

## Chapter 3: THE SANDS OF THE GANGES - Notes towards a Buddhist ecological philosophy

By Stephen Batchelor, taken from „*Buddhism and Ecology*“, Motilal Banarsidass, 1994

Long before this age of astrophysics presented us with a universe in which the distances of stars were measured in millions of light years, Buddhists lived in a cosmos of similarly mind-numbing proportions. There was a universe with no beginning or end and galaxies „as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges“ arose, existed and passed away across vast aeons of time.

Yet unlike scientists who peer at the data from radio telescopes and analyse the rocks of Mars in search of a glimmer of life, Buddhists saw the universe as teeming with diverse living beings, longing not just to be, but to be something, to have something, to feel something. This collective craving is seen as the reason for the existence and constant renewal of the universe. It translates itself into external environments - complexes of physical lifeforms; and into internal environments - complexes of thoughts, feelings and impulses with the tragic habit of grasping themselves as separate, solid and permanent selves.

Human existence is just one of six forms of life spread throughout the universe. Hedonistic and conceited gods, warring titans, animals, hungry ghosts and denizens of hell also inhabit the world systems, living out their own dramas and sufferings alongside human beings. Some are visible to the human eye, as with animals, but most are invisible, as with gods and ghosts. The presence of human beings is certainly not restricted to the planet Earth nor is the human species regarded as the best effort so far in an evolutionary unfolding of nature; Nonetheless, existence as a human is seen as an exceptional opportunity; for it is the kind of life most suited to finding out what is going on here.

While we in the West are inclined to think that we know what is going on, it is a fundamental principle of Buddhism that we do not. This is stated in the second of the Four Noble Truths which underpin Buddhist philosophy. The first Noble Truth states that there is suffering. The second, that there is a cause for that suffering which is delusion. The third Noble Truth states that there is an end to the suffering (i.e. the delusion) and the fourth that there is a way or path to reach that end. When the Buddha spoke of enlightenment, nirvana, he was referring to the absolute understanding that ends our suffering.

(...)

### NO SELF: THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF ALL

The Buddhist vision of reality is often spoken of in terms of absence. Insight is not only the discovery of something previously unknown and unsuspected but also the amazement that something you had always taken for granted has fallen away. You find that it is no longer necessary to uphold the fantasy of a solid, lasting self; reality works perfectly well without one and, in fact, this self has only ever managed to get in the way and cause trouble. The fear that denial of the self would give us no ground to stand on is realized to be in itself groundless, like the discovery we make as children when we find we can swim and are, at that moment, freed from the terror of drowning. Thus the instinctive insistence upon a separate self is seen to provide an utterly false sense of security; for in an undivided world everything miraculously supports everything else.

When the conviction that there is a solid, enduring self co-existing with millions of solid, enduring others in a world of solid, enduring things, falls away, a universe of magically interrelated processes and events is revealed. That dreadful, alienating sense of separation dissolves, opening us to the freedom that is our birthright. Buddhist teachers often keep silent about the nature of this reality, knowing that for an unenlightened mind any descriptions

would only tend to confuse and lead to speculation. Nonetheless, in some scriptures poetic imagery is employed to try and capture this sense of things as they are. One image used is that of Indra's Net, a vast grid of interconnected mirroring spheres, each one reflecting all the others. Uisang, a seventh-century Korean Buddhist monk, said:

In one is all, in many is one.  
 One is identical to all, many is identical to one.  
 In one particle of dust are contained the ten directions. \*  
 And so it is with all particles of dust.

Twelve hundred years later, a similar insight was immortalized in the more familiar words of William Blake:

To see a world in a grain of sand,  
 And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
 Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
 And eternity in an hour!

Chinese Buddhist philosophers developed this vision of the world into the doctrine of „the unimpeded interpenetration of all phenomena“. This doctrine stated that everything in the universe is literally dependent upon everything else, nothing stands alone, everything is linked together through time and space. Taken to its limit, the doctrine maintains that a speck of dust on Jupiter is intimately linked to a streetlamp in Tokyo, that a drop of water suspended from one leaf of a mahogany tree in a Burmese rainforest is united with the exhaustfumes belching from a battered Chevrolet in Mexico City.

