

INTERBEING: Self, Others, Buddha Nature and the Evolving Universe

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Abstract: This paper attempts to highlight issues related to socially engaged Buddhism, drawing from a variety of schools. Both non-dual approaches like Jonang and popular devotional ones like Pureland are considered. Aspects of Buddhism from the personal, social and ecological dimensions are examined drawing from the work of theologians and practitioners like David Loy, Thich Nhat Hanh, Thanissaro Bhikku, Steven Batchelor, Buddhadasa Bhikku, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry.

Keywords: Buddha Nature, Evolutionary Buddhist Spirituality, Indra's Net, Interbeing, Pureland Buddhism, Rebirth, Self.

1. Introduction

At one time in early history much of South Asia was Buddhist, but today Buddhism is almost moribund here, though after Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956 there has been a small revival among dalits. This neo-buddhist movement appears to be largely confined to those at the bottom of the unjust caste system. They are today referred to as scheduled castes, although they have given themselves the name Dalit. While the neo-buddhists have thrown up fresh buddhist perspectives their impact is still largely limited to small pockets of the country.

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This paper is an attempt to highlight Buddhism's relevance to the modern world, especially in dealing with issues relating to social justice and environmental degradation and in strengthening spiritualities of compassion and peace. In the present context in India religions are not playing a significant role in promoting values related to pluralism, gender equality and ecological sustainability. Traditional Buddhist understandings in South Asia, mainly Sri Lanka, do not emphasise these aspects, but new Buddhist writings from all over the world, particularly in the West, are spearheading what is known as Engaged Buddhism. This is about rediscovering the Buddha's middle way, offering non-dogmatic understandings, which are deeply infused with compassion and hope to construct a world that is just and sustainable. The paper outlines different Buddhist approaches, whether they tend towards *jnana* (knowledge) or *bhakti* (devotion), that may help spiritually inclined as well as secular people to deal with the personal, social and ecological challenges of contemporary society.

2. The Competing Self

In the modern culture values are skewed in favour of the individual. It is difficult to be a person. A person is horizontally pitched, related to other human beings and bringing the person closer to the earth. It is these relationships with others and with the earth that brings realisation and fulfilment to a person. The individual, on the other hand, is on a vertical journey, seeing others as threats. As individuals we have been primed to succeed, to get to the top, and to see others as threats to be overcome. But experience and reflection teaches us that there is more to life than the usual compulsions that drive us; that caring and being cared for are more desirable than the 'dog eat dog' attitude that has come to plague our civilisation. The individual cannot care; only the person can.

An old story goes as follows: A young teenage ant, trying to figure out what life was all about, was walking down Main Street looking at the designer shop windows exhibiting consumer goodies. The young ant paused now and then to look

at the displays. They were interesting enough and she would have loved to buy many of the things if she had the money. But she was on a quest to discover the larger meaning of life and would not rest till she had found it. As she walked down Main Street she noticed a chant emerging in the distance. She hurried towards the chant, entranced by its mesmerising quality. As she got closer she saw a structure that represented a pyramid. But it could also have been a temple or a church. The youthful ant was now running, totally enthralled by the chanting emerging from the temple or church in the distance. When she got close enough she found that it was not really a temple or a church but a hill of ants, thousands of ants. Each ant was clambering upon the other trying to race to the top. They kicked and screamed frantically as they moved upwards. And they chanted at the top of their voice. The mesmerising chant went: ‘Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top!’ The young ant found an overwhelming passion and energy welling up within her. Before long she joined the other ants, chanting ‘Got to get to the top! Got to get to the top!’ She clambered upon the other ants, kicking and screaming as she pushed her way to the top. The frenzied kicking, screaming and chanting went on and on and several ants were crushed and wounded. Finally the ant, swept by the momentum, was hurtled to the top. She was amazed at what she saw. “There’s nothing at the top!” she exclaimed in stupefaction. “There’s absolutely nothing up here.” “Hush,” said the ant that came after. “There may be nothing here, but let’s not tell anybody.” The top held significance only as long as the others below believed that it was the pinnacle of success.

The historical significance of the story needs to be explained further. An intellectual stream of great import, known as The Enlightenment, emerged in Europe in the 18th century, which profoundly altered the notion of the human being. Up to then the churches, the feudal lords and the restrictive guilds held a stranglehold on human advancement. The liberal and intellectual currents of the Enlightenment, with their emphasis on reason and intellectual progress, took the human being out of the stranglehold of the church, the feudal structure, the family

and the clan. The natural child of the Enlightenment was the philosophy of Individualism that declared that the individual was a superior construct compared to those of previous ages, which curbed the freedom of the individual. All individuals were in some sense morally equal and no one would ever be treated solely as a means to the well being of another person. Individualism also justified a certain degree of selfishness.

