

Chapter 18. Climate Change and the Perennial Spirit

What is that by knowing which all things are known?

Mundaka Upanishad (Eknath Easwaran translation)

‘Climate change’, as I have tried to suggest throughout, is an umbrella term for the wider, existential crisis that we - and all life - are facing, as we enter the third decade of this 21st century. It includes, for instance, the physical planetary changes of biodiversity loss, deforestation, and ocean warming, which signal the mass extinction we are in the midst of, and responsible for. But it is also a crisis - and opportunity - for human consciousness.

The mirror wisdom, the subject of the previous chapter, suggested that we are now beginning to be interested as much in our sense of being as our ‘becoming’, who we timelessly, or ultimately, are in the present ‘now’, as much as how we see ourselves changing from ‘the past’ to ‘the future’. This is, perhaps, reflected in the new focus on solar, as well as lunar realities, or stillness and immovability as well as activity. A new perspective seems to be opening up.

Orthodox Western science has never pondered the metaphysical question how life developed from matter, or mind from life, but now - in this 21st century - we might begin to wonder whether something is evolving out of mind. Consciousness is thought to be the defining characteristic of human nature, but today there is a growing awareness that goes further, a consciousness of consciousness itself, a new sense of transcendence and liberation, despite what the future threatens.

The spirit of ecology

Jonathon Porritt, whose *Seeing Green*¹ was the green bible for many ecologically-minded enthusiasts in the 1980s in the UK and Europe, has now written *Hope in Hell*, a call to non-violent arms, given, as he now, like many others, believes, we have only *A Decade to Confront the Climate Emergency*.² In the 1970s, as a leading figure in the UK Green Party, Porritt had a big hand in writing the 1979 Party Manifesto, which was a landmark document - practical, detailed and visionary - about the place of Green ecological politics in the late twentieth century. He has been Director” of Friends of the Earth, Chair of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, and, with Sara Parkin and Paul Ekins,

cofounder of Forum for the Future, a sustainability advice charity for forward-looking companies. Parkin, Ekins and Porritt were also leading lights, along with the ecological economics thinker and activist, James Robertson, in The Other Economic Summit in the eighties, which led to the creation of the new economics foundation. ³

Porritt published his *Capitalism, as if the World Matters* in 2005. ⁴ Apart from speaking eloquently and convincingly about green issues, his originality has been in recognising and researching the place of entrepreneurial business in any Green future. He has no illusions about the failings of modern industrial capitalism with its materialist ethic and particularly its turn in the 1980s to neoliberal ideology, but he is not just an ideological or sentimental Green. Many Socialists consider “eco-capitalism” to be impossible, but Porritt, in writing a book with a reference back to Schumacher’s Buddhist economic ethics in *Small is Beautiful: economics as if people matter*, believed it was possible.

Grief, anxiety, fear and action

Lately, mental health initiatives have addressed the psychological issues of climate change, particularly the anxiety, distress, ‘environmental melancholy’ ⁵ - or ‘solastalgia’ ⁶ - and anticipatory grief more and more people are experiencing as they become aware of the existential crisis and mass extinction we are causing. ⁷ At the same time there are increasing fears about the instances of social collapse we see at home and across the globe, evident, for instance, in the rise of terrorism, the 2008 banking collapse, the degree of social injustice world-wide and the increase of authoritarian populism as a threat to democracy. These fears are exacerbated by the ever more alarming storms, floods and droughts now experienced throughout the World and increasingly linked in the public mind to climate change.

Denial about climate change and the lack of governmental action is now denounced by the increasingly vocal and active young across the planet ⁸ and the non-violent civil disobedience movements that arose in 2020. ⁹ Though grief, anxiety and fear are an understandable response to the climate emergency, we can - and must - go beyond them. Rather than just a cause for stoic resignation and adaptation only, they should be a spur to political action and spiritual renewal. This is understood by the ‘deep adaptation’ movement started by Jem Bendell, now a growing association of people who realise the need for allying political activity with a new, non-violent 21st century mindset.

Interestingly they have linked up with other groups, particularly with the Extinction Rebellion movement and the Climate Psychology Alliance. ¹⁰

In 2012 Porritt published a book, *The World We Made*, ¹¹ as if written in 2050 by a fictional narrator looking back from a world that had solved the ecological problems of our age at the beginning of the 21st century. It was a benign and optimistic view with a whole range of imaginative ideas and information to encourage us to think how we can actually transform our world today for the better. Needless to say *Hope in Hell* is written in a different tone. Porritt no longer has faith in an incremental, or persuasive, approach. Civil disobedience is now clearly called for. In a section of his book, entitled “What’s Stopping Us?”, he identifies and lists the greater obstacles now which still need addressing. ¹² But, as Porritt himself recognises throughout this, and his earlier book, we have the knowledge and capability to deal with all these issues. It is not science which is lacking. What’s stopping us is ourselves.

