

# David R. Loy: Awakening in the Age of Climate Change

**If Buddhism is to address the ecological crisis, it must clarify its essential message.**

Let me begin by emphasizing what most of us already know about climate change. First, it's the greatest threat to human civilization ever, as far as we can tell. Second, it's not an external threat but something we are doing to ourselves. And third, our collective response remains, if not completely negligible, very far from adequate.

Yet climate breakdown is only part of a much larger eco-crisis. We cannot blame the degradation of nature simply on recent increases of carbon in the atmosphere. If we are to avert climate disaster and our own potential extinction, we must address our long-standing degradation of the natural world in all its forms. Humanity has been exploiting the natural world for most of its existence. Today, however, business as usual has become a threat to our very survival.

E. O. Wilson, the renowned Harvard biologist, predicts that by the end of this century about half of all the earth's plant and animal species will become extinct or so weakened that they will disappear soon thereafter. Scientists tell us that there have been at least five other extinction events in the earth's history, but this is the fastest ever and the only one caused by the activity of one particular species: us.

The whole eco-crisis attests to the fact that we are a globalizing civilization that has lost its way. The crisis of nature is, at heart, a crisis of civilization. Shifting to renewable sources of natural energy will not by itself resolve our collective preoccupation with never-ending economic growth—and the often meaningless production and consumerism it entails—that is incompatible with the finite ecosystems of the earth. Many things could be said from a Buddhist perspective about why this fixation on growth cannot provide the satisfaction we seek from it, but let's take a look at one particularly revealing example: what Mitsubishi is doing with

bluefin tuna.

The Japanese love sashimi, and their favorite variety is bluefin tuna. Unfortunately, bluefin tuna is also one of the world's most endangered fish. But the Mitsubishi conglomerate, one of the world's largest corporate empires, has come up with an ingenious response: It has cornered close to half the world market by buying up as many bluefin tuna as it can as the worldwide population plummets toward extinction. The tuna are imported and frozen at -60°C in Mitsubishi's massive freezers, for they will command astronomical prices if, as forecast, Atlantic bluefin tuna soon become commercially extinct as tuna fleets try to satisfy an insatiable demand—primarily Mitsubishi's.

From an ecological standpoint, this response is immoral, obscene. From a narrow economic standpoint, however, it's quite logical, even clever, because the fewer bluefin tuna in the ocean, the more valuable Mitsubishi's frozen stock becomes. And it's the nature of economic competition that corporations like Mitsubishi are sometimes encouraged or "forced" to do things like that: if you don't do it, someone else probably will. That's how the "tragedy of the commons" plays out on a global scale.

The example above is one of many that point to a fundamental perversity built into economic systems motivated by profit, which tend to devalue the natural world into a means, subordinated to the goal of expanding the economy in order to maximize profits. This focus often overshadows our appreciation of the natural world, which means that we end up destroying real wealth—a flourishing biosphere with healthy forests and topsoil, oceans full of marine life, and so on—in order to increase numbers in the bank accounts. As the enormous gap between rich and poor continues to widen worldwide, most of that increase goes into a very small number of accounts.

Such perverse logic ensures that sooner or later our collective focus on endless growth—on ever-increasing production and consumption, which requires ever more exploitation of our natural resources—must inevitably run up against the limits of the planet, and it just so happens that's happening now. Today it's not enough

for us to meditate and pursue our own personal awakening; we also need to contemplate what this situation means, and how to respond.

Many Buddhist teachings are relevant here, especially their emphasis on interdependence and nonduality. We consider ourselves and others to be separate entities, pursuing our own well-being at the cost of theirs in ways that the eco-crisis repudiates. As earth-dwellers, we're all in this together. When China burns coal, that pollution doesn't just stay above Chinese skies, nor does nuclear radioactivity from Fukushima stay only in Japanese coastal waters. The same is true generally for humankind and the rest of the natural world: when the ecosystems of the earth become sick, we become sick. In short, the ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis: we are challenged to realize our interdependence—our larger “self”—or else. What the earth seems to be telling us is Wake up or get out of the way.