Individualism, which at one point in time was seen as a progressive current, finds itself today in crisis, because of its identification with the fiercely competitive attitude of 'win-lose'. It is an axiom of post-modern society that some will win and others lose, that some will rise to wealth and fame while others will be trampled upon materially and emotionally. Today the individual is geared to compete from primary school through university to professional life. Like the young ant she is geared to reach the top. The prevailing vision of human existence is vertical, to climb over each other to get to the top. Only one set of human drives is to the fore: those of power, money, possession and competition.

Other drives, the horizontal ones, concerned with being a person, of caring and loving, fellowship and interconnectedness, are neglected and are showing signs of atrophy. A person is certainly an autonomous being. But she is also an interdependent being, for her destiny is interwoven with the destinies of others and the earth-mother herself. The person is one who is aware that the quest for excellence cannot be confused with the paranoia to get to the top. She knows that distinction comes from our ability to pay attention to detail and value 'rigour' in all that we do. We need not be aggressive or inordinately competitive to be attentive and rigorous.

Buddhism says that nothing is permanent, and the cause of all suffering is to hold on to the illusion of permanence. The consumer goodies we buy are not permanent, the modest or giddy heights we aspire to are not permanent. Each cell in our bodies is racing to extinction. If we were to grasp this central truth we would be happier persons. But the notion of impermanence is usually so frightening that we prefer not to

think about it. Instead we are drawn to the make believe world of consumer advertisements and the power of being at the top.

The buddhist thinker David Loy puts it succinctly with his notion of lack. We experience lack as a huge hole in the core of our being, a sense of ungroundedness that terrifies us. This ungroundedness is the result of a cluster of always changing processes that cannot be secured. We flee from this lack and try to fill the hole with a quest for money, power, sex, being a celebrity and so forth. The teenage ant in our story is dealing with her sense of lack through sharpening her competitive instincts to get to the top. In an interview with Tom McFarlane, David Loy says,

But if we open up to that ungroundedness at our core, if we can let go and yield to it, then we find that it's the source of our creativity and our spirituality, that at the very core of our being there's something else there, something formless that can be grasped, something that transcends the self and yet is the ground of the self.¹

Only an unconditioned, unconstructed person can experience the wonder and the transcendence of ungroundedness. The individual, a product of our consumer wasteland, was pronounced spiritually dead some time ago. Fortunately, we are aware that absolute individualism would drive us crazy, and even the rabidly individualistic amongst us value the time spent with our children, spouses, companions and friends. Many of us are aware that there is much more to life than the low-grade stimulation that mere ambition, power, money and information society can bring us. We also realise that we need not become saints to tilt the balance in favour of compassion and joy.

3. Is There Really a Self?

To understand the difference between the 'individual self' and the 'personal self' we must first ask the question: Is there a self at all? On the face of it the question might sound absurd since our

¹David Loy, *Lack and Liberation in Self and Society*, <www.centerforsacredsciences.org/index.php/Holos/holos-david-loy.html> (3 March 2017).

daily experience shows that all over the world people take the self for granted. Often they see the self as separate and being threatened by other selves. They hurt each other in the name of religion, race or ethnicity, not to overlook gender. One might persist with the question: Is the person who dislikes/hates the 'other' a real person, stable and coherent, somebody who innately believes in what she is doing? Or is she unreal, a merely constructed one?

According to Peter Harvey,

People's choices, decisions and intentions, which are expressions of will, and even the desires and aspirations which feed into these, are clearly under a range of influences:

- Biological influences: one's genes, but also the effect of illness, tiredness, or drugs
- Social influences: from parents, peers, education, and the media, especially advertising
- Personal history: one's life events
- General history: the times in which one lives
- Psychological influences: fears, complexes, inclinations, strengths and weaknesses, and mental illness

Thus one's choices, however 'free' they may appear, are made under the influence of a range of conditioning factors or constraints.²

Buddhists might say that the will cannot be entirely free since the karma accumulated by past births plays a role. Therefore present action is shaped both by past and by present actions. Thanissaro Bhikku states that "present actions shape not only the future but also the present. Furthermore, present actions need not be determined by past actions. In other words, there is free will, although its range is somewhat dictated by the past."³

²Peter Harvey, "'Freedom of the Will' in the light of Theravada Teachings," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol. 14, 2007, 37 < www.ahandfulofleaves.org/documents/Articles/Freedom%20of%20the%20Will_The_ravada%20Teachings_Harvey_JBE_2007.pdf > (16 January 2017).

