

From: ENGAGED Buddhist Reader; PASADENA PRESS,
1996



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World As Lover, World As Self

OUR PLANET IS in trouble. It is hard to go anywhere without being confronted by the wounding of our world, the tearing of the very fabric of life. I return this day from Germany, where I lived in the 1950s amidst the clear waters, rich green fields, and woodlands of Bavaria. Now there is an environmental plague there called *waldsterben*, "the dying of the trees," and the Black Forest is reckoned to be about 50% dead from industrial and automobile pollution.

South of the Black Forest rise the headwaters of the Rhine, which flows on down through Basel, across Europe, and into the North Sea. A 1986 fire at the Sandoz chemical plant in Basel washed 30,000 tons of mercury and dioxin-forming chemicals into that once great, life-bearing artery of Europe. Millions of fish floated belly-up, and the deaths of seals as far away as the North Sea have been traced to the accident. Along this majestic river, requiems were held. On its many bridges, people gathered, banging on pots, pans, and anything that could make a noise, and cried, "*Der Rhein ist tot!*" "The Rhine is dead!"

I went to Germany to lead a workshop, just south of the Black Forest, near the source of the Rhine. We came together to explore the inner resources that are needed to take action in today's world. The corner of Europe where we met, given the prevailing winds in April and May of 1986, received some of the heaviest radioactive fallout from the disaster at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl. During the workshop, one participant brought out a loaf of bread and said, reverently, "This was made from grains harvested before Chernobyl! We can eat it without fear."

In the face of what is happening, how do we avoid feeling overwhelmed and just giving up, turning to the many diversions and demands of our consumer societies?

It is essential that we develop our inner resources. We have to learn to look at things as they are, painful and overwhelming as that may be, for no healing can begin until we are fully present to our world, until we learn to sustain the gaze.

These concerns, obviously, are not limited to Germany. Two weeks before going, I led a similar workshop in England at a neo-Gothic castle in the Lake District. We were fifteen minutes from Barrow, the great ship-building town on the Irish Sea where the new British Trident submarine, with its mammoth load of nuclear warheads, was being constructed. Half an hour up the coast, the dirtiest nuclear reactor ever built, Sellafield, is turning the Irish Sea into the world's most radioactive body of water. Looking for the inner resources to deal with such a world, we felt very deeply the tragedies that are befalling it. As the poisoned winds of Chernobyl and the plutonium being dumped daily into the Irish Sea teach us, there are no boundaries to ecological disasters, no political borders to the perils that threaten us today.

Among the inner resources that we seek for sustaining our action and our sanity are what the Germans call *weltbild*, the way we view our world and our relationship to it. Let us reflect together on our basic posture vis-a-vis our world and how we may come to see it in ways that empower us to act.

By "our world," I mean the place we find ourselves, the scene upon which we play our lives. It is sending us signals of distress that have become so continual as to appear almost ordinary. We know about the loss of cropland and the spreading of hunger, the toxins in the air we breathe and the water we drink, and the die-off of fellow species; we know about our nuclear and so-called conventional weapons that are deployed and poised on hair-trigger alert and the conflicts that ignite in practically every corner of the world. These warning signals tell us that we live in a world that can end, at least as a home for conscious life. I do not say it will end, but it *can* end. This very possibility changes everything for us.

There have been small groups throughout history that have proclaimed the end of the world, such as at the time of the first millen-

nium and again during the Black Plague in Europe. These expectations arose within the context of religious faith, of a belief in a just but angry God ready to punish his wayward children. But now the prospect is spelled out in sober scientific data, not religious belief, and it is entirely devoid of transcendent meaning. I stress the unprecedented nature of our situation, because I want to inspire awe, respect, and compassion for what we are experiencing. With isolated exceptions, every generation prior to ours has lived with the assumption that other generations would follow. It has always been assumed, as an integral part of human experience, that the work of our hands and heads and hearts would live on through those who came after us, walking on the same earth beneath the same sky. Plagues, wars, and personal death have always taken place within that wider context, the assurance of continuity. Now we have lost the certainty that we will have a future. I believe that this loss, felt at some level of consciousness by everyone, regardless of political orientation, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time.

These signals of impending doom bring with them a sense of urgency to do something. But there are so many programs, strategies, and causes that vie for our attention that we may feel overwhelmed. So it is good to pause and ground ourselves, to look at our *weltbild*, at the ways we see and relate to our world, and discover what ways can best sustain us to do what must be done. With this in mind, I would like to reflect on four particular ways that people on spiritual paths look at the world. These are not specific to any particular religion; you can find all of them in most spiritual traditions. These four are: world as battlefield, world as trap, world as lover, world as self.

Many people view the *world as a battlefield*, where good and evil are pitted against each other, and the forces of light battle the forces of darkness. This ancient tradition goes back to the Zoroastrians and the Manichaeans. It can be persuasive, especially when you feel threatened. Such a view is very good for arousing courage, summoning up the blood, using the fiery energies of anger, aversion, and militancy. It is very good, too, for giving a sense of certainty. Whatever the score may be at the moment or whatever tactics you are using, there is the sense that you are fighting God's battle and that ultimately you will

win. William Irwin Thompson has called this kind of certainty and the self-righteousness that goes with it, the "apartheid of good."

