

The Nonduality of Ecology and Economy

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“The American way of life is not negotiable.”

So declared President George H. W. Bush at the 1992 “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro. It was his response to what everyone else there had realized: that the earth’s ecology is endangered and “that nothing less than a transformation of our attitude and behavior would bring about the necessary changes” to protect it, according to Maurice Strong, secretary-general of the conference.

In 2002 a ten-year follow-up to the Earth Summit was held, but President George W. Bush did not bother to attend. When his White House press secretary Ari Fleischer was asked whether the new president would encourage Americans to reduce consumption in order to reduce pollution, he said no: “The American way of life is a blessed one.”

What happened during those ten years? Unfortunately, not very much. After the Earth Summit it seemed like the world had finally awakened to the eco-crisis, and for a couple years I noticed that almost every media report on the oil industry referred to global warming. And then ... the world seemed to fall asleep again. The environmental crisis was not really forgotten, but the linkage between ecology and economy was de-emphasized – and so very little was achieved, because not much can be achieved without addressing their interconnectedness.

Why did so little happen during that decade? It’s only a guess, but I suspect that two different reactions reinforced each other. Corporations – especially oil companies – realized that the new green movement was a threat to their profit margins, and rather than restructure they decided to fight, with a massive advertising and propaganda campaign designed to muddle the issue by denying climate change. (Jim Hansen, head of NASA and the world’s most respected climatologist, has called their misinformation campaigns “crimes against humanity.”) At the same time, consumers began to realize the same thing – that the eco-crisis is a serious challenge to consumerism – and rather than change the “blessed American way of life” it was easier to ignore the problem. After all, the experts disagree, don’t they? The result was mass denial. At some level of consciousness, many if not most people were aware that the

environment is deteriorating, but that didn't have much affect on our day-to-day lives. As the economy boomed, most of us consumed more than ever.

As a result, much valuable time has been lost, and the need for drastic change has become even more urgent. Yet that will not happen until we realize the nonduality of ecology and economy. Although most people still see the issue as merely a technological problem, to be solved by lowering carbon emissions, atmospheric carbon is only the visible tip of a much more ominous iceberg. According to the United Nations Environment Program, 1 in 4 mammalian species, 1 in 8 bird species, 1 in 3 amphibian species, and 70% of all the world's plant species are now endangered. Global warming, along with deforestation, agriculture and urbanization, could drive half of all species on earth to extinction by 2100, according to eminent biologists such as Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University. Ninety percent of all large fish species have been driven toward extermination. Depleted water tables are becoming a global problem, and since 1950 the world has lost about 30% of its arable land and soil fertility.

Most of us are familiar with these grim facts, but too often such statistics remain abstract and disconnected from our own lives. We overlook the institutions that mediate between the biosphere and our own patterns of consumption: the world's globalizing economic system, which today is *seven* times as large as it was in 1950. The fact that 20% of the Amazon rainforest ("the lungs of the earth") has been cut down in recent decades needs to be connected with our "need" for more soybeans to feed the cattle and pigs who provide our beef and pork. The fact that almost all large fish species are endangered is a consequence of the high-tech ship-factories that trawl the oceans with enormous drift nets. Most fresh water is used for agriculture and manufacturing; vast amounts of topsoil are lost because of industrial farming. And so forth.

It would be a serious mistake to blame everything on capitalism. Most of us (at least in the "developed world") have benefited much from the affluence provided by its innovative dynamism. The old Soviet Union was not capitalist – it was a classic example of "command socialism" – and its ecological record was perhaps the worst of all developed nations. What capitalism and state socialism have in common is a preoccupation with industrialization, which has accelerated and taken on a life of its own.

Today, however, socialism is more or less dead, and globalizing capitalism is the only game in town. Our collective relationship to the biosphere and its ecosystems is largely mediated by what its corporations do, and what they do is largely determined by what is most profitable --

quite apart from its ecological consequences, which still tend to be ignored or “externalized” when possible.

The consequence is an unsustainable economic system, and a deluded worldview that supports it. All the world’s economies are wholly-owned subsidiaries of the earth’s biosphere, but we still have great difficulty understanding what that implies. Yes, it does mean the end of business-as-usual. It means the greatest possible challenge to consumer capitalism, whose corporations must either mutate into something very different, or be replaced altogether. And this is a transformation that Buddhists should embrace and encourage, because it is also implied by the teachings of the Buddha.

The news media have been telling us that the financial crisis – which is far from over -- is due to the excessive greed of Wall Street speculators and the unbridled spending of Main Street borrowers. Yet the problem goes much deeper, and our predicament is much worse. Greed is not a virus that has infected the economic hard drive; it has become the software that runs our economy.

Buddhism does not say much about evil itself, but it emphasizes the *three roots of evil*: greed, ill will, and delusion. The basic problem with our present economic system is that it institutionalizes the first of those roots. As George Lakoff recently put it, “the economic and ecological meltdowns have the same cause: the unregulated free market and the idea that greed is good and that the natural world is a resource for short-term private enrichment. The result has been deadly, toxic assets and a toxic atmosphere” (*Huffington Post*, 22 May 2009). Two sides of the same coin.

Greed also takes two forms, according to our means. “In a consumer society there are two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy” (Ivan Illich).