³Thanissaro Bhikkhu, "*Karma*," *Access to Insight* (Legacy Edition), 8 March 2011 < www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/karma.html > (16 January 2017).

Steven Batchelor, an advocate for secular Buddhism, believes that reincarnation and past karma need not play a role in modern Buddhist practice. While deeply respecting Buddhist traditions he implies that the cultural mores of Buddha's time were so deeply steeped with the notion of re-incarnation and karma that Buddhist thought could scarcely escape them. So Batchelor feels justified in jettisoning reincarnation and past karma. Our early childhood or later conditioning could influence our present actions although we might not be aware of these. But these actions would shape both the present and the future.⁴

When actions are repeated they consolidate habit. Actions that lead to habit could be consuming alcohol or tobacco or mental attitudes and perceptions. The French philosopher Giles Deleuze stated that the self is "nothing but habits."⁵ These habits are firmly anchored in our psyche and lead to closed ideologies, fixed dogmas and numerous prejudices. So much of our 'thinking' is along these lines.

While tobacco or alcohol might largely affect a person or his immediate family and friends, mental attitudes can lead to more serious consequences when they become part of a collective psyche. Thus, for example, disliking or hating a particular religious or ethnic community has serious social consequences. Deconstructing this dislike or hatred at a personal and collective level needs ongoing mindfulness practice that leads to behavioural change. Buddhism would suggest that practice of mindfulness and meditation could help a person to become aware of habits she may be unaware of, helping the person deconstruct negative practices and values and create conditions for transformative change.

The larger question would be if the conditioned self (which is an unreal self, a product of repetition and habit) is not 'real' then who is the one who wills, who dislikes, who hates, who gets

⁴Steven Batchelor, *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*, Delhi: Harper Element, 2016, 298-304.

⁵Gilles Deleuze, *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991, x.

angry? Can de-conditioning help in ridding oneself of the unreal self with its habits and prejudices and discover the real self? If the unreal self that hates, dislikes and judges is merely the product of genetic and psychological conditioning is there another self, a real one, that some might call Buddha nature?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu states that in the Pali Canon the Buddha avoided the question of whether there was a self or not. The Buddha later said that emphasising either the self or the absence of self was taking extreme positions that would make Buddhist practice impossible. The question had therefore to be put aside. Thanissaro Bhikkhu adds that the Buddha divided all questions into four classes:

... those that deserve a categorical (straight yes or no) answer; those that deserve an analytical answer, defining and qualifying the terms of the question; those that deserve a counter-question, putting the ball back in the questioner's court; and those that deserve to be put aside. The last class of question consists of those that don't lead to the end of suffering and stress ... For these reasons, the Buddha advised paying no attention to such questions as 'Do I exist' or 'Don't I exist?' for however you answer them, they lead to suffering and stress.⁶

The Buddha often chose to maintain silence when asked metaphysical questions related to the self. A well-known example is found in the Ananda Sutta: "Having taken a seat to one side, Vacchagotta the wanderer said to the Master, 'Now then, Venerable Gotama, is there a self?' When this was said, the Blessed One was silent."⁷

Some would interpret the Buddha's silence in response to Vacchagotta's question as evidence of his acknowledgement of the existence of the self. Joaquin Perez-Reimon, in his book *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*, states that the Pali Canon also

⁶B. Thanissaro, "No-Self or Not-Self?" in *Noble Strategy*, Valley Center, California: Metta Forest Monastery, 1996. <www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn44/sn44.010.than.html> (16 January 2017).

⁷B. Thannisarō, trans., *Tipitaka*, <<http://www.access.toinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn44/sn44.010.than.html>> (16 January 2017).

contains passages in which the Buddha appears to speak about the self in a positive sense. Perez-Remon identifies the following passage from the Mahaparinibbana Sutta: “Therefore Ananda, stay as those who have the self as island, as those who have the self as refuge, as those who have no other refuge.”⁸ Elsewhere, in the Dhammapada, the Buddha says, “Your own self is your master; who else could be? With yourself well controlled, you gain a master very hard to find.”⁹

However a more appropriate understanding of the doctrine is the view advocated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu: “In this sense, the *anatta* teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness.”¹⁰ For Thanissaro Bhikku the doctrine of *anatta* is only a practical strategy that guides one to let go of attachment to conditioned phenomena and thus to achieve liberation. From this it is clear that nirvana is not complete annihilation, but the annihilation of the condition self.