It is remarkable how little one has to tease out these ancient Buddhist doctrines to arrive at ecologically important statements. Long before environmental disasters brutally forced upon us an understanding of the interconnection of things, Buddhist teachers knew full well that such insight was crucial for the welfare of humanity. Moreover, these Indian and Chinese monks spoke of much more than the mere interconnection of the observable natural world: they included the vital role of the mind.

„The world“, wrote the Indian Buddhist philosopher *Vasubhandu* in the fourth century, „is created from intentions.“ In other words, the environment we find ourselves in and the way we experience it are the consequences of how we have chosen and agreed to live. If our intentions are driven by self-centred greed and attachment, then that will determine the way we perceive the external environment, i.e. we will see it as a resource to be exploited to satisfy our desires and protect us against the things we fear. And since greed and attachment are short-sighted, mentally deadening and dehumanizing, the environment will reflect back those very qualities we inject into it. Decaying inner cities, gutted hillsides and polluted rivers are therefore the consequence of intentions of the human mind. To place responsibility for these things on the shoulders of industrialists and politicians, as we are prone to do, is just another knee-jerk reaction of a mind that insists on duality to make sense of life, in this case by dividing the world into „innocent“ and „guilty“. Yet as long as we participate in the same delusions of separateness, then we too are responsible - by upholding instinctively a view of the world that allows such things to be possible..

Insight into the interconnection of life, however, is not just a personally satisfying solution to the problem of delusion. When we dissolve the rigid boundaries of the self, we inevitably reveal our connection with, and mutual dependence upon, other living beings. And when this insight breaks through in our hearts, it expresses itself as compassion and love.

The eighth-century Indian Buddhist poet *Shantideva* evoked this sense of universal sympathy with his image of life as a single organism, like a cosmic body. For just as the hand reaches out to a foot that is in pain, so does the enlightened person reach out in sympathy to those who are suffering. Insight into the interpenetration of all things transforms our immediate relationship with those around us, making it simply impossible to stand by with indifference and watch the world go up in flames. In a sense, the realization of the interdependence

of life is a painful one. No longer can we remain comfortably insulated by the illusion of our separate selfhood. At this point, compassion stops being the deliberate doing of good, it becomes an instinctive urge. „Although one acts in this way for others“, remarks *Shantideva*, „there is no sense of conceit or amazement. It is just like feeding oneself; one hopes for nothing in return.“

#### THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: IMPLEMENTING A BUDDHIST SOLUTION

For visions of doom and gloom, Buddhists have no need to refer to the messages of the modern prophets of impending ecological disaster. They have only to read their own texts to be told that within the huge time-cycles of the universe, humanity is currently embarked on a vicious downswing. The birth of the Buddha in this world was but a brief flash of cosmic illumination, in which the Dharma was revealed to those with „little dust on their eyes“. But it seems the Buddha did not expect the influence of his teaching to last very long. Estimates vary, but the general consensus among Buddhist traditions is that the Dharma would not remain for more than a few thousand years after the Buddha's death. Moreover, the fading of Buddhist doctrine is but one symptom of a period of moral degeneration, which is also characterized by a gradual shortening of human lifespan (in spans of time so vast that the recent increase of life expectancy in the affluent West could be interpreted as an aberrant blip), an increase in fatal diseases, the proliferation of weapons and, worst of all, a deepening of spiritual delusion.

If taken seriously, these predictions confirm the forecasts of scientists and others that we are living in a way that is both unsustainable and grossly irresponsible towards other forms of life as well as our own species. And if the world continues to be driven by the mounting forces of delusion rather than enlightenment, then what hope is there of implementing a Buddhist solution on a scale which could hold back the disasters looming towards us? In all honesty, are millions of human beings suddenly going to choose the Buddha's enlightenment instead of the pursuit of material affluence?

