

# Awareness Bound and Unbound

*Buddhist Essays*

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**SUNY**  
P R E S S

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# Introduction

## *Myth Broken and Unbroken*

If we can no longer believe in transcendence—an eternity with God in heaven, or a nirvana that subsists apart from samsara—then we are faced with a choice. We can simply dismiss such beliefs as superstition, perhaps a necessary stage in the development of humanity but a crutch to be outgrown as modern science discovers more about the world (and modern psychology reveals more about ourselves).

Alternatively, we can understand religious language as metaphor that fails when taken literally. Paul Tillich distinguished “unbroken myth” from what he called “broken myth,” stories no longer believed to be historically true yet still resonant with meaning. The argument of this book is that broken myths and metaphors can point to a different type of salvation or deliverance: not liberation from this world but *into* it. We can fantasize about going somewhere else where everything will be okay, or we can “wake up” to realize that this world is different from what we thought it was. What do we need to do to become truly comfortable with—at one with—our lives here and now?

This more hermeneutical approach encourages sensitivity to implications of religious claims, implications that are becoming more important as the legacy of modernity becomes more questionable. If burgeoning social and ecological crises are tied to increasingly dubious ways of understanding what the world is and who we are, where should we look for a better understanding? Our manifest inability to take care of our collective home (and mother) suggests the need for a more nondual worldview: a new version of secularity that is just as much a new vision of sacrality.

The chapters that follow develop this alternative approach in various ways. They offer primarily Buddhist perspectives, because Buddhist teachings lend themselves to this sort of hermeneutic. That is not to say that such perspectives are uniquely Buddhist, only that Buddhist categories provide especially receptive and productive ways to address these issues. (See the chapters on

Swedenborg and *The Cloud of Unknowing* for some remarkably similar non-Buddhist categories.) Like other religious claims, Buddhist doctrines need to be interrogated and deconstructed; what is distinctive about Buddhism is how often the tradition has performed that deconstruction on itself, the better to reconstruct itself. In addition to fruitful comparisons with other traditions (especially Taoism and various versions of Christianity), several of these chapters engage in what might be called “internal dialogue” to clarify an issue by bringing together what different Buddhist teachers and teachings have had to say about it. It is academically fashionable, and often important, to focus on differences and tensions within a tradition, to highlight the difficulties that dog most generalizations. “Buddhism” is certainly susceptible to that sort of critique, yet my main concern in what follows is to emphasize the continuities that can contribute to a more or less consistent worldview, one that challenges what we have been taking for granted.

Chapter 1 takes seriously the many Buddhist admonitions about “not settling down in things” and the importance of “wandering freely without a place to rest.” Its simple thesis is that delusion (ignorance, samsara) is awareness trapped, and liberation (enlightenment, nirvana) is awareness unstuck because freed from grasping. This means that the key issue is attachment. Our basic difficulty is not letting go of (things in) this world, in order to experience something else; attachments are problematic because they are the forms on which formless awareness has become fixated. “Awareness” here does not mean Mind or Consciousness—concepts with transcendental pretensions—but nothing more grandiose than (the true nature of) our attention. According to the Japanese Zen master Hakuin, the difference between Buddhas and the rest of us is like that between water and ice: without water there is no ice, and without Buddha there are no sentient beings. Are we “frozen” Buddhas?

Our basic attachment—the main place that awareness gets stuck—is the ego-self, which is not a self (a subject) but a psychological/social/linguistic construct (a mental object). Understanding “my” awareness as the vehicle of “my” ego-self, as something that *belongs to me*, is a delusion. We are normally preoccupied with relating bodies and possessions, hopes and fears, and so forth, to something that does not exist except as an unstable, always insecure, always incomplete construction better understood as a process than as a thing. In fact, that ongoing act of relationship is how the sense of self is constructed and maintained. Ironically, then, while all experience is related to this ego-self, it has no reality except as that to which all experience is supposedly related. This lack of own-being is a persistent source of considerable anxiety—in Buddhist terms, the root of our *dukkha*, “suffering.”

The ego-self does not act; being fictional, it cannot do anything, any more than a character in a novel (a being composed only of words on a page) can

actually do something. The literary metaphor is a good one, because we can lose ourselves in the plot and identify with the protagonist (usually in opposition to other characters), overlooking the fact that all the people and situations in a novel are creations of the same imagination. The same thing happens when I identify with (the supposed interests of) my own ego-self . . . but then who is this “I”? *What* imagination identifies with the ego-self? Some of the chapters offer a demythologized account of how one finds the answer to that question.