In the Pali Canon the Buddha frequently describes nirvana in positive terms:

... the subtle,
the very-hard-to-see,
the ageless, permanence, the undecaying,
the surface-less, non-objectification,
peace, the deathless,
the exquisite, bliss, solace,
the exhaustion of craving,
the wonderful, the marvellous,
the secure, security,
nibbana...¹¹

⁸Joaquin Perez Remon, *Self and Non-Self in Early Buddhism*, Hague, Paris and New York, Mouton Publishers, 1980, 20.

⁹Eknath Easwaran, *The Dhammapada*, Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007, 157.

¹⁰Thanissaro, “No-Self or Not-Self?”

¹¹B. Thanissaro, *The Mind Like Fire Unbound*, Valley Center, California: Metta Forest Monastery, 1999 <<https://www.buddhanet.net/buddhism-self.htm>> (2 February 2017).

Suffering (*dhukka*) happens when we hold on to the delusion of the unreal self, the conditioned self. But *dhukka* can also mean 'affliction', 'unsatisfactoriness' or 'stress'. For our purpose let us use the word stress. If we dislike a person belonging to another religion, race or ethnicity then we are merely responding to our own conditioning, merely reacting out of habit. Thanisarro Bhikku asks:

Am I suffering stress because I'm holding onto this particular phenomenon? Is it really me, myself, or mine? If it's stressful but not really me or mine, why hold on?" These last questions merit straightforward answers, as they then help you to comprehend stress and to chip away at the attachment and clinging — the residual sense of self-identification — that cause it, until ultimately all traces of self-identification are gone and all that's left is limitless freedom.¹²

4. Frogs in the Well

An experience of complete non-duality is what the Buddhists call *Sunyata* or Nirvana, and what the Advaitins would call the experience of Brahman. While the Buddhists would refer to the experience as one of emptiness the Advaitins would call it as fullness of being or the experience of the One. Both would imply that another being is not separate, but only an extension of this emptiness or fullness. In the *Brahmanimantanika Sutra* (Majjhima-Nikaya), the Buddha sounds like an Advaitin when he says: "Do not think that this [nirvana] is an empty or void state. There is this consciousness, without distinguishing mark, infinite and shining everywhere (*Vinnanamanidassanamanantam sabbatopabham*); it is untouched by the material elements and not subject to any power."¹³ David Loy says that this is inconsistent with the usual Theravada view that all consciousness is the result of conditions and does not arise without those conditions.¹⁴

¹²Thanissaro, "No-Self or Not-Self?"

¹³ David Loy, "Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta: Are Nirvana and Moksha the Same?" <<http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/JR-AN/26715.htm#3>> (16 February 2017).

¹⁴Loy, "Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta."

Advaita (non-dual) Vedanta, as expounded by the Adi Sankara, the great 8th century Indian philosopher, emphasises the identity of Atman and Brahman. Brahman is an infinite, self-luminous (self-aware) consciousness that transcends the subject-object duality. Unqualified and all-inclusive, perhaps its most significant feature is that it is "One without a second," since there is nothing outside it. Hence Atman -- the true Self, what each of us really is -- is one with this Brahman. *Tat tvamasi*: "That thou art." This is "All-Selfness": "... there is nothing else but the Self." "To realize the whole universe as the Self is the means of getting rid of bondage." "To the seer, all things have verily become the Self."¹⁵

Let me illustrate non-duality with the parable of the frogs: Several water wells existed in a dusty village in a remote area. One well had pleasing saffron walls. A frog rested tranquilly with its big black eyes looking nowhere in particular. A gentle breeze stirred the few plants that clambered on the inside walls of the well. Life is good, the frog thought to itself. In a nearby well another frog was feeling the same way about life. This well had vibrant green walls. In the relative cool of the morning the frog gazed at the other wells nearby. One had yellow walls, another blue and yet another, silver. The frogs sitting on the walls seemed happy to breathe the cool fragrance of moss and herb. By noon the weather got very hot. It was the hottest period in many years. The frogs began to feel restless with the heat. As their irritation grew they heard voices in their heads. The frog in the green well heard a voice saying, "You are right to be upset, for although your well is the best one, and the waters the purest, the frogs in the other wells do not recognise this truth." The frog in the saffron well also heard a voice saying that her well was the most pristine. The frog in the yellow and blue wells heard similar 'truths'. Soon the frogs began to croak aggressively at each other, each trying to outdo the other. This went on for a long time, till the frogs began to get tired. And then a few frogs in the saffron well, now completely exhausted, decided to swim to the depths of their own well to cool themselves. The deeper