Radical hope, ‘stubborn optimism’, and awakening

This raises the question of hope. If we knew ourselves better we might be more hopeful but the more obstacles we encounter, the more despairing we seem to become. Hope is often drowned out by the forces of destruction. In *The Future We Choose* Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, the leading lights in the 2015 Paris Agreement, imagine, like Porritt, they are looking back from 2050, and they paint two - dark and light - scenarios - ‘The World We Are Creating’ and ‘The World We Must Create’. They are only too aware of the consequences for the world - and us - if we don’t change our ways. Accordingly, they make a powerful case for global activism and the need for a new mindset, particularly for what they term ‘stubborn optimism’. ¹³

The philosopher, Jonathan Lear, wrote in his book, *Radical Hope*, about the indigenous Crow Indians of North America. ¹⁴ With the extermination of the Buffalo and no longer having the opportunity to fight with the Sioux, the Crow felt they had nothing left to live for. Their culture and *raison d’être* had been destroyed. But their leader, Plenty Coups, had a dream which foretold of a future for them. Though he didn’t know how it was to be realised, it gave them hope. In Lear’s words: “Radical hope anticipates a good for which

those who have this hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it".¹⁵ Lear's book is a study in ethics.

No one can one actually forecast the future, however doomed we may seem. Moreover, our psychological, ethical and spiritual well-being demands action in the present as the only way of facing into whatever that future brings. We should not forget that the scientific mind is an integral dimension of the human spirit. Tim Flannery, who warned of the climate crisis in his memorable book, *The Weather Makers*, in 2005, captures this spirit in his 2015 *Atmosphere of Hope*.¹⁶ He reminds us of what we have achieved, and points, for instance, to a technological 'third way', a new concept in geo engineering that casts light "on how Earth's natural system for maintaining the carbon balance might be stimulated to draw CO₂ out of the air and sea at a faster rate than occurs presently, and how we might store the recovered CO₂ safely". This may sound fantastic, like creating our future out of thin air, but it is non-toxic and "the only way that complex life has ever prospered - by building itself out of CO₂ drawn from the atmosphere".¹⁷ But, of course, it all depends on our will to do this.

The 'radical hope' of Lear - or the 'stubborn optimism' of Figueres and Rivett-Carnac - however, requires an awakening. If what's stopping us is ourselves, then it is our understanding of ourselves we might begin to question. All the perennial traditions counsel us to look for reality within, whether it is Shakyamuni Buddha teaching the importance of intimate breathing and meditation, Christ telling us that "the kingdom of heaven is within" or, today, the dialogues of Sri Ramana Maharshi urging us simply to reflect on who we are. In his book, *Going On Being*, the Buddhist psychotherapist, Mark Epstein, reminded us of the essential nature of awakening: "you don't have to change to awaken, you only have to awaken to change".¹⁸

The great nineteenth century Tibetan scholar, Kongtrul wrote, reflecting the great and essential insight of Buddhism:

Just realising the meaning of mind encompasses all understanding.¹⁹

In the Buddhist view this is not just the human mind but the whole of the universe as mind, a view obscured to our modern scientific culture. The more we contemplate our own minds, the more we understand this. We, currently, limit consciousness to ourselves

only but are beginning to realise how short-sighted this is. The human mind is an extraordinary phenomenon but it evolved and emerged from something larger than itself.

The existential crisis of the 21st century indicates a revolution in our understanding of mind. For instance, the Tibetans have an ethical practice, called *Lojong*, which is a mind training, consisting of seven main points, guiding the aspirant to awakening, wisdom and true self-understanding. The third point of this mind training concerns “The Transformation of Adversity into Awakening”. For the Tibetans, this is about carrying practice into everyday life:

*When misfortune fills the world and its
inhabitants, make adversity
the path of awakening.* ²⁰

Two kinds of awakening today are clear: firstly waking up to the reality of climate change and our responsibility in causing it, as evidenced both by the science and now our own experience of its increasing symptoms. Secondly waking up to ourselves. The two are connected since, if we were more aware of ourselves we would be more conscious of the toxic effect we are having on the life systems of our planet.