Emphasizing the distinction between delusion (awareness bound) and awakening (unbound) is consistent with basic Buddhist teachings and provides insight into some of the more difficult ones, including the relationship between samsara and nirvana, and the Mahayana claim that “form is no other than emptiness, emptiness not other than form.” It is also important to see the implications of this perspective for the social issues that concern us today. The constriction or liberation of awareness is not only a personal matter. What do societies do to encourage or discourage its emancipation? Is attention to be controlled and exploited, or cultivated and awakened? Is awareness to be valued as a means to some other goal, or should its liberation be cherished as the most valuable end-in-itself?

This approach also has implications for how we understand language. Those who meditate are familiar with warnings about clinging to concepts, which can interfere with one’s practice and hinder enlightenment. To awaken is to experience that which transcends language, whatever that means. This has provoked some unresolved and perhaps irresolvable controversies about whether there is a formless “pure consciousness” distinguishable from thought and language. If, however, the basic issue is whether awareness is stuck or unstuck, there is another possibility: not liberation from language but *into* language. Do we use language or does language use us? What happens when we realize that (as philosophers such as Heidegger emphasize) we *are* language?

Chapter 2 addresses these questions. It compares two important Mahayana thinkers—Nagarjuna and Dogen—who are linked (if we accept the traditional account) by a common transmission lineage yet also separated by vast geographical, historical, and linguistic differences. Those differences are reflected in their divergent textual styles: Nagarjuna, the philosopher’s philosopher, notorious for his laconic, knife-edged logic, versus Dogen, the allusive and transgressive poet, willing to reinterpret or misinterpret Buddhist texts in order to devise new semantic possibilities. It is remarkable, then, that their dissimilar methods end up emphasizing similar Buddhist insights. That is because they deconstruct the same types of delusive dualisms, most of them versions of our commonsense distinction between substance and attribute, subject and predicate. They provide alternative demonstrations of how language can work against its own mystifications.

Nevertheless, although both undermine dualistic ways of understanding ourselves “in” the world, they reach different conclusions about the possibility of language conveying a “true” understanding of the world. For Nagarjuna, language at its best (that is, deconstructive philosophy) ultimately self-negates, to reveal a beatitude or serenity (*shiva*) in which there is no Buddha to teach and nothing to be taught. For Dogen, however, concepts and metaphors are not just instrumental means to communicate truth; they themselves manifest the truth—or rather, since that is still too dualistic, they are themselves the truth that we need to realize. If we have a problem with language, why blame the victim? When I do not try to extract some truth *from* a metaphor, it can be a way “my” awareness consummates itself. Although symbols can be redeemed only by mind, awareness does not function in a vacuum but is activated by—or better, *as*—symbols. In short, the path leads not to the elimination of concepts but to their liberation.

Chapter 3 offers examples from different traditions (including Derridean deconstruction) that demonstrate how language can operate in a more liberated and liberating fashion. Hui-neng, Dogen, and Eckhart—arguably the greatest Chinese Chan master, the greatest Japanese Zen master, and the greatest medieval Christian mystical writer, respectively—are so elevated in the spiritual pantheon that we tend to overlook how freely and opportunistically they employ words. (There I go again, dualizing between *them* and *their language!*) In addition to the blithe way that Hui-neng contradicts traditional Buddhist teachings when it suits his purposes (that is, when it might prompt an awakening), there are striking parallels to Dogen’s semantic transgressions in Eckhart’s Latin neologisms, which he uses to subvert the usual bifurcations of language—for example, when “thy will be done” in the Lord’s Prayer becomes “will, be thine.” For Eckhart, the dualism that most needs to be deconstructed is between myself “inside” and God “outside,” and there are linguistic ways to undermine their duality.

The Mahayana doctrine of interpenetration (e.g., Indra’s net) implies that each dharma is both cause and effect of all other dharmas, and that applies to language as well. This means that linguistic expressions are at the same time both relative—they always refer to other terms and things—and ends in themselves. To dwell only on the instrumental and referential aspect of language overlooks what Dogen calls the *ippo-gujin*, “total exertion of a single dharma,” of words and symbols. They are *ippo-gujin* because they remain, like everything else, groundless—that is, lacking any self-nature or self-presence of their own. Isn’t our philosophical quest for Truth a sublimated response to the same groundlessness? We try to fixate ourselves somewhere, if only (for intellectuals like me who write these words and you who read them) on some produced linguistic effect. Such searches for unconditioned

grounds and origins are doomed to fail, for our philosophizing too sails in an unfathomable ocean without any secure harbors to anchor within. Yet when language is not used to compensate for our own groundlessness—when we do not grasp at it in order to extract something else from it—then language can become a way awareness consummates itself.