¹⁵Loy, "Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta."

they went the cooler they felt... and calmer too. Then they noticed little crevices in the walls and went into them, and the water was even cooler. They progressed in horizontal mode through these crevices. When they later came up they realised, to their utter astonishment, that they were in the wrong well. The frogs from the saffron well had come up in the green well. The frogs from the green well had the same experience, some of them coming up in the saffron well. Likewise, the frogs in the yellow and blue wells came up in other wells, not their own. Word of the discovery that all the wells were interconnected in their depths, and were nourished with the same waters spread with the swiftness of frog-croak. The frogs realised that as long as they remained on the surface they experienced the illusion that the waters were different. At the surface level the frogs experienced their separateness, but the deeper they swam they experienced the healing influence of the common waters. The waters were after all the same, coursing through each well through subterranean passages.

The metaphor is self-explanatory. We come into the world first as human beings, and only then, without our consent, do we grow up as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists or indigenous peoples. Or we grow up as Indians or Pakistanis, Americans or Kenyans and so on; browns, whites or blacks. Some of us grow up to suspect our neighbours because they practice a different faith, belong to a different culture or have a different skin. And when we get restless, due to poverty and oppression in one context, or loneliness and alienation in another, we are willing to turn into aggressive demagogues. We desecrate the shrines of 'other gods,' even kill and rape in the name of 'our own god,' or watch people live in poverty, as we would watch another soap opera. The story illustrates that there is a potential for all of us to meet together in the common waters deep within ourselves and sense our oneness, our non-duality. These deep and subterranean waters may have differences in colour, taste, temperature and mineral content, but they are like *sanghams* or 'meeting rivers' flowing into each other at various

intersections. Therefore, when we nurture and care for another we nurture and care for ourselves.

5. Buddha Nature

The Buddha nature in each of us will uncover through the practice of mindfulness and loving kindness. The ‘other’ is also Buddha nature, a mystical extension of our very selves, meriting our spontaneous care and affection. The unreal, constructed self will slowly begin to dissolve as the Buddha nature emerges. This process leads to behaviour changes and craving, selfishness, hatred and the aggressive-competitive instinct diminishes. As a Cherokee story puts it: An old Cherokee is teaching his grandson about life. “A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy. “It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil — he is anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” He continued, “The other is good — he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you — and inside every other person, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf will win?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

The emergence of the Buddha nature within us reveals our non-duality, our sense of oneness with others and our interdependence with other human beings and the earth. A Buddhist tradition that clearly enunciated the significance of the Buddha nature was the Jonang school, which believed that the Buddha nature would free us from our cravings, attachments and selfish pursuits, all of which are delusory. The leading figure of this tradition was Dolpopa Sherab Gyaltzen, who was born in northwestern Nepal in 1292. Dolpopa’s interpretation of the Buddha Nature was not unlike the advaita notion of Atman and Brahman being one. Dolpopa wrote numerous volumes celebrating the self-existence of this reality. In his influential *General Commentary on the Doctrine*, he outlined his views, which soon came to be known as the Zhentong tradition.

I bow before the enlightened masters who teach that just like a flame whose light is partially hidden by a screen, the radiant light of the Buddha nature exists beneath our conflicting emotions, as well as beneath the phenomena of nature. While the objects we perceive with our senses and the thoughts we sense with our minds have no enduring reality, the Buddha nature itself exists immutably outside time and space. Inside each of us lies the living experience of this absolute reality.¹⁶

In another important text, *The Fourth Council*, Dolpopa wrote, "I bow to you, absolute, immobile, discriminating self-awareness, absolute total awareness of self and awareness of all ... absolute great love, infinite in nature, absolute great compassion with sublime intellect, absolute great wisdom possessing great intellect ..." ¹⁷ What Dolpopa expounded regarding the notion of the Buddha nature has a history that goes back to early Buddhist schools like the Mahasamghikas, who spoke of a relative or conventional truth and the absolute and ultimate truth.

The Mahaparinirvana Sutra, which originated in the first century CE in Andhra, India, also talks of Buddha nature (or Buddhadattu) as a true Self that remains when non-Self is discarded: "... if the non-eternal is made away with [in Nirvana], what there remains must be the Eternal; if there is no more any sorrow, what there remains must be Bliss; if there is no more any non-Self, what exists there must be the Self; if there is no longer anything that is impure, what there is must be the Pure."¹⁸

6. Indra's net

We have a piece of art, Indra's Net, at Fireflies Ashram, created by the artist Sahadevan from scrap metal. It represents the interpenetration of everything with everything else, our sense of

¹⁶Linda Johnsen, *Empty or full? An Ancient Master Reclaims Buddha's Teachings* <<https://yogainternational.com/article/view/empty-or-full-an-ancient-master-reclaims-buddhas-teachings>> (16 Feb. 2017).