We see this in many areas of our world today, in Beirut and Belfast, in the Persian Gulf and South Asia, even in my beloved Sri Lanka, a home of the most tolerant of religions. And we see it in our own country. The Jerry Falwells of society evoke the righteousness of this divinely ordained battle, leading, as they see that it must, to Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ. In this variety of Christian thought, nuclear war may be the catalyst for the millennial denouement, bringing just rewards to the elect, who will inherit the Earth—and the Bomb itself can appear as an instrument of God's will.

A more innocuous version of the battlefield image of the world is the one I learned from my grandparents. It is the world as a classroom, a kind of moral gymnasium where you are put through certain tests which would prove your mettle and teach you certain lessons, so you can graduate to other arenas and rewards. Whether a battlefield or classroom, the world is a proving ground, with little worth other than that. What counts are our immortal souls, which are being tested here. They count, and the world doesn't. For the sake of your soul, whether you are a Jerry Falwell or an Ayatollah Khomeini, you are ready to destroy.

If you feel our world has seen enough destruction already, this view may be unappealing. But it is strong among monotheistic religions, and it is contagious. Agnostics, too, can feel a tremendous do-or-die militancy and self-righteousness. Even adherents of more tolerant and non-theistic religions betray this kind of fundamentalism, a conviction that you are on the side of the good and, therefore, whatever you do is permitted, if not required. I don't expect many readers to leap to the defense of this view, especially as I am presenting it in so bald and biased a fashion. But it is important that we recognize its presence, its appeal, and its tenacity.

Let us turn to the second view: *the world as trap*. Here, the spiritual path is not to engage in struggle and vanquish a foe, but to disentangle ourselves and escape from this messy world. We try to extricate ourselves and ascend to a higher, supra-phenomenal plane. This stance is based on a hierarchical view of reality, where mind is seen as higher than matter and spirit is set over and above nature. This

view encourages contempt for the material plane. Elements of it have entered all major religions of the last 3,000 years, regardless of their metaphysics.

Many of us on spiritual paths fall for this view. Wanting to affirm a transcendent reality distinct from a society that appears very materialistic, we place it on a supra-phenomenal level removed from confusion and suffering. The tranquility that spiritual practices can provide, we imagine, belongs to a haven that is aloof from our world and to which we can ascend and be safe and serene. This gets tricky, because we still have bodies and are dependent on them, however advanced we may be on the spiritual path. Trying to escape from something that we are dependent on breeds a love-hate relationship with it. This love-hate relationship with matter permeates our culture and inflames a twofold desire—to destroy and to possess. These two impulses, craving and aversion, inflame each other in a kind of vicious circle. In the terms of general systems theory, the desire to destroy and the desire to possess form a deviation-amplifying feedback loop. We can see this exemplified in our military arsenal. To back up our demands for the raw materials we want, we threaten their very existence. To sustain our technologies' capacity to destroy, we require increasing amounts of raw materials; and the vicious circle continues, exponentially.

Many on a spiritual path, seeking to transcend all impulses to acquire or to destroy, put great value on detachment. "Let us move beyond all desire or any actions that might inflame desire." And they are reluctant to engage in the hurly-burly work of social change. Some of my fellow Buddhists seem to understand detachment as becoming free from the world and indifferent to its fate. They forget that what the Buddha taught was detachment from ego, not detachment from the world. In fact, the Buddha was suspicious of those who tried to detach themselves from the realm of matter. In referring to some yogis who mortified the flesh in order to free the spirit, the Buddha likened their efforts to those of a dog tied by a rope to a stake in the ground. He said that the harder they tried to free themselves from the body, the more they would circle round and get closer to the stake, eventually wrapping themselves around it.

Of course, even when you see the world as a trap and posit a fundamental separation between liberation of self and transformation of society, you can still feel a compassionate impulse to help its suffering beings. In that case you tend to view the personal and the political in a sequential fashion. "I'll get enlightened first, and then I'll engage in social action." Those who are not engaged in spiritual pursuits put it differently: "I'll get my head straight first, I'll get psychoanalyzed, I'll overcome my inhibitions or neuroses or my hang-ups (whatever description you give to *samsara*) and *then* I'll wade into the fray." Presupposing that world and self are essentially separate, they imagine they can heal one before healing the other. This stance conveys the impression that human consciousness inhabits some haven, or locker-room, independent of the collective situation—and then trots onto the playing field when it is geared up and ready.

It is my experience that the world itself has a role to play in our liberation. Its very pressures, pains, and risks can wake us up—release us from the bonds of ego and guide us home to our vast, true nature. For some of us, our love for the world is so passionate that we cannot ask it to wait until we are enlightened.