From this perspective, the problems that challenge us today are even more intimidating. Facing seemingly intractable political and economic systems, we could easily despair. Where to start? Those who control our current economy and political systems also profit the most from them (in the narrow sense), so they tend to be little inclined to make the systemic changes necessary—and are often incapable of doing so.

We can see that institutional change can only come from the grassroots, and signs are growing that more and more people are fed up with waiting for economic and political elites to take action. As the author and environmentalist Paul Hawken points out in his 2007 book *Blessed Unrest*, a vast number of large and small organizations are working for peace, social justice, and sustainability —perhaps two million, he now estimates. This is something that's never happened before: it's as if the organizations have “sprung up” from the earth to act as its immune system, responding to the cancer that now threatens our survival. But while the necessary response has begun, it's easy to overlook what's happening, because the mainstream media are not interested in publicizing or encouraging that transformation. Six

megacorporations now control 90 percent of the media in the United States, and they make their profits not from informing us but from advertising. Their perspective inevitably tends to normalize consumerism, including the political system that aids and abets it. Unsurprisingly, they promote “green consumerism” as the solution to the eco-crisis—personal lifestyle changes such as buying hybrid or electric cars, installing solar panels, eating locally, and so on. As Bill McKibben has pointed out, however, even if many of us do everything we can to reduce our individual carbon footprints, “the trajectory of our climate horror stays about the same.” But if the same number of us work all-out to change the system, he continues, “that’s enough.”

The ecological crisis, and the larger civilizational predicament of which it is a symptom, is just as much a crisis for the Buddhist tradition, which needs to clarify its essential message in order to fulfill its liberative potential in the modern world.

One of the important developments in contemporary Buddhism has been socially engaged Buddhism, and service—prison dharma, hospice work, helping the homeless, and the like—is now widely accepted as an important part of the Buddhist path. Buddhists have become much better at pulling drowning people out of the river, but—and here’s the problem—we’re not any better at asking why there are so many more drowning people, or what’s pushing them into the river upstream.

I’m reminded of Dom Hélder Câmara’s famous quote: “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.” Is there a Buddhist version? When Buddhists help homeless people and prison inmates, they are called bodhisattvas; but when Buddhists ask why there are so many more homeless, so many rotting in prison, other Buddhists call them leftists or radicals. “That has nothing to do with Buddhism,” the others say.

At the same time as Buddhist organizing for social and economic justice has floundered, the mindfulness movement has seen incredible success. Mindfulness offers an individualistic practice that can fit nicely into a consumer corporate culture focused on

efficiency and productivity. Although such practices can be very beneficial, they can also discourage critical reflection on the institutional causes of collective suffering, or social dukkha. As Bhikkhu Bodhi has warned: "Absent a sharp social critique, Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism." Recently I read a passage in *Everybody's Story: Wising Up to the Epic of Evolution*, by Loyal Rue, that stopped me in my tracks, because it crystallizes so well a discomfort with Buddhism (or some types of Buddhism) that has been bothering me for some time. Rue writes that religions such as Christianity and Buddhism will keep declining as it becomes increasingly clear that they can't address the great challenges facing us today. He cites two basic problems: cosmological dualism and individual salvation, both of which "have encouraged an attitude of indifference toward the integrity of natural and social systems."

Cosmological dualism is obviously an important aspect of Christianity, one that distinguishes God in his heaven from the world he has created. But Buddhism also dualizes insofar as this world of samsara is distinguished from nirvana. In both traditions, the contrast between the two worlds inevitably involves some devaluation of the lower one: so we are told that this realm of samsara is a place of suffering, craving, and delusion. And in both cases, the ultimate goal is individual salvation, which involves transcending this lower world by doing what is necessary to qualify for the higher one, whether that is eternity in heaven with God or attaining nirvana.

One can point to aspects of the Buddhist tradition that do not support cosmological dualism, especially the famous statement by Nagarjuna, the influential Buddhist philosopher and founder of the Madhyamaka school, that "there is not the slightest difference between nirvana and samsara." Yet that claim must be balanced against (for example) the early Buddhist doctrine that nirvana involves the end of physical rebirth, or the Mahayana Pure Land schools that contrast this world with Amitabha's Pure Land.