¹⁷Cyrus Stearns, *The Buddha from Dolpo*, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2010, 116-117.

¹⁸Kosho Yamamoto, *Mahayanism: A Critical Exposition of the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, Ube City: Karinbunko, 1975, 107-108.

interconnectedness. It also underscores that if we are to construct a sustainable planet we can only do so through a vision of working together, cooperating and sensing the interdependence of all things.

Let me first go to the metaphor itself. It is found in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* of Mahayana Buddhism:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each 'eye' of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.¹⁹

Indra's net is an amazing representation to portray our interdependence with each other and the earth. All things are connected. If we forget our interconnectedness and our own sense of interbeing we will disappear from the planet altogether, since we otherwise cannot create sustainable future. Thomas Cook states that Indra's Net "symbolises a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos. ... the cosmos is, in short, a self-creating, self-maintaining, and self-defining organism."²⁰ Such a universe has "no theory of a beginning time, no concept of a creator, no question of the purpose of it all. The universe is taken as a

¹⁹Graham Priest, *One: Being an Investigation Into the Unity of Reality and of Its Parts, Including the Singular Object which is Nothingness*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 179.

²⁰Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977, 2.

given."²¹ Furthermore it has no hierarchy and no centre. If there is a centre it is found everywhere. This is similar to the theory that the universe functions like a hologram, where every point of the hologram contains information regarding all the points.

Unlike the interrelatedness of Indra's Net the unreal self sees itself as separate from others and the world. This sense of separateness creates conditions of alienation from the other. And in the context of market fundamentalism the other is seen as a competitor, a threat. But if we are all extensions of each other, then it goes against our very grain to compete aggressively with each other. It is this sense of being inter-connected that Thich Nhat Hanh calls Interbeing. The Buddha nature is nothing else but awareness of this larger sense of being. As David Loy puts it, "If 'I' am not separate from theirs, neither is my well-being separate from theirs. Today this means that we are called upon not only to help other individuals deconstruct their sense of separation ... but also help our society to reconstruct itself, to become more just and sustainable — and awakened."²²

Thich Nhat Hanh gives the following example:

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow, and without trees we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either ...

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the tree cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became

²¹Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism*, 2.

²²David Loy, *A New Buddhist Path*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2015, 63-64.

his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too.

You cannot point out one thing that is not here — time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper ... As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.²³

7. Pureland Buddhism

A school of Buddhism that is hugely popular in Japan, Korea and Vietnam is Pureland Buddhism. This tradition of Buddhism has its origins in ancient times. The story goes that it was a bodhisattva known as Dharmakara who became Amitabha Buddha upon enlightenment. Out of his deep-seated compassion Amitabha, known as Amida in East Asia, declared that all those who repeated his name and had faith in him would be reborn into the Pureland, a kind of Paradise, from where Amitabha would unfailingly assist in the person's enlightenment.

Pureland Buddhism believes in the efficacy of 'other power' rather than 'self power'. 'Other power' signifies the grace of Amitabha Buddha. We human beings are foolish, unreliable and confused. We cannot hope to gain enlightenment solely through our own efforts and power. In other words we cannot gain enlightenment through 'self power', through our own striving and efforts. This is a school of Buddhism that does not require a person to learn rigorous meditative practices or be a learned scholar. The mere recitation of the name of Amitabha Buddha, with complete faith, is sufficient. This practice of recitation of Amitabha's name and concentration on his presence is known as 'Buddha-anusmrti' in Sanskrit and *nenbutsu* in Japanese.

One of the contemporary Pureland schools that is deeply engaged socially and has great promise for the future is Amida Shu, based out of Malvern, U.K., and with chapters in other European countries, North America and India. The spiritual guru

²³Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988, 3-5.

of Amida Shu is the psychotherapist David Brazier, also known as Dharmavidya. David Brazier's writing on psychotherapy and Buddhism are playing an influential role in promoting a new wave of Pureland Buddhism that is both critical and compassionate.