So let us now discuss the third view: *world as lover*. Instead of a stage set for our moral battles or a prison to escape, the world is beheld as a most intimate and gratifying partner. In Hinduism, we find some of the richest expressions of our erotic relationship to the world. In early Vedic hymns, the first stirrings of life are equated with that primal pulse of *ergs*. In the beginning there was the sacred, self-existent one, Prajapati. Lonely, it created the world by splitting into that with which it could copulate. Pregnant with its own inner amplitude and tension, it gave birth to all phenomena, out of desire. Desire plays a creative, world-manifesting role here, and its charge in Hinduism pulses onward into Krishna worship, where devotional songs, or *bhajans*, draw on the erotic yearnings of body and soul. Krishna evokes them to bring to his devotees the bliss of union with the divine. As you sing your yearning for the sparkle of his eyes, the touch of his lips, the blue shade of his skin—like the thunderclouds that bring the refreshment and fertility of the monsoon—the whole world takes on his beauty and the sweetness of his flesh. You feel yourself embraced in the primal erotic play of life.

That erotic affirmation of the phenomenal world is not limited to Hinduism. Ancient Goddess religions, now being explored (at last!) carry it too, as do strains of Sufism and the Kabbalah, and Christianity has its tradition of bridal mysticism. It also occurs outside of religious metaphor. A poet friend of mine went through a period of such personal loss that she was catapulted into extreme loneliness. Falling apart into a nervous breakdown, she went to New York City and lived alone. She walked the streets for months until she found her wholeness again. A phrase of hers echoes in my mind: "I learned to move in the world as if it were my lover."

Another Westerner who sees the world as lover is Italian storyteller Italo Calvino. In his little book, *Cosmicomics*, he describes the evolution of life from the perspective of an individual who experienced it from the beginning, even before the Big Bang. The chapter I want to recount begins with a sentence from science. "Through the calculations begun by Edwin P. Hubble on the galaxies' velocity of recession, we can establish the moment when all the universe's matter was concentrated in a single point, before it began to expand in space."

"We were all there, where else could we have been?" says Calvino's narrator, Qfwfq, as he describes his experience. "We were all in that one point—and, man, was it crowded! Contrary to what you might think, it wasn't the sort of situation that encourages sociability...." Given the conditions, irritations were almost inevitable. See, in addition to all those people, "you have to add all the stuff we had to keep piled up in there: all the material that was to serve afterwards to form the universe...from the nebula of Andromeda to the Vosges Mountains to beryllium isotopes. And on top of that we were always bumping against the Z'zu family's household goods: camp beds, mattresses, baskets...."

So there were, naturally enough, complaints and gossip, but none ever attached to Mrs. Pavacini. (Since most names in the story have no vowels, I have given her a name we can pronounce.) "Mrs. Pavacini, her bosom, her thighs, her orange dressing gown," the sheer memory of her fills our narrator with a blissful, generous emotion.... The fact that she went to bed with her friend Mr. DeXuacauX, was well-known. But in a point, if there's a bed, it takes up the whole point, so it isn't a question of *going* to bed but of *being* there, because anybody

in the point is also in the bed. So consequently it was inevitable that she was in bed with each of us. If she'd been another person, there's no telling all the things that might have been said about her...

This state of affairs could have gone on indefinitely, but something extraordinary happened. An idea occurred to Mrs. Pavacini: "Oh boys, if only I had some room, how I'd like to make some pasta for you!" Here I quote in part from my favorite longest sentence in literature, which closes this particular chapter in Calvino's collection:

And in that moment we all thought of the space that her round arms would occupy moving backward and forward over the great mound of flour and eggs...while her arms kneaded and kneaded, white and shiny with oil up to the elbows, and we thought of the space the flour would occupy and the wheat for the flour and the fields to raise the wheat and the mountains from which the water would flow to irrigate the fields...of the space it would take for the Sun to arrive with its rays, to ripen the wheat; of the space for the Sun to condense from the clouds of stellar gases and burn; of the quantities of stars and galaxies and galactic masses in flight through space which would be needed to hold suspended every galaxy, every nebula, every sun, every planet, and at the same time we thought of it, this space was inevitably being formed, at the same time that Mrs. Pavacini was uttering those words: "...ah, what pasta, boys!" The point that contained her and all of us was expanding in a halo of distance in light years and light centuries and billions of light millennia and we were being hurled to the four corners of the universe...and she dissolved into I don't know what kind of energy-light-heat, she, Mrs. Pavacini, she who in the midst of our closed, petty world had been capable of a generous impulse, "Boys, the pasta I could make for you" a true outburst of general love, initiating at the same time the concept of space and, properly speaking, space itself, and time, and universal gravitation, and the gravitating universe, making possible billions and billions of suns, and planets, and fields of wheat, and Mrs. Pavacini scattered through the continents of the planets, kneading with floury, oil-shiny, generous arms and she lost at that very moment, and we, mourning her loss.

But is she lost? Or is she equally present, in every moment, her act of love embodied in every unfolding of this amazing world? Whether we see it as Krishna or as Mrs. Pavacini, that teasing, loving presence is in the monsoon clouds and the peacock's cry that heralds monsoon,

and in the plate of good pasta. For when you see the world as lover, every being, every phenomenon, can become—if you have a clever, appreciative eye—an expression of that ongoing, erotic impulse. It takes form right now in each one of us and in everyone and everything we encounter—the bus driver, the clerk at the checkout counter, the leaping squirrel. As we seek to discover the lover in each life form, you can find yourself in the dance of *rasa-lila*, sweet play, where each of the milkmaids who yearned for Krishna finds him magically at her side, her very own partner in the dance. The one beloved has become many, and the world itself her lover.