The timeless axis

The simple essence of the Indian, or Hindu, view - from within which tradition Buddha Shakyamuni emerged, and which, in our own day, Aldous Huxley, following Leibniz, called the Perennial Philosophy, because it is common to every age and civilisation - can be summarised in three statements:

1. There is a timeless, changeless and infinite reality beneath the world of change and appearance.
2. This same reality lies at the core of every human being.
3. The purpose of life is to discover this reality for oneself, either through yoga or some form of meditation or contemplative practice. It is, perhaps, akin also to the realisation of God within oneself, not God as an idea or concept but as the very ground of being. It is an experiential reality rather than an intellectual one. ²¹

The modern West finds this difficult to believe. But these principles are at the heart of many of the world's Perennial traditions and are described in the *Upanishads*, those sacred Indian writings composed two and a half thousand years ago, which are the essence of classical Indian thought. They express the mystery of the human mind, such as the power of stillness within all movement and the mind's essential interdependence with everything. For instance, the *Isha Upanishad* poetically captures the seeming paradoxical experience of the real Self:

Swifter than thought, swifter than the senses.
Though motionless, he outruns all pursuit.
Without the Self, never could life exist.

The Self seems to move, but is ever still.
He seems far away, but is ever near.
He is within all, and he transcends all.

Those who see all creatures in themselves
and themselves in all creatures know no fear.
Those who see all creatures in themselves
And themselves in all creatures know no grief.
How can the multiplicity of life
Delude the one who sees its unity?

The Self is everywhere. Bright is the Self,
Indivisible, untouched by sin, wise,
Immanent and transcendent. He it is
Who holds the cosmos together. ²²

These are mysteries which promise to open up to us again as we face the global crisis of the ecological emergency and mass extinction.

Truth, universality and the self

There is a question that lies within all the *Upanishads*, and which I quote at the head of this chapter: “What is that by knowing which all things are known?” The answer is the truth of oneself, also reflected in the Socratic injunction: “know thyself”. Something like it was expressed in the last century in a collection of essays by the dramatist and president-to-come of post-war Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel, entitled *Living in Truth*. Havel wrote about the experience of living in a totalitarian state, which he felt was like living in a lie. For the State to claim absolute authority over reality, personal truth has to be suppressed. ²³

In *Living in Truth* Havel wrote about this in one landmark essay, “The Power of the Powerless”, republished in 2018 as a book in its own right. ²⁴ While the totalitarian, or authoritarian, state takes away the power of the individual, Havel believes the means of recovering it is to ‘live in truth’. Each of us is responsible for truth. As Timothy Snyder pointed out in his introduction to the 2018 edition, Havel insisted that we cannot delegate that responsibility to anyone else. Living in truth means taking personal decisions based on your own sense of being. You may never know whom your action will touch, but, in Havel’s words, “any genuinely meaningful point of departure in an individual’s life usually has an element of universality in it”. ²⁵

As a polemic against the ideology of Soviet communism, Havel’s essay is a powerful testament, but he also includes in the ‘lie’ the materialism of Western liberal democracy, which he feels may provide a comfortable material life but, in its ideological consumerism, actually deprives the individual spirit of its natural freedom. At the same time, as a political system, it neglects whole sections of society. Scientific materialism, and the so called freedom of the modern state, is the ideology of the West.

Transcendence

What the classic Indian scriptures emphasise is the sense of an immaterial, universal order which gives meaning to our personal particular experience. This is a transcendent order but it is also immanent in all life. It is the ultimate context for everything. Havel insists, for instance, that, though you have to live in a political system, the system doesn’t

have to live in you. This may not be easy to live up to, but it crucially depends on knowing your true self - independent as well as interdependent.

The Communist State may force its individual citizens into following its totalitarian rules, or the modern Western state may put its population to sleep with its materialistic focus. But freedom is about a sense of harmony between the individual conscience and political ethics. In Communist countries the State claims itself to have transcendent power and the individual person is thereby ignored or oppressed, while in the West the ideology of neoliberalism, and its concomitant belief in possessive individualism, resists government provision altogether and allows an untrammelled consumerist and narcissistic culture free rein.