Buddhists don't aim at heaven: we want to awaken. But for us, too,

salvation is individual: yes, I hope you will become enlightened also, but ultimately my highest well-being—my enlightenment—is distinct from yours. Or so we have been taught.

When it comes to the nature of enlightenment, however, most of us aren't sure what to believe. Since many modern Western Buddhists reject the idea of rebirth, it is not surprising that a this-worldly alternative has become popular in the West, where understanding the Buddhist path as a program of psychological development helps us cope with personal problems, especially our "monkey mind" and afflictive emotions. This has led to innovative types of psychotherapy as well as the recent success of the mindfulness movement, which represents the culmination of this trend in Western Buddhism. Buddhism is providing new perspectives on the nature of psychological well-being and new practices that help to promote it—reducing greed, ill will, and delusion here and now, for example, but also sorting out our emotional lives (not a big issue in Asian Buddhism) and working through personal traumas. This development has been largely beneficial, but it has a shadow. The common presupposition of the more secular Buddhism is that my basic problem is the way my mind works, and the solution is to change the way my mind works, so that I can play my various roles (work, family, friends, etc.) better, so that I fit into this world better. Most of Asian Buddhism is concerned with escaping this world, since samsara can't be changed, but for much of contemporary Western Buddhism, the path is all about changing myself, because I'm the problem, not the world.

So while traditional Asian Buddhism emphasizes ending rebirth into this unsatisfactory world, much of Western Buddhism, including most of the mindfulness movement, emphasizes harmonizing with this world. That means neither is much concerned about social engagement that works to change our world; both take the world (including its ecological crisis and social injustice) for granted, and in that sense accept it as it is.

Both approaches encourage a different way of reacting to the eco-crisis: ignoring it. When we read or think about what is happening, how do we react? We become anxious, of course, but Buddhists

know how to deal with anxiety: we meditate, and our unease about what is happening to the earth goes away—for a while, anyway. Needless to say, that is not an adequate response.

The point here is that Buddhist difficulty with social and ecological engagement can be traced back, in part, to this ambiguity about the nature of awakening. And this ambivalence is a challenge we can't keep evading: we really do need to clarify what the essential message of Buddhism is.

There is an alternative way of understanding the Buddhist path, one that is not reducible to the either/or of escaping this world or simply harmonizing with it. The path of personal transformation is about deconstructing and reconstructing the self, or, more precisely, the relationship between the self and its world. Because my sense of self is an impermanent psychosocial construct, with no reality of its own, it is always insecure, haunted by dukkha [suffering] as long as I feel separate from the world I inhabit. We usually experience this as a sense of lack: something is wrong with me, something is missing, "I'm not good enough." Consumerism encourages us to perceive the problem as a personal lack: I don't have enough money, I'm not famous enough, attractive enough, and so on. Buddhist practice helps us wake up from this bad dream. A really important social implication of this deconstruction and reconstruction of the self brings us back to social engagement, including eco-dharma, the application of Buddhist teachings to our ecological situation. As we start to wake up and realize that we are not separate from each other, nor from this wondrous earth, we also begin to realize that the ways we live together, and the ways we relate to the earth, need to be reconstructed as well. That means not only social engagement as service, but finding ways to address the problematic economic and political structures—the institutionalized forms of greed, ill will, and delusion—that are deeply implicated in the eco-crisis. Within such a notion of liberation, the path of personal transformation and the path of social transformation are not really separate from each other. We must reclaim the concept of awakening from an exclusively individualistic therapeutic model and focus on how individual

liberation also requires social transformation. Engagement in the world is how our personal awakening blossoms. It just so happens that the Buddhist tradition provides a wonderful archetype that can help us to do that: the bodhisattva. We overcome deep-rooted self-centered habits by working compassionately for the healing of our societies and the healing of the earth. This is what's required for the Buddhist path to become truly liberative in the modern world. If we Buddhists can't do that, or don't want to do it, then Buddhism might not be what our world needs right now.

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