Since, as Calvino reminds us, we were “all in one point” to begin with, we could as easily see the *world as self*. Just as lovers seek for union, we are apt, when we fall in love with our world, to fall into oneness with it as well. Hunger for this union springs from a deep knowing, to which mystics of all traditions give voice. Breaking open a seed to reveal its life-giving kernel, the sage in the *Upanishads* tells his student: “*Tat tvam asi*—That art thou.” The tree that will grow from the seed, that art thou; the running water, that art thou, and the sun in the sky, and all that is, that art thou.

“There is a Secret One inside us,” says Kabir, “the planets in all the galaxies pass through his hands like beads.” Mystics of the Western traditions have tended to speak of merging self with God rather than with the world, but the import is often the same. When Hildegard of Bingen experienced unity with the divine, she gave it these words: “I am the breeze that nurtures all things green...I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.”

In times like our own recent centuries, when the manifest world is considered less real and alive than ideas inside our heads, the mystic impulse reaches beyond it and seeks union with a transcendent deity. But once the bonds of limited ego snap, that blazing unity knows no limits. It embraces the most ordinary and physical of phenomena. The individual heart becomes one with its world, and expresses it in imageries of circle and net. The fifteenth century cardinal, Nicholas of Cusa, defined God as an infinite circle whose periphery is nowhere and whose center is everywhere. That center, that one self, is in you and me and the tree outside the door. Similarly, the Jeweled Net of

Indra, the vision of reality that arose with *Hua Yen* Buddhism, revealed a world where each being, each gem at each node of the net, is illuminated by all the others and reflected in them. As part of this world, you contain the whole of it.

Today this perception arises in realms of science as well. The founder of general systems theory, biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, shows how all self-organizing systems are created and sustained by the dynamics at play in the larger systems of our universe. The part contains the whole, he says, and acknowledges his debt to Nicholas of Cusa. Systems thinker Gregory Bateson describes cognitive open systems, our minds, in terms of a flow-through of information, where no separate self can be delimited. Mind itself is immanent in nature, he says, extending far beyond the tiny spans illumined by our conscious purposes.

The way we define and delimit the self is arbitrary. We can place it between our ears and have it looking out from our eyes, or we can widen it to include the air we breathe, or, at other moments, we can cast its boundaries farther to include the oxygen-giving trees and plankton, our external lungs, and beyond them the web of life in which they are sustained.

I used to think that I ended with my skin, that everything within the skin was me and everything outside the skin was not. But now you've read these words, and the concepts they represent are reaching your cortex, so “the process” that is me now extends as far as you. And where, for that matter, did this process begin? I certainly can trace it to my teachers, some of whom I never met, and to my husband and children, who give me courage and support to do the work I do, and to the plant and animal beings who sustain my body. What I am, as systems theorists have helped me see, is a “Flow-through.” I am a flow-through of matter, energy, and information, which is transformed in turn by my own experiences and intentions. Systems theory seeks to define the principles by which this transformation occurs, but not the stuff itself that flows through, for that, in the last analysis, would be a metaphysical endeavor. Systems thinkers Kenneth and Elise Boulding suggest that we could simply call it *agape*—the Greek and early Christian word for “love.”

Systems thinking is basic to the swiftly developing science of ecology, and its import for our relationship to the world is expressed most clearly in the movement of thought called "deep ecology." This term was coined in the mid-1970s by Norwegian philosopher and mountain-climber, Arne Naess, to contrast with the environmentalism that still sets the self apart from its world. Environmental efforts that focus on cleaning up the Hudson River or San Francisco Bay for the sake of our own species are inadequate. These tend to be short-term, technological fixes, band-aid approaches to ecological problems, because they do not address the sources of these problems, which is our stance in relation to our world. What is destroying our world is the persistent notion that we are independent of it, aloof from other species, and immune to what we do to them. Our survival, Naess says, requires shifting into more encompassing ideas of who we are.

To experience the world as an extended self and its story as our own extended story involves no surrender or eclipse of our individuality. The liver, leg, and lung that are "mine" are highly distinct from each other, thank goodness, and each has a distinctive role to play. The larger selfness we discover today is not an undifferentiated unity. Our recognition of this may be the third part of an unfolding of consciousness that began a long time ago, like the third movement of a symphony.

In the first movement, our infancy as a species, we felt no separation from the natural world around us. Trees, rocks, and plants surrounded us with a living presence as intimate and pulsing as our own bodies. In that primal intimacy, which anthropologists call "participation mystique," we were as one with our world as a child in the mother's womb.

Then self-consciousness arose and gave us distance on our world. We needed that distance in order to make decisions and strategies, in order to measure, judge and to monitor our judgments. With the emergence of free-will, the fall out of the Garden of Eden, the second movement began—the lonely and heroic journey of the ego. Nowadays, yearning to reclaim a sense of wholeness, some of us tend to disparage that movement of separation from nature, but it brought great gains for which we can be grateful. The distanced and observing eye brought us tools of science, and a priceless view of the vast,

orderly intricacy of our world. The recognition of our individuality brought us trial by jury and the Bill of Rights.