Stephen Batchelor, the Buddhist writer who wrote *The Awakening of the West*, referred elsewhere to 'A Culture of Awakening', which, with the meeting of Western modernity and the wisdom traditions of Buddhism in this 21st century, leads us to look afresh at the understanding and practice of freedom:

Just as Buddhism provides psychological insights and contemplative practices to free people from their inner demons, so the liberal philosophies of Europe and America provide social insights and political practices to free people from governments and religions that restrict their liberty to live as they choose. We thus come to appreciate the full extent of Mara's (the Devil's) reach: intense private hatreds share with complex social structures of repression the same capacity to block paths and limit freedom. ²⁶

The Coronavirus has caused a great deal of suffering, but one of the benefits of the 2020 pandemic, in addition to waking us up, may also have been to encourage more balance between the state and the individual. It has been a form of retreat for many people and, as individuals, we are now reviewing our personal lives, hopefully taking more responsibility for ourselves and learning to live more healthy, ecological and ethical lives. At the same time, governments may be beginning to reassess their accountability for a more just society, economically and socially.

The Romantics of the nineteenth century were open to a transcendent dimension within the individual mind, but eventually their inspiration was replaced by the more powerful

forces of modernity and modernism, with their strong but limited 'meta-narratives', such as Scientific Materialism, Psycho-analysis and Marxist thought. It is only in this 21st century that we are becoming more aware of a truer, or more honest, authentic transcendence that we can see how limited and destructive, as well as creative, our modern culture has been.

The question now is what hope do we have left. Porritt, with *Hope in Hell*, reminds us that there are still some "reasons to be cheerful" and, along with other prominent activists, suggests, in a form of qualified hope, that engagement and action are the antidote to naive optimism or hopeless despair. Nor do we know where it will lead. The millennial generation seem to have been born with a spirit that brings new ideas and imagination to bear on the crisis. Certainly 'the three mindsets' - of stubborn optimism, 'collaboration', arising from an understanding of abundance, and 'radical regeneration' - that Figueres and Rivett-Carnac outline in their book suggest a new kind of thinking behind the Paris Agreement accord. These mindsets may well have their source - or be confirmed - in Rivett-Carnac's buddhist background.

Transcendence is also the title of a new book by Gaia Vince, the award-winning science writer for her *Adventures in the Anthropocene: a Journey to the Heart of the Planet We Made*. The transcendence she writes about is human evolution. She explains that there is a special relationship between the evolution of our genes, environment and culture, which she calls 'our human evolutionary triad':

This mutually reinforcing triad creates the extraordinary nature of us, a species with the ability to be not simply the objects of a transformative cosmos, but agents of our own transformation. We have diverged from the evolutionary path, taken by all other animals and, right now, we are on the cusp of becoming something grander and more marvellous. As the environment that created us is transformed by us we are beginning our greatest transcendence.²⁷

It may be difficult to accept from a science writer that our transformation of the environment is 'our greatest transcendence', but, if we include ourselves as part of the environment, then, whether, or how, we survive the climate and ecological crisis, waking up to a new transcendent sense of our true selves can only help us face whatever the future brings. This was the spirit which made the 2015 Paris Agreement such a turning

point. It is vital that it continues to be the sustaining power of the even more crucial Conference 26 of the Parties this autumn in Glasgow.

Notes and references

¹ Jonathon Porritt, *Seeing Green: the politics of ecology explained*, Foreword by Petra Kelly, Oxford: Blackwell, 1984.

² Jonathon Porritt, *Hope In Hell: A Decade to Confront the Climate Emergency*, London: Simon and Schuster, 2020.

³ See David Boyle and Andrew Simms, *The New Economics: a Bigger Picture*, London: Earthscan, 2009.

⁴ Jonathon Porritt, *Capitalism as if the World Matters*, Foreword by Amory Lovins, London: Earthscan, 2007.

⁵ See Renee Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic dimensions of engagement*, London: Routledge, 2015.

⁶ Solastalgia is a new term that describes emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change. It is different from 'eco-anxiety' in that it refers to mourning for what has been lost, whereas the latter term is linked to what may happen in the future. See Glenn Albrecht, "Solastalgia: a New Concept in Human Health and Identity", *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* 3, 2005 pp 41-45.

⁷ An example is the UK Climate Psychology Alliance, whose focus, according to their handbook, is to understand the psychological defences of the denial of climate change, the cultural factors that inhibit change and the difficulties individuals and groups face in negotiating change with family, friends and colleagues. It also highlights "the psychological resources - resilience, courage, radical hope, new forms of imagination - that support change". It offers a deeper perspective than mainstream positivist psychology. In employing a 'psycho-social' approach, the CPA draws on an imaginative alliance of ideas and activists from depth-psychological and ecological sources, including "psychoanalysis, Jungian psychology, eco-psychology, chaos theory, continental philosophy, eco linguistics and social theory". It also aims to "illuminate the complex two-way interaction between the personal and the political".

