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AWAKENING FROM CLIMATE SLUMBER

ILLUSTRATION BY RYAN TODD

HUMANITY FACES AN environmental crisis so critical that our survival on earth is in peril. Yet we have another even more urgent problem: most of us go on living as though nothing out of the ordinary is happening. What is wrong with us? Is there something religions could do to spur us to action? If so, what? Is there a role Buddhists could play? To address these questions, in 2011, at the request of the His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Mind & Life Institute convened a think tank of more than a dozen leading scientists, interdisciplinary scholars, and theologians at his private residence in Dharamsala, India. Other Buddhist luminaries joined in, including Roshi Joan Halifax, Thupten Jinpa, Matthieu Ricard, and His Holiness the 17th Karmapa. This meeting was the twenty-third Mind & Life dialogue with the Dalai Lama. As is typical of these dialogues, it provided a forum both to educate the Dalai Lama and to solicit his input; it also provided a rare venue to introduce Buddhist perspectives to cutting-edge interdisciplinary scholarship, interfaith dialogue, and public discourse. (Atypically, it focused on a topic unrelated to cognitive science.) *Ecology, Ethics, and Interdependence: the Dalai Lama in Conversation with Leading Thinkers on Climate Change*—a skillfully edited and easily readable transcript of the dialogue—shares that important conversation with a wider audience. (Interested readers can also watch videos of the meeting on YouTube.)

"We're all in a kind of trance," says meeting moderator and book co-editor Daniel Goleman in the opening chapter. "Today, we're facing a real paradox: even though we love our children as much as anybody in human history has, every day, each of us unwittingly acts in ways that create a future for this planet and for our own children, and their children, that will be much worse." The struggle to understand, articulate, and address this paradox is a central theme of the book. "I feel that Buddhism and Christian theology, as well as philosophy and psychology, have very important perspectives to offer science," Goleman continues. "Science documents what's happening, but it doesn't necessarily have within it the mechanisms to mobilize people to act in a skillful way."

The book comprises ten lectures and the ensuing discussions. It is divided into three parts: the first part lays out the scientific evidence showing the consequences of human activity on the planet; the second weighs the ethical implications of environmental change; and the third explores effective action. This week-long conversation traverses a wide range of questions from the factual (What is happening, to whom, and how fast?) to the philosophical (Do future humans have rights?) to the practical (Should we be vegetarians?). It introduces creative metaphors to facilitate action—such as 'handprint,' a counterbalance to environmental 'footprint,' which offers a way to quantify the positive impact of our actions. Or 'mindprint,' which adds intention to the calculation. And it strikes a hopeful tone, not only focusing on what humans are doing wrong, but also providing examples of where we are doing it right—such as in Bhutan, where 50 percent of the country is national park, farming is headed toward all organic, and carbon emissions are on decline.

Environmental scientist Diana Liverman starts off the presentations, summarizing the latest scientific findings on the state of the environment. By means of a series of charts, she demonstrates the growth in human activity and resource use since 1950 and the corresponding increase in environmental degradation—a phenomenon known as *the Great Acceleration*. The acceleration results from two factors: the number of people on the planet (good news: expected to level off at nine billion by 2050) and how much each person consumes (well, that's bad

news). Scientists are concerned about multiple environmental tipping points, she explains; if we cross these thresholds, change will be rapid and irreversible. In this context, climate change is merely one of nine looming catastrophes including chemical pollution, ocean acidification, and biodiversity loss.

We have moved from the Holocene into the *Anthropocene*, Liverman explains, a new geological epoch in which the primary shaping force of the planet is human activity. The emerging understanding of the earth is that all its multiple systems—land, oceans, atmosphere, and living things—and all its multiple processes—physical, chemical, and biological—are entangled in complex ways with each other and with human life and activity. "It is very important to remember that the earth's system is not separate from us, but rather that we are part of it," she emphasizes, introducing a second central theme of the book: interdependence.