Now, harvesting these gains, we are ready to return. The third movement begins. Having gained distance and sophistication of perception, we can turn and recognize who we have been all along. Now it can dawn on us: we are our world knowing itself. We can relinquish our separateness. We can come home again—and participate in our world in a richer, more responsible and poignantly beautiful way than before, in our infancy.

Because of the journey we undertook to distance ourselves from our world, it is no longer undifferentiated from us. It can appear to us now both as self and as lover. Relating to our world with the full measure of our being, we partake of the qualities of both. I think of a poem, "The Old Mendicant," by Thich Nhat Hanh. In it he evokes the long, wondrous evolutionary journey we all have made together, from which we are as inseparable as from our own selves. At the same time, it is a love song. Hear these lines, as if addressed to you.

Being rock, being gas, being mist, being Mind,
 being the mesons traveling among galaxies
 at the speed of light,
 you have come here, my beloved....
 You have manifested yourself
 as trees, grass, butterflies, single-celled beings,
 and as chrysanthemums.
 But the eyes with which you looked at me this morning
 tell me you have never died.

We have all gone that long journey, and now, richer for it, we come home to our mutual belonging. We return to experience, as we never could before, that we are both the self of our world and its cherished lover. We are not doomed to destroy it by the cravings of the separate ego and the technologies it fashioned. We can wake up to who we really are, and allow the waters of the Rhine to flow clean once more, and the trees to grow green along its banks.

contemporary nuclear physics, people talk about implicit order and explicit order. In the explicit order, things exist outside of each other—the table outside of the flower, the sunshine outside of the cypress tree. In the implicit order, we see that they are inside each other—the sunshine inside the cypress tree. Interbeing is the implicit order. To practice mindfulness and to look deeply into the nature of things is to discover the true nature of interbeing. There we find peace and develop the strength to be in touch with everything. With this understanding, we can easily sustain the work of loving and caring for the Earth and for each other for a long time.



JOANNA MACY

The Greening of the Self

SOMETHING IMPORTANT is happening in our world that you are not going to read about in the newspapers. I consider it the most fascinating and hopeful development of our time, and it is one of the reasons I am so glad to be alive today. It has to do with what is occurring to the notion of the *self*.

The self is the metaphoric construct of identity and agency, the hypothetical piece of turf on which we construct our strategies for survival, the notion around which we focus our instincts for self-preservation, our needs for self-approval, and the boundaries of our self-interest. Something is happening to the self!

The conventional notion of the self with which we have been raised and to which we have been conditioned by mainstream culture is being undermined. What Alan Watts called “the skin-encapsulated ego” and Gregory Bateson referred to as “the epistemological error of Occidental civilization” is being unhinged, peeled off. It is being replaced by wider constructs of identity and self-interest—by what you might call the ecological self or the eco-self, co-extensive with other beings and the life of our planet. It is what I will call “the greening of the self.”

At a recent lecture on a college campus, I gave the students examples of activities which are currently being undertaken in defense of life on Earth—actions in which people risk their comfort and even their lives to protect other species. In the Chipko, or tree-hugging, movement in north India, for example, villagers fight the deforestation of their remaining woodlands. On the open seas, Greenpeace activists are intervening to protect marine mammals from slaughter.

After that talk, I received a letter from a student I'll call Michael. He wrote:

I think of the tree-huggers hugging my trunk, blocking the chain-saws with their bodies. I feel their fingers digging into my bark to stop the steel and let me breathe. I hear the bodhisattvas in their rubber boats as they put themselves between the harpoons and me, so I can escape to the depths of the sea. I give thanks for your life and mine, and for life itself. I give thanks for realizing that I too have the powers of the tree-huggers and the bodhisattvas.

What is striking about Michael's words is the shift in identification. Michael is able to extend his sense of self to encompass the self of the tree and of the whale. Tree and whale are no longer removed, separate, disposable objects pertaining to a world "out there"; they are intrinsic to his own vitality. Through the power of his caring, his experience of self is expanded far beyond that skin-encapsulated ego. I quote Michael's words not because they are unusual, but to the contrary, because they express a desire and a capacity that is being released from the prison-cell of old constructs of self. This desire and capacity are arising in more and more people today as, out of deep concern for what is happening to our world, they begin to speak and act on its behalf.

Among those who are shedding these old constructs of self, like old skin or a confining shell, is John Seed, director of the Rainforest Information Center in Australia. One day we were walking through the rainforest in New South Wales, where he has his office, and I asked him, "You talk about the struggle against the lumbering interests and politicians to save the remaining rainforest in Australia. How do you deal with the despair?"

He replied, "I try to remember that it's not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather I'm part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking." This is what I mean by the greening of the self. It involves a combining of the mystical with the practical and the pragmatic, transcending separateness, alienation, and fragmentation. It is a shift that Seed himself calls "a spiritual change," generating a sense of profound interconnectedness with all life.