⁸ Greta Thunberg and the world-wide school strikes are an example.

⁹ See *This is not a Drill: an extinction rebellion handbook*, Foreword by Vandana Shiva, Introduction: 'The Story so Far' - Sam Knights, London: Penguin, 2019. See also the Sunrise movement in the States and the work and thinking of congresswoman, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

¹⁰ See Jem Bendell and Rupert Read, editors, *Deep Adaptation: Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021.

¹¹ Jonathon Porritt, *The World We Made: Alex McKay's Story from 2050*, London: Phaidon, 2012. Porritt wrote it, as he says in *Hope In Hell*, "to conjure up a positive vision of what of what a fair, compassionate and genuinely sustainable world could look like in 2050".

¹² Porritt writes of the 'lethal incumbencies' of global poverty, the power of the fossil fuel industry and the sheer cost of addressing climate change; the risk to democracy - the power of populism and the threat of mega social media corporations; and the 'planetary pressures and opportunities' - pressures, such as the gross toxic methods of industrial farming, leading to the extinction of the insect population and the carbon footprint of the cement, engineering and construction industries, though there are also opportunities like the recarbonisation of soil.

¹³ Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, *The Future We Choose: the Stubborn Optimist's Guide to the Climate Crisis*, London: Manilla Press, 2020

¹⁴ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge Ms: Harvard UP, 2006.

¹⁵ Ibid. p 105

¹⁶ Tim Flannery, *Atmosphere of Hope: Solutions to the Climate Crisis*, London: Penguin, 2016 (2015)

¹⁷ Ibid. p 9

¹⁸ Mark Epstein M.D., *Going on Being: Life at the Crossroads of Buddhism and Psychotherapy*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2008 (2001) p 13.

¹⁹ Quoted in Kalu Rinpoche, *Luminous Mind: The Way of the Buddha*, Somerville, Ms: Wisdom, 1997, p 15.

²⁰ Jamgon Kongtrul, *The Great Path of Awakening: the Classic Guide to Lojong, a Tibetan Buddhist Practice for Cultivating the Heart of Compassion*, translated and introduced by Ken McLeod, Boston: Shambhala, 2005 (1987) p 17.

²¹ These three principles are recognised and asserted in all perennial traditions, particularly clearly expressed in the teachings of the great eighth century Hindu sage, Shankara. I have here drawn on the Introduction to a modern translation into English of *The Bhagavad Gita*. See *The Bhagavad Gita*, introduced and translated by Eknath Easwaren, Tomales, California: Nilgiri Press, 2007 (1985).

²² *The Upanishads*, introduced and translated by Eknath Easwaren, Tomales, California: Nilgiri Press, 2007 (1987) pp 57-58.

²³ Vaclav Havel, *Living In Truth: twenty-two essays published on the occasion of the award of the Erasmus prize to Vaclav Havel*, edited by Jan Vladislav, London: Faber & Faber, 1987 (1986)

²⁴ Vaclav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless*, translated from the Czech by Paul Wilson with an Introduction by Timothy Snyder, London: Vintage, 2018.

²⁵ Ibid. p x

²⁶ Stephen Batchelor *Living with the Devil: A Meditation on Good and Evil*, New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin Group (USA), 2004, pp165-66. Interestingly, Batchelor published his book, *The Art of Solitude*, which is a meditation on the paradox of “being alone with others in this world”, last year - 2020 - when the pandemic of Covid 19 was at its most virulent. Batchelor believes there is more to solitude than just being alone - “true solitude is a way of being that needs to be cultivated. You cannot switch it on or off at will. Solitude is an art”. As an opportunity for self-knowledge, whether in a wilderness setting or busy urban life, it can lead to profound loneliness or mystical rapture. Batchelor does not attempt to define or ‘explain’ solitude but treats it as a possible practice or way of life. For instance he has several interesting chapters on Montaigne who retreated to his tower, after his father died, to write his famous essays of confession and self-exploration.

In Batchelor’s view, solitude is not a luxury for the leisured few but “an inescapable dimension of being human. Whether we are devout believers or devout atheists, in solitude we confront and explore the same existential questions”. Batchelor also writes about his own experience of solitude through the years, whether in Buddhist meditation, writing, teaching or taking psychedelic drugs under shamanic supervision. See Stephen Batchelor, *The Art of Solitude, a meditation on being alone with others in this world*, Yale University Press, 2020.

²⁷ Gaia Vince, *Transcendence: How Humans Evolved through Fire, Language, Beauty and Time*, London: Allen Lane, 2019, p xiii.