Chapter 4 compares Nagarjuna with the Chinese sage Zhuangzi, whose eponymous reflections comprise the most profound and provocative text of ancient China. Again, the geographical, historical, and linguistic differences are vast, yet their targets and conclusions are remarkably similar. The *Zhuangzi* offers a bewildering succession of anecdotes and arguments whose shifting tone makes it difficult to determine which voice represents the author. This postmodernist playfulness, which prefers posing questions to drawing firm conclusions, functions quite differently from Nagarjuna's univocal dissection of this and that logical alternative. Instead of refuting all candidates for a master discourse, Zhuangzi subverts our need for such a master discourse, for that perfectly reason-able position Zhuangzi loves to mock.

What if there is no such Truth? Or is this insight itself the Truth? Is that a contradiction (and therefore self-refuting) or a paradox (which encourages a "leap" to a different level of understanding)? Zhuangzi has been labeled a relativist and/or a skeptic, Nagarjuna a skeptic and/or a nihilist, yet such designations put the cart before the horse. We cannot appreciate their skepticism without considering what motivates our commonsense belief in objective knowledge. We cannot determine whether Zhuangzi is a relativist without considering what the rest of us expect from the truth. Instead of asking what kind of a skeptic or relativist Zhuangzi is—that is, which of our conceptual boxes he should be squeezed into—this chapter reflects on the relationship between knowledge and other important themes for him: especially no-self, mind-fasting, and dreaming. By no coincidence, these topics happen to be very important for Buddhism as well. The most interesting issue, however, is not whether the "skepticism" of Zhuangzi and Nagarjuna is consistent with other claims such as no-self. That question needs to be turned around: What context do common themes such as no-self, meditation, dreaming and waking up, and so on, provide for their understanding of our understanding of knowledge?

Chapter 5 brings us back from ancient India and China to twenty-first-century technologies. To be only *here*, and for here to be always *now*: Would that be the fulfillment of our dreams, or a nightmare? New cyberenvironments have begun to compress space and time so radically that they may be altering awareness itself. Is that transformation something to be embraced or deplored?

Unsurprisingly, there are sharp differences of opinion. In *Real Time: Preparing for the Age of the Never Satisfied Customer*, Regis McKenna acclaims

our digital conquest of space and time, with its new possibilities for e-business. Paul Virilio's *Open Sky* is less sanguine: instantaneous communication and almost-as-fast transportation are producing an "ultimate state of sedentariness" in a society without future or past, since "there is no more here and there, only the mental confusion of near and far, present and future, real and unreal—a mix of history, stories, and the hallucinatory utopia of communication technologies" (Virilio 1997, 35). Why should we make the effort to go anywhere or do anything if everywhere is already here, if everytime is now?

Virilio's critique adds a new dimension to the distinction between awareness bound and awareness unbound. To be attentive to everything telepresent would spread one's awareness so thinly that it becomes indistinguishable from ignorance. Infinite possibility implies paralytic indecision. How do I decide what to do when nothing is more present than anything else?

From this paradox Thomas Eriksen derives a general law of the information revolution: "When an ever-increasing amount of information has to be squeezed into the relatively constant amount of time each of us has at our disposal, the span of attention necessarily decreases." Data-glut tends to make each instant "ephemeral, superficial and intense. . . . Everything must be interchangeable with everything else *now*. The entry ticket has to be cheap, the initial investment modest. Swift changes and unlimited flexibility are main assets" (Eriksen 2001, 119). Margaret Gibbs points to one of the consequences: "We've become a society where we expect things instantly, and don't spend the time it takes to have real intimacy with another person" (in Cray, 2006).

From a Buddhist perspective, accelerating cybertime aggravates rather than reduces the delusive dualism between things (including ourselves) and the time they are "in." Perhaps technological preoccupation with ever-increasing speed is not the solution but the problem. The difficulty here is liberating awareness not from fixations but from inability to focus—which, as meditators know, can be just as great a challenge. To counteract Eriksen's law, Buddhism provides contemplative practices that increase our attention span by slowing us down. This enables us to "forget ourselves" so that we can realize the true nature of awareness and become one with whatever we do.