This is hardly new to our species. In the past poets and mystics have been speaking and writing about these ideas, but not people on the barricades agitating for social change. Now the sense of an encompassing self, that deep identity with the wider reaches of life, is a motivation for action. It is a source of courage that helps us stand up to the powers that are still, through force of inertia, working for the destruction of our world. I am convinced that this expanded sense of self is the *only* basis for adequate and effective action.

When you look at what is happening to our world—and it is hard to look at what's happening to our water, our air, our trees, our fellow species—it becomes clear that unless you have some roots in a spiritual practice that holds life sacred and encourages joyful communion with all your fellow beings, facing the enormous challenges ahead becomes nearly impossible.

Robert Bellah's book *Habits of the Heart* is not a place where you are going to read about the greening of the self. But it is where you will read *why* there has to be a greening of the self, because it describes the cramp that our society has gotten itself into with its rampant, indeed pathological, individualism. Bellah points out that the individualism that sprang from the Romantic movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (the seeds of which were planted even earlier than that) is accelerating and causing great suffering, alienation and fragmentation in our century. Bellah calls for a moral ecology which he defines as a moral connectedness or interdependence. He says, "We have to treat others as part of who we are, rather than as a 'them' with whom we are in constant competition."

To Robert Bellah, I respond, "It is happening." It is happening in the arising of the ecological self. And it is happening because of three converging developments. First, the conventional small self, or ego-self is being impinged upon by the psychological and spiritual effects we are suffering from facing the dangers of mass annihilation. The second thing working to dismantle the ego-self is a way of seeing that has arisen out of science itself. It is called the systems view, cybernetics, or new paradigm science. From this perspective, life is seen as dynamically composed of self-organizing systems, patterns that are sustained in and by their relationships. The third force is the resurgence in our time of non-dualistic spiritualities. Here I am speaking from my own

experience with Buddhism, but it is also happening in other faith-systems and religions, such as "creation spirituality" in Christianity. These developments are impinging on the self in ways that are undermining it, or helping it to break out of its boundaries and old definitions. Instead of ego-self, we witness the emergence of an eco-self!

The move to a wider ecological sense of self is in large part a function of the dangers that are threatening to overwhelm us. Given nuclear proliferation and the progressive destruction of our biosphere, polls show that people today are aware that the world, as they know it, may come to an end. I am convinced that this loss of certainty that there will be a future is the pivotal psychological reality of our time. The fact that it is not talked about very much makes it all the more pivotal, because nothing is more preoccupying or energy-draining than that which we repress.

Why do I claim that this erodes the old sense of self? Because once we stop denying the crises of our time and let ourselves experience the depth of our own responses to the pain of our world—whether it is the burning of the Amazon rainforest, the famines of Africa, or the homeless in our own cities—the grief or anger or fear we experience cannot be reduced to concerns for our own individual skin. It can never be the same.

When we mourn over the destruction of our biosphere, it is categorically distinct from mourning over our own death. We suffer with our world—that is the literal meaning of compassion. It isn't some private craziness. Yet, when I was weeping over the napalming of villages in Vietnam twenty years ago, I was told that I was suffering from a hangover of Puritan guilt. When I expressed myself against President Reagan, they said I had unresolved problems regarding my own father. How often have you had your concerns for political and ecological realities subjected to reductionistic pop-therapy? How often have you heard, "What are you running away from in your life that you are letting yourself get so concerned about those homeless people? Perhaps you have some unresolved issues? Maybe you're sexually unfulfilled?" It can go on and on. But increasingly it is being recognized that a compassionate response is neither craziness nor a dodge. It is the opposite; it is a signal of our own evolution, a measure of our humanity. We are capable of suffering with our world, and that is the

true meaning of compassion. It enables us to recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings. Don't ever apologize for crying for the trees burning in the Amazon or over the waters polluted from mines in the Rockies. Don't apologize for the sorrow, grief, and rage you feel. It is a measure of your humanity and your maturity. It is a measure of your open heart, and as your heart breaks open there will be room for the world to heal. That is what is happening as we see people honestly confronting the sorrows of our time. And it is an adaptive response.

The crisis that threatens our planet, whether seen from its military, ecological, or social aspect, derives from a dysfunctional and pathological notion of the self. It derives from a mistake about our place in the order of things. It is a delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries, that it is so small and so needy that we must endlessly acquire and endlessly consume, and that it is so aloof that as individuals, corporations, nation-states, or species, we can be immune to what we do to other beings.

This view of human nature is not new, of course. Many have felt the imperative to extend self-interest to embrace the whole. What is notable in our situation is that this extension of identity can come not through an effort to be noble or good or altruistic, but simply to be present and own our pain. And that is why this shift in the sense of self is credible to people. As the poet Theodore Roethke said, "I believe my pain."

This "despair and empowerment" work derives from two other forces I mentioned earlier: systems theory, or cybernetics, and non-dualistic spirituality, particularly Buddhism. I will now turn to what we could call the cybernetics of the self.