CLIMATE SCIENCE EVOLVES quickly. Between the occurrence of the meeting and the publishing of the book seven years have elapsed, so potential readers might fear the content is dated. Alas, recent facts are no less concerning, so the fundamental issues addressed by the book are still relevant. More complicating for the reader is that the political backdrop of the climate conversation has inverted in the United States since the meeting occurred; now climate-change-deniers govern one of the world's leading polluters. In this sense, the book sometimes reads as a relic of a qualitatively different and more hopeful age. For example, after Liverman finishes her talk, the Dalai Lama offers advice that seems naive in the face of today's political reality. "Global leaders should be exposed to this kind of data so that people who are responsible for countries will become fully convinced of the seriousness of the situation. More awareness needs to be created, particularly awareness in free countries where leaders are chosen through election."

In his repeated insistence that education is the solution to public inaction, the Dalai Lama acts as a foil. His is the voice of common sense. Get people the information about what is happening; explain that changing their way of life is in their own best interest; and of course they will comply. Except that isn't what happens, the Dalai Lama's interlocutors are quick to inform him, explaining that the findings have become politicized, forces of active *dis*information are at work, and even when receptive people get the memo, often they don't respond. (The fact that the commonsense approach fails is an important indication that something is wrong with contemporary common sense, an insight that emerges chapters later.)

If peoples' failure to respond is not caused by a lack of data, then what *is* its cause? We have a design flaw in our brains, Goleman suggests, offering a perspective from evolutionary psychology. After all, we have brains "designed for detecting snarling tigers, not the very subtle causes of planetary degradation," he said, so the danger simply doesn't trip the neurological alarm system. The panelists consider many other possibilities as the dialogue advances. Science is telling people things they don't want to hear; the implications are too severe. Or: the future is too far away; we aren't emotionally moved by it. Or: people aren't convinced by data; statistics just aren't the sort of thing that convinces.

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Throughout these exchanges, the Dalai Lama demonstrates a faith in science education laudable for a religious leader but misguided in its scientism. "In these modern times, the scientist can sometimes be considered a guru, a person of authority on these issues," the Dalai Lama insisted. "The gurus need to come out and speak." Or later: "I think the best people to stimulate awareness about what's happening and what needs to be done are not the politicians or leaders but the scientists. They are the real gurus in these matters."

When the issue at hand is environmental change, certainly natural scientists *are* the best authorities. But when the matter concerns motivating public response, they are not. The Dalai Lama here is making three common—but telling—category mistakes. First, he conflates all knowledge with knowledge of natural science. Motivation is not a matter of natural fact; it is a matter of human meaning and values, which is the forte of experts like theologians, qualitative scientists, and humanists. Second and third, he misappraises the *kind* of awareness at stake and the corresponding *kind* of response needed—thus missing game-changing distinctions that enter the conversation only when Christian theologian Sallie McFague presents.

To introduce these distinctions, McFague asks her audience to imagine giving up driving or flying. "The shock that we feel when we imagine this causes us to realize how far we have to go in our attitudes and our practices. We human beings are so embedded in the culture of consumerism that being asked to consume less makes us almost gasp. And we do; we stop for a moment, and then we have to inhale and take another breath, and get back in our cars and our airplanes, and continue on."

That feeling of mind-stopping shock is an important indication that peoples' lack of response is not operating at the level of explicit *knowledge* (which thereafter is referred to as "awareness"); it is operating at the level of implicit *assumptions* (thereafter "deep awareness"). McFague puts it like this: "The culture of consumerism is not just a form of life that we can accept or reject. It has now become like the air we breathe, and this is the nature of culture. Culture becomes nature; it becomes natural. It

becomes the way things are; it becomes the world in which we live."

Anthropocene is ostensibly a scientific term referring to an epoch in *natural* history, but it has another important meaning in the context of the humanities, which went unmentioned in Dharamsala. It refers to the corresponding era in *human* history. This meaning of "Anthropocene" is harder to get your head around: it is the era during which nature has been, all along, something humans were assuming it was not. The notion captures an uncanniness and shock, suggests essayist Amitav Ghosh, similar to the moment "when a harmlessly drifting log turns out to be a crocodile." (See Ghosh's book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, which is an excellent companion read.)