The great Japanese scholar Honen Shonin, who died in 1212, believed that you could reach the Pureland 'just as you are' through *nenbutsu*, the practice of reciting Amitabha's name:

So those who call upon the sacred name should do it with the nature they now have: the wise person as a wise person, the fool as a fool, the pious as pious, the agnostic as agnostic, and thus all equally may attain 'ojo' (birth in the Pureland). Whether a person is rich and noble, or poor and mean, whether one is kind or unkind, greedy or generous, indeed no matter what one is, if one only repeats the *nenbutsu* in reliance upon the mysterious power of the Original Vow, one's 'ojo' is certain. Amida's Original Vow was made to take in all conceivable cases of people if they would but practice the *nenbutsu*. Without inquiring at all into the level of their abilities but merely by saying the *nenbutsu* in simple earnestness — this is all that is needed for anybody.²⁴

While Pure Land Buddhism might appear to suggest dualism, that Amitabha Buddha and the disciple are two separate entities, in reality this is not the case. Devotion to Amitabha Buddha leads to a fusion of love, where the disciple becomes one with Amitabha, becomes non-dual. Pure Land Buddhism is therefore paradoxically both dual and non-dual.

'Other power' and 'self power' are therefore not mutually antagonistic, but complementary. There are times when we feel the burden of our vulnerabilities and our foolishness and we take refuge in Amitabha Buddha and there are other times when we experience oneness with him, a fusion of love that allows us to experience cosmic unity and oneness with all things. This

²⁴Jonathan Watts and Yoshiharu Tomatsu, *Traversing the Pure Land*, Tokyo: Jodo Shu Press, 2005, 6.

sense of complementarity only adds richness to the Pureland tradition and makes it meaningful, realistic and appealing.

8. Evolutionary Buddhist spirituality

The understanding of each age grows and expands with time. Each society, in each era, is conditioned by its culture. Today we are trying to understand what Buddhist awakening means in an evolutionary age. But back in the Buddha's days it was a different society without the benefits of modern science. For example, it was a time when the notion of reincarnation was widely accepted. Either the Buddha was influenced by the culture of his period or the notion of reincarnation in Buddhism was a later interpolation, as Buddhadasa Bhikku, from the Suan Mokkh monastery in Thailand, claimed.

In a talk "*Anatta* and Rebirth," which he gave to students at Puget Sound University in Seattle, he says:

When there is no *atta* (self), then what is reborn? What or who is reborn? Forgive us for being forced to use crude language, but this question is absurd and crazy. In Buddhism, there is no point in asking such a thing. There is no place for it in Buddhism. If you ask what will be reborn next, that's the craziest, most insane question. If right here, right now, there is no soul, person, self or *atta*, how could there be some 'who' or 'someone' that goes and gets reborn? So there is no way one can ask 'who will be reborn?' Therefore, the rebirth of the same person does not occur. But the birth of different things is happening all the time. It happens often and continuously, but there is no rebirth. There is no such thing, in reality, as rebirth or reincarnation. That there is one person, one 'I' or 'you', getting reborn is what reincarnation is all about. If all is *anatta*, there is nothing to get reborn. There is birth, birth, birth, of course. This is obvious. There is birth happening all the time, but it is never the same person being born a second

time. Every birth is new. So there is birth, endlessly, constantly, but we will not call it 'rebirth' or 'reincarnation'.²⁵ In a different vein Stephen Batchelor, who advocates secular Buddhism, believes that it is no longer necessary in the modern world to accept notions like reincarnation.²⁶ Clearly, we are talking of an evolving Buddhism.

Will evolutionary theory itself show Buddhism in a different light? Early indications suggest that this is so. Let me begin by paraphrasing Miriam McGillis from *Genesis Farm*,²⁷ who has attempted to summarise basic evolutionary ideas: The universe came into being 15 billion years ago. First there was hydrogen, which was around only for about seven seconds. From the union of hydrogen atoms came helium. From helium came carbon. The process of differentiation continued. Our earth was formed about five billion years ago.

This is a long time to comprehend. For purposes of elucidation let us say that 5 billion years equals 12 months. Then, in these twelve months of the earth's existence life appeared only in the last four months. From single celled organisms the process evolved and differentiated into more and more complex forms of life. Again, this took a long time. If the earth was born 12 months ago the human came into being only in the last day, in the last twenty-four hours! We know hardly anything about these twenty-four hours. Most of it is buried in a great tribal age where no detailed records exist. We only have some information on the last five thousand years or so — the period of the great civilisations. In the 24 hours that the human has been around our great civilisations are only 30 minutes old. And our modern scientific age is only about a couple of minutes old! Another philosopher, Brian Swimme, quaintly suggests that if you leave

²⁵Buddhadasa Bhikku, *Anatta and Rebirth*, <<http://sharanam.tumblr.com/post/3049000438/a-progressive-buddhist-view-on-rebirth>> (3 March 2017).