The findings of twentieth-century science undermine the notion of a separate self distinct from the world it observes and acts upon. Einstein showed that the self's perceptions are shaped by its changing position in relation to other phenomena. And Heisenberg, in his uncertainty principle, demonstrated that the very act of observation changes what is observed.

Contemporary science, and systems science in particular, goes further in challenging old assumptions about a distinct, separate, con-

tinuous self, by showing that there is no logical or scientific basis for construing one part of the experienced world as "me" and the rest as "other." That is so because as open, self-organizing systems, our very breathing, acting and thinking arise in interaction with our shared world through the currents of matter, energy, and information that move through us and sustain us. In the web of relationships that sustain these activities there is no clear line demarcating a separate, continuous self.

As postmodern systems theorists say, "There is no categorical 'I' set over against a categorical 'you' or 'it.'" One of the clearer expositions of this is found in the teachings and writings of Gregory Bateson, whom I earlier quoted as saying that the abstraction of a separate "I" is the epistemological fallacy of Western civilization. He says that the process that decides and acts cannot be neatly identified with the isolated subjectivity of the individual or located within the confines of the skin. He contends that "the total self-corrective unit that processes information is a system whose boundaries do not at all coincide with the boundaries either of the body or what is popularly called 'self' or 'consciousness.'" He goes on to say, "The self is ordinarily understood as only a small part of a much larger trial-and-error system which does the thinking, acting, and deciding." Bateson offers two helpful examples. One is the woodcutter, about to fell a tree. His hands grip the handle of the axe, there is the head of the axe, the trunk of the tree. Whump, he makes a cut, and then whump, another cut. What is the feedback circuit, where is the information that is guiding that cutting down of the tree? It is a whole circle; you can begin at any point. It moves from the eye of the woodcutter, to the hand, to the axe, and back to the cut in the tree. That is the self-correcting unit, that is what is doing the chopping down of the tree.

In another illustration, a blind person with a cane is walking along the sidewalk. Tap, tap, whoops, there's a fire hydrant, there's a curb. What is doing the walking? Where is the self then of the blind person? What is doing the perceiving and deciding? That self-corrective feedback circuit is the arm, the hand, the cane, the curb, the ear. At that moment that is the self that is walking. Bateson's point is that the self is a false reification of an improperly delimited part of a much larger field of interlocking processes. And he goes on to maintain that:

this false reification of the self is basic to the planetary ecological crisis in which we find ourselves. We have imagined that we are a unit of survival and we have to see to our own survival, and we imagine that the unit of survival is the separate individual or a separate species, whereas in reality through the history of evolution, it is the individual plus the environment, the species plus the environment, for they are essentially symbiotic.

The self is a metaphor. We can decide to limit it to our skin, our person, our family, our organization, or our species. We can select its boundaries in objective reality. As the systems theorists see it, our consciousness illuminates a small arc in the wider currents and loops of knowing that interconnect us. It is just as plausible to conceive of mind as coexistent with these larger circuits, the entire "pattern that connects," as Bateson said.

Do not think that to broaden the construct of self this way involves an eclipse of one's distinctiveness. Do not think that you will lose your identity like a drop in the ocean merging into the oneness of Brahman. From the systems perspective this interaction, creating larger wholes and patterns, allows for and even requires diversity. You become more yourself. Integration and differentiation go hand in hand.

The third factor that is aiding in the dismantling of the ego-self and the creation of the eco-self is the resurgence of non-dualistic spiritualities. Buddhism is distinctive in the clarity and sophistication with which it deals with the constructs and the dynamics of self. In much the same way as systems theory does, Buddhism undermines categorical distinctions between self and other and belies the concept of a continuous, self-existent entity. It then goes farther than systems theory in showing the pathogenic character of any reifications of the self. It goes farther still in offering methods for transcending these difficulties and healing this suffering. What the Buddha woke up to under the Bodhi tree was the *paticca samuppada*, the co-arising of phenomena, in which you cannot isolate a separate, continuous self.

We think, "What do we do with the self, this clamorous 'I,' always wanting attention, always wanting its goodies? Do we crucify it, sacrifice it, mortify it, punish it, or do we make it noble?" Upon awaking we realize, "Oh, it just isn't there." It's a convention, just a convenient convention. When you take it too seriously, when you suppose that it

is something enduring which you have to defend and promote, it becomes the foundation of delusion, the motive behind our attachments and our aversions.

For a beautiful illustration of a deviation-amplifying feedback loop, consider *Yama* holding the wheel of life. There are the domains, the various realms of beings, and at the center of that wheel of suffering are three figures: the snake, the rooster and the pig—delusion, greed and aversion—and they just chase each other around and around. The linchpin is the notion of our self, the notion that we have to protect that self or punish it or do *something* with it.

Oh, the sweetness of being able to realize: I am my experience. I am this breathing. I am this moment, and it is changing, continually arising in the fountain of life. We do not need to be doomed to the perpetual rat-race. The vicious circle can be broken by the wisdom, *prajña*, that arises when we see that “self” is just an idea; by the practice of meditation, *dhyana*; and by the practice of morality, *shila*, where attention to our experience and to our actions reveals that they do not need to be in bondage to a separate self.