Chapters 6 and 7 compare Buddhism with two versions of Christianity that are very different from each other. Both comparisons demonstrate how the path to liberation has been conceptualized and practiced in other ways that turn out to be remarkably congruent with basic Buddhist teachings. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous fourteenth-century English mystical text, is a manual of contemplative practice that eschews doctrinal claims. The voluminous writings of the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, philosopher, and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg offer just the opposite: a grand metaphysical system

whose structure unexpectedly resonates with Buddhist perspectives on such issues as the delusion of self and the nature of karma.

Buddhist awakening involves the realization that there is no ontological self and never was. Nevertheless, there are provocative similarities in the ways that some other spiritualities emphasize the need to “die to the self.” Christianity, for example, urges a change of heart (*metanoia*) so drastic that it requires a kenosis (Phil. 2:6), a total emptying of the self so that “not I but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Evidently Christ’s own death and resurrection are not enough: we ourselves must be crucified and reborn in order to realize that “the Kingdom of God is at hand” here and now.

Chapter 6 compares two specific contemplative practices. Zen koans are paradoxical problems that in principle cannot be solved rationally. One of the best known is “Joshu’s Mu”: “A monk in all seriousness asked Joshu: ‘Has a dog Buddha-nature, or not?’ Joshu retorted: ‘Mu!’ ” The koan point—the problem to be solved—is: What is “Mu”? Practitioners are usually instructed to treat “Mu” as a kind of mantra to let go of other mental activity. In order to become enlightened, I must lose myself completely in “Mu.” Since the sense of self is a psychological construct sustained by habitual ways of thinking, cutting off all such activity with “Mu” can undermine it.

This process was described by the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dogen: “To study Buddhism is to study yourself. To study yourself is to forget yourself. To forget yourself is to perceive your intimacy [nonduality] with all things. To realize this is to cast off the mind and body of self and others.” When this practice is ripe, a teacher can sometimes help by cutting the last thread: an unexpected action or sound may startle the student into letting go. “All of a sudden he finds his mind and body wiped out of existence, together with the koan. This is what is known as ‘letting go your hold’ ” (Hakuin). The shock of an unexpected sensation can cause it to penetrate to the very core of one’s being—in other words, it is experienced nondually as the sense of self momentarily evaporates.

The practice described in *The Cloud of Unknowing* has a different goal: to attain “with a loving stirring and a blind beholding unto the naked being of God himself only.” The text takes its title from the meditation method recommended. Those who want to experience God should wrap themselves in “a darkness or a cloud” that “treads down” all thinking: “[T]ake thee but a little word of one syllable, for so it is better than two. . . . And such a word is this word GOD and this word LOVE. Choose whichever thou wilt, or another: whatever word thou likest best of one syllable. And fasten this word to thine heart, so that it may never go thence for anything that befalleth” (McCann 1952, 16).

A detailed comparison between the two practices discovers many other parallels, which prompt the inevitable question: If I can “forget myself” either

by becoming one with “Mu” or by fastening the word “love” to my heart and never letting it go, what does that imply about the results of these not very different techniques? The Zen experience of *kensho*, “seeing into one’s own nature,” reveals the *shunyata*, “emptiness,” of the self and other phenomena, while a practitioner of *The Cloud* beholds the naked being of God himself. Whether or not they can be equated, the source of our attachments has been mortally wounded: realizing that the ego-self is an insubstantial construct frees awareness from the delusion that most binds it.

Chapter 7 summarizes a very different vision of human and postmortem existence, one that contrasts sharply with our postmodernist suspicion of grand narratives. No narrative could be grander than Swedenborg’s, yet his perspective (like Buddhism’s) is postmodern insofar as it denies an ontological self. The love of self, which closes our inmost parts to the “divine influx,” is the main problem to be overcome. With the help of his rationality man has corrupted the output of the spiritual world within himself “through a disorderly life. So he must be born into complete ignorance and be led back from there into the pattern of heaven by divine means” (Swedenborg 1988, section 108).

The claim of a rebirth into ignorance suggests a Buddhist-like critique of conceptualization. Insights, being outward truths, do not by themselves save us; we are saved by the way those insights change us. Innocence is the essence (*esse*) of everything good, which invites comparison with *tathata*, the “just this!”-ness that describes the unselfconscious way an enlightened person lives. To be spiritual is nothing more than being open to, and thereby one with, the whole. We are in heaven right now if our “internals” are open, according to Swedenborg, even as nirvana is to be attained here and now, according to the Buddha.