We cannot ignore these questions. If the Buddhist analysis of the ecological crisis is correct, then we are clearly going to have to do more than just switch to recycled envelopes and ozone-friendly hairspray to prevent the potential environmental catastrophe that a growing number of responsible voices are predicting. Yet to be realistic, we also have to accept that selfishness and greed are not going to vanish overnight. It would appear that the first step of a Buddhist solution—as 'skillful means'\* at least—must be to explain how our present way of life is simply not in our own self-interest, let alone in the interest of millions of other beings and future generations.

The second step of a Buddhist solution would be to challenge the social structures which sustain and promote values that blind us to the ecologically destructive results of our actions. Two structures of particular importance would be education and economics. In the secular democracies of the West, both of these structures are based on

belief in value-free (objective) knowledge, unlimited progress, and individual freedom. The combined effect of these beliefs is the rapid erosion of the moral values which still survive from our ancestral religions (compassion, generosity, self-control etc.). As a force of spiritual renewal, Buddhism would seek to inject into our social structures a fresh awareness of undisputed values—but without these depending on belief in God.

To be complete, however, both approaches (appealing to self-interest and renewing social values) must begin with an inner practice of self-transformation. Learning, reflection and meditation would uproot the tendencies of the mind which are destructive to both ourselves and our environment. We need to be encouraging within ourselves qualities such as simplicity, balance, compassion and understanding. We are each the starting point of a world-order based on these qualities. In such ways Buddhist practice would work inwardly at transforming the mind and outwardly at transforming the world.

Moreover, there are two traditions in Mahayana Buddhism which might prove particularly relevant to the ecological crisis. The first is the belief that all beings are enlightened if only they would realize it. For in spite of the scriptures' dire predictions of spiritual and moral decline, in spite of widespread ignorance and greed, and in spite of the breakdown of traditional values, delusion is not essential to life but accidental. In their innermost being, every creature is aglow with illumination. But like a sun obscured by a dark mass of cloud, their true nature is concealed. This is a doctrine of hope that can be raised to counterbalance the pessimistic leanings in Buddhism, which have prevailed for much of its history. When Zen Buddhists, for example, speak of sudden enlightenment, they mean that insight is something that can break into our lives at any time. Enlightenment is not a distant goal that we may reach after many aeons of effort but is already present here and now in everyone. To trust in the underlying presence of such enlightenment is a great strength in facing the calamities of life for it draws our attention to what is good in people rather than to the masks of delusion that hide their goodness.

The second tradition is that of the tantric doctrine of transformation. In tantric (or Vajrayana) Buddhism\*, delusion is not thought of as something to be eliminated. On the contrary, it is seen as a particular energy pattern that is neither essentially good nor bad. When understood as energy patterns, even the most powerful delusions can be transformed into forces for enlightenment by transforming the pattern. Needless to say, the practice of tantra is a rigorous and demanding discipline which includes an element of danger. Yet it is often claimed by tantric teachers that the present „degenerate“ age is particularly suited to the Vajrayana, for the simple reason that the more intense the delusion, the more powerful is the energy available to be transformed into enlightenment.

We can also interpret the present delusive and dangerous situation as itself being a tantric teacher. For whatever our beliefs, the crisis demands that we act; it compels us to question ourselves in a way that constantly challenges us to transform our lives.

\* Tantric Buddhism, also known as Vajrayana, 'Vehicle of the Diamond', is the 'Indestructible vehicle' for crossing the 'ocean of suffering' to enlightenment. Tantric practice is based on the principle of transforming the impurities that defile the inherently pure soul. The tantric texts deal with the evocation of deities, the acquisition of magical power and the attainment of enlightenment through meditation, mantras (mystical chants), mudras (ritual movement/dance) and yoga. Tantra can only be received through the instruction of a guru. It is a form of Mahayana Buddhism.