Buddhism contains parallels. For example, when we learn the truth of suffering, we might imagine we have acquired knowledge about the world "out there"—that it is in the nature of suffering—but what really matters is what we learn about *ourselves*: we had imagined otherwise; we had it wrong. And gaining that insight is not a matter of acquiring a new fact. Rather, it is relinquishing an illusion.

THROUGHOUT THE INDUSTRIAL revolution and beyond, modern people assumed that nature was separate from humans, inert, predictable, without agency, under our control, and there for our exploitation. That's how we ended up in this mess. But the escalating environmental crisis acts as incontrovertible counterevidence to these assumptions. We now know that nature has never been like that. We had it wrong.

Understanding that there is a connection between nature and humans reveals a further surprise. We had it wrong on not just one but two counts; that is, about both nature and humans. In light of science's new conception of nature, continuing our out-of-control use of resources is illuminated as logically incoherent, morally wrong, and existentially absurd. But questioning consumer ideology—"the culture of insatiable greed"—in turn undermines our very identity. We no longer know who we are in the most fundamental scheme of things, where we fit into the big picture as human beings, or what we should be doing, McFague observed. "Change at this level is very, very difficult, and in fact, most people find it impossible."

We cannot solve the crisis with the paradigm that created it. And this is why education is necessary but not sufficient to awaken public response. Succeeding at that lies not in playing this game better, as it were, but in playing an entirely different game. We need a paradigm shift.

TO IDENTIFY THE KIND OF shift needed, we have to examine the nature of consumer culture. In what manner are we entrenched? What kind of change would abandoning it entail? McFague says, "Consumerism is a cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning and fulfillment through the consumption of goods and services. Given this," she posits, "consumerism is the newest, the latest, and the most successful *religion* [italics mine]."

To adequately address the planetary crisis then, it would seem we need a culture-wide transformation akin to a *spiritual awakening*. Indeed, McFague uses such language when she says, "We need to wake up to the lie held in the current worldview of individualist, selfish fulfillment… We need to wake up to a different worldview, one that shares all our resources with our fellow creatures." Such an "awakening" sounds comparable in scope to a *religious conversion*. "The change has to happen at all levels of our life," she confirms, "personal, what we eat, how we get to work, taxes, car emissions, everything."

In responding to McFague, the Dalai Lama pinpoints what is at stake. There are theistic and nontheistic religions, he observes, "but we need a third religion." As the chapters progress, conference participants sketch an outline of what that "religion" might look like. (Dalai Lama: "One without scriptures, that is based simply on common sense, our common experience, our inner experience, warmheartedness, a sense of concern for others' well-being, and respect for the rights of others.") Thupten Jinpa contributes a Buddhist mechanism for facilitating a value-system shift. And the Karmapa adds his personal environmental conversion story, conveying what environmental awakening might look like from a first-person perspective. Creating a new social consciousness to bring about an alternative future might seem like a brazen undertaking, but cutting-edge theorizing of this very sort is already well underway in academic fields like science studies and the environmental humanities. Moving forward, it could be fruitful to connect the dialogue that emerged from Dharamsala more explicitly with that broader conversation.

A reader might begin *Ecology, Ethics, and Interdependence* imagining that the role for religions in motivating public response is a peripheral one—on the order of planting trees in monasteries, finding sutras that support environmental ethics, or preaching conservation from the pulpit. But by the end of the book, it is clear that is not the case. In the vision that comes forth from the conference, religion occupies center stage

And in this project, Buddhism could play a leading part. After all, don't Buddhists have experience developing a culture based on a kind of waking up? And how did the Buddha do it? He articulated the problem; identified its causes; established that the problem could be fixed by abandoning its causes; and taught a step-by-step path for doing that. Then he created a community and evolved institutions to support people undergoing that transformation. Might this example not serve as a parallel for how to awaken humanity from climate slumber? The Buddha provided a strategy to recognize and escape from a predicament so existentially dire that we are encouraged to respond as though our hair is on fire. Today, as the Dalai Lama says, in the sentence that closes the book, "The earth is our home, and our home is on fire.'"