Like that of Shakyamuni Buddha and, for that matter, of Christ himself, Swedenborg’s account of evil and its retribution emphasizes intention, for that is how evil becomes tied to its own punishment.

Every evil carries its punishment with it, the two making one; therefore whoever is in evil is also in the punishment of evil. And yet no one in the other world [afterlife] suffers punishment on account of the evils that he had done in this world, but only on account of the evils that he then does; although it amounts to the same . . . since every one after death returns into his own life and thus into like evils; and the person continues the same as he had been in the life of the body. . . . But good spirits, although they had done evils in the world, are never punished, because their evils do not return. The Lord does not do evil to anyone. Evil has

its own punishment, thus hell, and goodness its own reward, thus heaven. (Swedenborg 1990, sec. 9033).

This remarkable passage is, in effect, a sophisticated account of karma that avoids both the problem with a mechanical understanding of moral cause and effect (common in popular Buddhism) and also the difficulty with a juridical understanding of hell as punishment for disobeying divine authority (common in popular Christianity). The crucial insight is that people are “punished” not for what they have done but for what they have become, and what we intentionally do is what makes us what we are. My actions and my intentions build my character—my “spiritual body”—just as food is digested to become my physical body.

As in Buddhism, Swedenborg’s version of karma undercuts our usual distinction between the one who intends and the intention itself. One’s habitual tendencies to act in certain ways—one’s *samskaras*, according to Buddhism—are what construct and maintain the sense of self. A person with unwholesome *samskaras*—a “bad character”—cannot be saved, because he or she *is* those *samskaras*, which cannot dwell in Swedenborg’s heaven because they would not be comfortable there. “Evil” people suffer in the afterworld for the same reason that good people are blessed there: they end up living with others just like themselves.

Whether or not there is such an afterlife, the issue becomes how our attention—in this case, as *intention*—is bound or unbound, here and now. The previous chapter focuses on contemplative practices that can release awareness from its usual patterns. Swedenborg’s understanding of evil and its punishment helps to clarify the problem: how habitual tendencies keep our attention circling in familiar, comfortable ruts.

Karma remains a serious problem for contemporary Buddhism. Taken literally, it not only rationalizes racism, caste, birth handicaps, and genocides, but also justifies the authority of political elites, who must deserve their wealth and power, and the subordination of those who have neither. It provides the perfect theodicy: if there is an infallible cause-and-effect relationship between one’s actions and one’s fate, there is no need to work toward social justice, because justice is already built into the moral fabric of the universe.

What does that imply about “the karma of women,” the subject of chapter 8? Although responsibility for the inferior status of women in Asian cultures cannot be placed solely upon Buddhism, there is nevertheless a Buddhist explanation: those born as women are reaping the fruits of their inferior karma—which includes, in many cases, prostitution.

Thailand has probably the largest sex trade in the world, a business that some temples profit from. Women and prostitutes are encouraged to offer

*dana*, “gifts” such as money and other valuables, in order to ensure a better rebirth next time. This classic example of “blame the victim” overlooks the Buddha’s emphasis on *cetana* “motivation.” By “ethicizing” karma he made it into the key to spiritual development: one’s life situation can be transformed by transforming the motivations of one’s actions right now. Karma is not something the self *has*; it is what the sense of self *is*, and that sense of self changes according to one’s conscious choices. “I” (re)construct myself by what “I” intentionally do, because “my” sense of self is a precipitate of habitual ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.

Once again, the issue comes down to what we choose to do with our attention—yet that way of making the point is upside down, if attention-habits are what construct *us*. Understood in this fashion, the karma doctrine does not imply passive acceptance of any type of violence against women, but encourages us to confront the unwholesome motivations of those who maintain patriarchal systems of domination.

The last two chapters broaden the discussion of awareness, bound and unbound, to consider more collective and institutionalized versions. Do group ego-selves share a group awareness, subject to the same problems and possibilities? Chapter 9 addresses Samuel Huntington’s infamous thesis that the world’s new battle lines are the fault lines between world civilizations. Is this a prescient observation, validated by the September 11 terrorist attacks and what has happened since then, or better understood as a dangerous example of group delusion, because it rationalizes policies that may make it into a self-fulfilling prophecy?

Religion turns out to be the crucial factor for Huntington. His test case, of course, is Islam, which provides strong support for his argument, since the Islamic world is having so much trouble getting along with any other world.