The Buddha’s first noble truth identifies *dukkha* “dissatisfaction” as inherent to the human condition. It is the nature of an unawakened mind to be bothered by something. We usually experience this as the feeling that “something is wrong with me.” Our economic system (which includes the media mega-corporations that make their profit from advertising) takes advantage of this and conditions us to understand our sense of lack as “I don’t have *enough* ...” -- especially *not enough things* and *not enough money*. The consequence is that we always want (“need”) more. This individual lack is institutionalized into a collective craving that can never be satisfied. Investors seek increasing returns in the form of dividends and higher share prices.

This puts pressure on business executives, who must think this way if they hope to rise to the top. This general expectation translates into an impersonal but constant demand for evermore profit and growth, which requires evermore production-and-consumption, and evermore sophisticated advertising to make us want things that often didn't even exist last year.

Here's one way to point out the basic difficulty. Capitalism is about using capital (money for investment) to create more capital. Since the *goal* is to end up with more money, everything else becomes a *means* to that end. "Everything else" in this case includes Mother Earth ("resources"), human life ("labor"), and society itself (we must continually adapt to the changing requirements of the economy).

The ultimate irony is that money in itself is literally *worthless*: whether pieces of paper or numbers in bank accounts, money has value only because it is our socially-agreed medium of exchange. A \$100 bill is just a piece of paper. We can't eat it, drink it, ride on it, etc. We forget that money is a social construct—a kind of group fantasy. The anthropologist Weston LaBarre called it a psychosis that has become normal, "an institutionalized dream that everyone is having at once."

This dream can become a nightmare. Psychologically, the danger is that means and ends become reversed, so the *means* of life becomes the *goal*. The philosopher Schopenhauer called money "abstract happiness" – that is, not genuine happiness but something that now represents it in our culture. Another way to say it is that money becomes "frozen desire": not desire for anything in particular but a symbol for the satisfaction of desire in general. And what does the Buddha say about desire? Frozen or not, it remains the root cause of suffering.

Collectively, this means that what motivates our economic system is *the drive to use anything and everything* (now "natural resources," including "human resources") *to create something that is really nothing*. We don't usually notice the absurdity of this because we are preoccupied with the *more and more* that the system produces. The fact that so many of us already have more than we need is addressed by manipulating our awareness, in increasingly sophisticated ways, so that we always want something else that we don't yet have. It's always the *next* _____ (fill in the blank) that will satisfy us.

Max Frisch said that technology is the knack of arranging the world that we don't have to experience it. That's why modern technologies fit so well with consumer capitalism, which

works to transform the whole biosphere into consumer goods. Together they are making Mother Earth into a gigantic Walmart.

This system is unsustainable because it involves a growth obsession that, left to itself, will not cease until the whole of the biosphere has been converted into profit – which, of course, will then be useless. Capitalism made more sense a couple centuries ago when the Earth seemed infinite and capital was relatively scarce. Today the obvious metaphor is cancer on a planetary scale. Cells become cancerous when they mutate into uncontrolled growth and spread throughout the body to disrupt its healthy functioning. Unfortunately, that is not a bad description of our collective situation now.

Ultimately, does it come down to a choice between our present economic/financial system and the survival of the biosphere? Our current system is doomed no matter what, in the same way that a cancer is always doomed: if it's successful enough to kill its host, it kills itself. If the biosphere gets sick, we get sick. When ecological systems collapse, so will human civilization as we know it.

Despite what the Presidents Bush declared, the “blessed American way of life” *is* negotiable – or it becomes a suicide pact.

This means that the financial meltdown is actually a wonderful opportunity to address a much deeper problem. No one should make light of the economic pain that we can expect to continue and deepen over the next few years. Many, perhaps most people are also disgusted with the present system, and becoming more open to possible alternatives. Such a crisis would be a terrible thing to waste because this sort of opportunity does not happen very often. There is no better time to address the fundamental challenge of our times: the intimate relationship between an out-of-control, self-destructive economic system and the ecological crisis.

No other nation is in a position to begin reforming that relationship, which is why Obama's leadership on this issue is so important to the whole world. Admittedly, this is an extraordinary challenge. According to the Center for Public Integrity, in the last year more than 770 corporations and interest groups have hired an estimated 2340 lobbyists to influence federal policy on climate change. That number is more than three times what it was only five years ago, and means that Washington now has more than four climate lobbyists for every member of congress. The Center also estimates that lobbying expenditures on climate change topped \$90 million last year, a figure that will no doubt be much higher this year.

That puts the onus on the rest of us to emphasize the nonduality between ecology and economy. So far, at least, Obama's economic appointments have not been encouraging. Some of the people most responsible for the financial crisis have been appointed to fix it. No wonder the only solution they can think of is to try to patch up the present system. But they only represent a much bigger problem: the people who benefit the most from our present economic system – and who therefore have the least incentive to change it – are the ones who control it, and (through their lobbyists) much of the political process as well. As Will Rogers put it some 80 years ago, we (still) have “the best congress money can buy.”

Nevertheless, Obama has given us reasons to hope that he might rise to the occasion and grow to meet the challenge. Yet even with the best will in the world, this is not something Obama (or anyone else) can do by himself. Very little will happen without broad public pressure, based on a new understanding of our perilous situation. This does not mean a Buddhist movement, but there is need for a Buddhist voice in such a movement, to emphasize our nonduality with the earth, and the karmic effects of greed and delusion, both individual and institutionalized.

The *Lotus Sutra* speaks of bodhisattvas springing forth from the earth, to preach the dharma. Is it time for new types of bodhisattvas to rise up from the earth, to manifest the dharma that defends her?

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