²⁶Batchelor, *After Buddhism*, 298, 300, 306.

²⁷Miriam Therese MacGillis, "The Fate of the Earth" <<https://eco.zoicetimes.com/articles-2/the-fate-of-the-earth-miriam-therese-macgillis-1986/>> (3 March 2017).

hydrogen gas alone for fifteen billion years or so it turns into rosebuds, giraffes and humans.²⁸

Several significant conclusions may be drawn from our understanding of the evolutionary process. We have evolved from the earth and the earth is therefore our primary mother. Besides, nothing in the scheme of evolution has stated that there is a hierarchy in the universe. If at all there is a reason for according the human a special place it is because it is through the human that the earth has finally attained consciousness of itself. Perhaps we can also extend this further and say that it is through enlightened human beings that the cosmos expresses its self-awareness; not only through human beings but through other similar beings in the distant galaxies, of which we know little today.

Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme propose this line of exploration in their book *The Universe Story*: “The eye that searches the Milky Way galaxy is itself an eye shaped by the Milky Way. The mind that searches for contact with the Milky Way is the very mind of the Milky Way galaxy in search of its own depths.”²⁹ To rephrase this marvellous insight in Buddhist terms: The eye that searches for Buddha nature is itself an eye shaped by Buddha nature. The mind that searches for contact with Buddha nature is the very mind of Buddha nature in search of its own depths.

A couple of lines by David Loy and John Stanley, from a piece they wrote in the Huffington Post, reads,

As far as we know, we are the only species that can dis-identify with every particular thing (which happens during meditation, when one ‘lets go’ of any mental event that occurs) and thereby come to realise that the whole universe is our body. The other side of that realisation is assuming

²⁸Libby Comeaux Col, "Cosmology, Spirituality and the Universal Human," *Loretto Earth Network News*, Spring 2011, Vol. 19, No. 2. <<http://www.lorettocommunity.org/LEN/LENN.spr2011.pdf>> (3 March 2017).

²⁹Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story*, New York: Harper Collins, 1992, 45.

responsibility for the well-being of the whole. In Buddhism, wisdom and compassion work together.³⁰

There is no better way of ending this essay than by quoting a scintillating text that reveals the strong parallel between The Great Story of evolution and Buddhism:

- The largest whole is seen as beyond and embracing all polarities, including existence and nonexistence, spirit and matter, mind and body, nature and culture. In Buddhist terms, this is Buddha Mind in its aspects of formlessness and form.
- The world of phenomena is a seamless process from which we can discern subsystems such as galaxies, solar systems, the Earth, individuals and so on. This is the view of the whole (Absolute). From the view of the parts, we can say that the world is radically interconnected (Relative).
- The world of phenomena is flux, always new, different, fresh.
- Everything within the world of phenomena has infinite causes and infinite effects.
- From the view of the largest whole (Absolute), there is only the doing and no individual or separate doer within this whole. From the view of the parts (Relative), there is the appearance of a doer — although radically interconnected with the larger whole.

And there are aspects of the Great Story, which appear compatible with Buddhism.

- The universe is evolving towards greater complexity.
- Humans are the universe becoming aware of itself.³¹

9. Conclusion

Without doubt India is much poorer without the healing words of the Buddha. In today's world of cultural and religious conflict

³⁰David Loy and John Stanley, *A Buddhist Philosophy of Evolution*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-loy/buddhist-philosophy-of-evolution_b_1633359.html> (3 March 2017).

³¹"Evolutionary Buddhism" <http://evolutionaryspirituality.wikia.com/wiki/Evolutionary_Buddhism> (3 March 2017).

the Buddha stands as a beacon of hope for a peaceful and compassionate society. Our times are difficult, particularly in India, and one would wish that more Indian youth and religious thinkers will study Buddhist teachings and create conditions for a new Buddhist renaissance. The Buddha was India's greatest spiritual thinker and it is heartening to know that many Western intellectuals have embraced him wholeheartedly and that the best recent writings in Buddhism come from Europe and North America.

The Buddha lived much of his life under trees - an apt image to recall and act on the ecological crisis we are facing. His notion that nothing in the world is permanent and that much anxiety and suffering results from holding on to, clinging, possessing and controlling is more than appropriate for the 21st century where we have the illusion of permanence in consumer goods, money, property and power. The Buddha's insistence on compassion and the bodhisatva ideal teaches us that only a considerate and caring global citizenry can tackle the grave challenges of social injustice and climate change that hang over us like the sword of Damocles.