Far from the nihilism and escapism that is often imputed to the Buddhist path, this liberation, this awakening puts one *into* the world with a livelier, more caring sense of social engagement. The sense of interconnectedness that can then arise, is imaged—one of the most beautiful images coming out of the Mahayana—as the jeweled net of Indra. It is a vision of reality structured very much like the holographic view of the universe, so that each being is at each node of the net, each jewel reflects all the others, reflecting back and catching the reflection, just as systems theory sees that the part contains the whole.

The awakening to our true self is the awakening to that entirety, breaking out of the prison-self of separate ego. The one who perceives this is the bodhisattva—and we are all bodhisattvas because we are all capable of experiencing that—it is our true nature. We are profoundly interconnected and therefore we are all able to recognize and act upon our deep, intricate, and intimate inter-existence with each other and all beings. That true nature of ours is already present in our pain for the world.

When we turn our eyes away from that homeless figure, are we indifferent or is the pain of seeing him or her too great? Do not be easily duped about the apparent indifference of those around you.

What looks like apathy is really the fear of suffering. But the bodhisattva knows that to experience the pain of all beings is necessary to experience their joy. It says in *The Lotus Sutra* that the bodhisattva hears the music of the spheres, and understands the language of the birds, while hearing the cries in the deepest levels of hell.

One of the things I like best about the green self, the ecological self that is arising in our time, is that it is making moral exhortation irrelevant. Sermonizing is both boring and ineffective. This is pointed out by Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who coined the phrase “deep ecology.” This great systems view of the world helps us recognize our embeddedness in nature, overcomes our alienation from the rest of creation, and changes the way we can experience our self through an ever-widening process of identification.

Naess calls this self-realization, a progression “where the self to be realized extends further and further beyond the separate ego and includes more and more of the phenomenal world.” And he says,

In this process, notions such as altruism and moral duty are left behind. It is tacitly based on the Latin term “ego” which has as its opposite the “alter.” Altruism implies that the ego sacrifices its interests in favor of the other, the alter. The motivation is primarily that of duty. It is said we *ought* to love others as strongly as we love our self. There are, however, very limited numbers among humanity capable of loving from mere duty or from moral exhortation.

Unfortunately, the extensive moralizing within the ecological movement has given the public the false impression that they are being asked to make a sacrifice—to show more responsibility, more concern, and a nicer moral standard. But all of that would flow naturally and easily if the self were widened and deepened so that the protection of nature was felt and perceived as protection of our very selves.

Please note this important point: virtue is *not* required for the greening of the self or the emergence of the ecological self. The shift in identification at this point in our history is required precisely *be-*

cause moral exhortation doesn't work, and because sermons seldom hinder us from following our self-interest as we conceive it.

The obvious choice, then, is to extend our notions of self-interest. For example, it would not occur to me to plead with you, "Oh, don't saw off your leg. That would be an act of violence." It wouldn't occur to me because your leg is part of your body. Well, so are the trees in the Amazon rain basin. They are our external lungs. And we are beginning to realize that the world is our body.

This ecological self, like any notion of selfhood, is a metaphoric construct and a dynamic one. It involves choice; choices can be made to identify at different moments, with different dimensions or aspects of our systemically interrelated existence—be they hunted whales or homeless humans or the planet itself. In doing this the extended self brings into play wider resources—courage, endurance, ingenuity—like a nerve cell in a neural net opening to the charge of the other neurons.

There is the sense of being acted through and sustained by those very beings on whose behalf one acts. This is very close to the religious concept of grace. In systems language we can talk about it as a synergy. But with this extension, this greening of the self, we can find a sense of buoyancy and resilience that comes from letting flow through us strengths and resources that come to us with continuous surprise and sense of blessing.

We know that we are not limited by the accident of our birth or the timing of it, and we recognize the truth that we have always been around. We can reinhabit time and own our story as a species. We were present back there in the fireball and the rains that streamed down on this still molten planet, and in the primordial seas. We remember that in our mother's womb, where we wear vestigial gills and tail and fins for hands. We remember that. That information is in us and there is a deep, deep kinship in us, beneath the outer layers of our neocortex or what we learned in school. There is a deep wisdom, a bondedness with our creation, and an ingenuity far beyond what we think we have. And when we expand our notions of what we are to include in this story, we will have a wonderful time and we will survive.



BILL DEVALL

Ecocentric Sangha

IN HIS BOOK, *A Sand County Almanac*, ecologist Aldo Leopold recounts expeditions he and his friends made into the wilderness of the American Southwest in the early part of this century. He tells about his relentless campaign to kill all the wolves. One day, spotting a wolf down ridge from the hunting party, he shot first and then moved to where the body of the wolf was lying.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.¹

Leopold entitled this section of his book "Thinking Like a Mountain," a phrase that has become a slogan for the deep ecology movement.² Buddhists trained to cultivate mindfulness can appreciate the possibilities for true understanding embodied in that slogan.

During the past few centuries almost every ecosystem and primal culture on the Earth has been disrupted, and in many cases totally despoiled, by aggressive human beings. This multitude of ruins is

¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 130.

² John Seed, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1988).