Or so it seems from a Western perspective. That perspective, however, is hardly objective or neutral. For most of their histories, the Christian West and the Islamic world have been each other’s chief rivals. Unlike Jesus and Shakyamuni, however, Muhammad was not only a spiritual teacher but a political and military leader. Because neither Jesus nor Shakyamuni provided that sort of leadership, it has been easier to adapt their teachings to secular nationalism, capitalism, and consumerism. The need to “have faith” that corporate globalization will eventually work to benefit everyone implies what is increasingly difficult to overlook: that the West’s economic system now serves a religious function as well, providing a worldview and set of values whose religious role we miss only because they do not refer to anything transcendent.

That is not the only problem with Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis. In the only place where he identifies Western values, he trots out the

usual shibboleths: “individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state” (Huntington 1996, 26). But what is the relationship between these Western *values* and Western *interests*? Huntington never addresses this uncomfortable question, perhaps because it is difficult to reconcile these ideals with the ways that the United States continues to treat other nations when its own short-term interests are at stake. Would the West get along better with other civilizations if we were less greedy for their resources and markets?

Should religious terrorism be dismissed as just another example of violent fanaticism, or is it a reaction to some failure of modernity? Chapter 10 argues that religious fundamentalism is not a return to premodern religiosity but a response to the “God-shaped hole” at the core of secular modernity.

The key issue in this case is identity, especially the dis-ease that lack of secure identity arouses. Traditional religions ground us in an all-encompassing vision of the sacred that explains the cosmos and our role within it. Modernity and postmodernity question such transcendental narratives and leave us anxious about the apparent meaninglessness of the universe and the ungroundedness of our lives within it. We no longer have a way to cope with death, or with the sense of lack that haunts the sense of self.

The violent religious movements that Mark Juergensmeyer has studied differ in many ways, but they agree in rejecting modern secularity. Although their responses only make things worse, I think there is nonetheless something perceptive about that rejection: it realizes that secularity is an ideology that pretends to be the everyday world we live in. This secular view of secularity, its own self-understanding, is not necessarily something to be accepted at face value.

From a Buddhist perspective, the basic problem with modernity (and postmodernity) is that our sense of *lack* festers regardless of any distinction we may make between sacred and secular worldviews. The disappearance or devaluation of transcendence means we end up trying to resolve that *lack* by compulsively grasping at something or other in the (secular) world—in ways that are doomed to fail

We are brought back to the distinction between awareness bound and unbound. According to Mahayana, our identity is always *shunya*, “empty,” yet realizing that is not problematic, because our emptiness/formlessness is liberated to take on the form or forms appropriate to the situation. If form is empty, emptiness is also form. This implies that the “spiritual home” awareness seeks can be found only in some transformation of its homelessness.

When such problems with secularism are acknowledged, we realize that what remains important about religion today—what survives its corrosive encounter with modernity—is its role in encouraging such personal

transformation. Buddhism helps us to see that dogmas and practices can be useful in accomplishing that. We should have no illusions that such an understanding of religion will soon or easily become the most prominent, but it may become necessary if religions are to fulfill the role that is most needed today.

This final chapter is an appropriate way to conclude, because it highlights some of the social implications of the Buddhist perspectives offered in earlier chapters. Whether awareness is bound or unbound is not only a matter for individual concern. Swedenborg's claims about the afterworld (including the claim that he visited it himself!) and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* notwithstanding, these chapters offer a demythologized version of the Buddhist understanding of our situation and the path we need to follow. Transcendence and myth—for example, the law of karma—are not rejected but “broken open” and interrogated in Tillich's sense. Comparisons with other religious traditions, and within the various Buddhist traditions, play a vital role in helping to distinguish what has become extraneous from what remains insightful—indeed, essential—today.

We end up with a spiritual path that focuses on the liberation of awareness: to say it again, release not from this world but into it. If the main issue is the ways our attention/intention gets trapped, the main place it gets stuck is the ego-self. Inasmuch as the sense of self is that to which everything else is related, it is the fundamental delusion and the basic source of our *dukkha*, since the constructed ego-self can never gain the secure identity it cannot help craving.

Do those claims have any special salience today? One could make a strong argument that the ecological and social breakdowns that have begun are consequences of our collective inability to digest this basic realization about the problem of the ego-self, individual and institutional. Before we dismiss religious perspectives as outmoded and irrelevant to modern challenges, we should reflect on the fact that in their different ways the world's religions have been emphasizing this insight for millennia.