

# The Timeless Axis



Climate Change and Cultural Transformation

Tony Cartwright

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

Blake, *The Proverbs of Hell*

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There are just three agents of change sufficiently powerful to open a gateway in time - the shifting of continents, cosmic collisions, and climate-driving forces such as greenhouse gases. All act in different ways, but they drive evolution using the same mechanisms - death and opportunity.

Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers*

'Seeing'. We might say that the whole of life lies in that verb.....the history of the living world can be summarised as the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes within a cosmos in which there is always something more to be seen.....'To see' or 'to perish' is the very condition laid upon everything that makes up the universe, by reason of the mysterious gift of existence. And this, in superior measure, is man's condition.

Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*

Just realising the meaning of mind encompasses all understanding.

Jamgon Kongtrul, *Outline of Essential Points.*

## Preface

Heaven and earth and I are of the same root. All things and I are of the same substance. Jo Hoshi

I began to think about the ideas behind this book a long time ago. Initially I was concerned – along with many others – about what we were doing to the Earth by altering the climate and destroying the environment - but as the warnings got more alarming with the passing years and so little seemed to be done, simply “saving the planet” – and ourselves - appeared to be less and less realistic. The planet, I realised, can look after itself though we may not be included in the plan. I am not one of those who believe the sooner we become extinct, the better for the Earth, but we are our own worst enemy. We have lived with the thought of instant annihilation by all-out nuclear war for over fifty years and now we are told unless we urgently wean ourselves off our fossil-fuel economy we can expect a catastrophic rise of global average temperature of 4 degrees plus sometime this century.

No one can predict the future but perhaps the issue is no longer merely about survival. Kenneth Clark in his sixties BBC “Civilisation” television series described how in different historical periods civilised life in the Western world had endured by “the skin of its teeth” – Europe survived the ‘fall’ of the Roman Empire, the invasions of the Arabs and the Mongols, and the destructive forces of twentieth century totalitarianism. Ironically we only just prevented Hitler from developing nuclear weapons before threatening each other with nuclear Armageddon thereafter. Now it is not just a civilisation that needs to be saved, the whole of life on Earth is at risk.

Yet the Earth and the Universe have never looked more fascinating, more mysterious, more sublime. Science may provide the means to destroy the world but it is also evidence of a boundless curiosity in us - whether we are looking into the structure of subatomic matter, the infinite forms of biological life, or the phenomenon of the cosmos itself. It is as if we are learning to love our planet again just as we are destroying it. Such is our contradictory nature.

We are a perverse species. We know much more about the phenomena of the world than ever before but the one blind spot is our knowledge of ourselves - what the French philosopher, Teilhard de Chardin, called “the human phenomenon”.<sup>ii</sup> We observe nature as if it was only outside us, forgetting that we are of a piece with what we observe. The phenomenological movement of the last century made us more aware of our own consciousness but natural science still believes naively in an objective world independent of our experience of it. But ever since Kant and the emergence of modern philosophy, it has been argued that we do not see the world as it is. We are conditioned to see it as we are. The “objective” world is a mirror of ourselves.

Nor need we be deluded that the enemy is an external one. If the Earth does succumb to catastrophe today we have no one to blame but ourselves – not some demonic force, malevolent God, evil tyrant. The responsibility is ours. Perhaps, at last, this is a time for growing up. This may be our final century but there are signs we are beginning to experience an awakening. Principally, it will require a new understanding of ourselves, not just our human consciousness, but the universe itself as mind.

This book is about about new forms of integrity. Integrity is not just about behaviour or ethics - whether of governments, bankers, corporations, or the rest of us – but also how we fit into the whole order of things. Prior to modern times we instinctively felt ourselves to be a link in a universal chain of being or teleology. We were a part of nature and the divine order - materially and metaphysically. But the objectifying gaze of modern science and rational thought has fragmented the world and left us feeling separate and apart. The evolutionary theory of modern biologists, for instance, may have transformed the way we think of life, but it excludes human nature. We know we live on a dynamic planet but have failed to see that we - *homo sapiens* – might also be evolving with it.

The anthropologist, Gregory Bateson, referred to “the pattern that connects” which underlies all creation. Integrity is also a translation of the ancient Chinese word, *tao*.<sup>iii</sup> *Tao* traditionally meant “way” or “teaching” and was a term used in the sense of human behaviour and moral laws, as Confucius taught. It was Lao Tzu - Confucius’ elder – who, in the classic text, the *Tao Te Ching*, ascribed a metaphysical

meaning to the term. *Tao* in this sense describes an ultimate reality which is invisible and nameless but which gives rise to the universe and the infinite phenomena in it, including ourselves. It is said to be nothing less than the primordial source of all being, which our purely material and positivist sciences have rendered us oblivious to.

This book is written in the growing belief that against – or out of - the backdrop of a human race and an Earth in crisis, we are actually re-awakening not only to our interdependency with the Earth and the Universe but to this original, primordial nature. The emergence of “the timeless axis” is a renewed consciousness of this.. At the same time as we see ourselves threatened by climate change and all that is associated with it, we are becoming aware of a timeless and changeless reality within us, as well as within all things. This awareness is evident in many cultures in history but which the modern Western world, for all its material progress, had lost sight of.

This is a global phenomenon, reflected in the emergence of a “global mind”. Some speculate we could even be living through an evolutionary moment to be compared with the emergence of life out of matter or of consciousness out of life. <sup>iv</sup> We are becoming conscious of consciousness itself. These are apocalyptic, but they may also be luminous times.

Scientists have always asked themselves what the universe is made of, without realising it is also made of us - that we are the same “substance” as the “external” world about us. *Homo sapiens* is believed to have emerged a mere 200,000 years ago yet we are living now in an age when our extinction was never more imaginable. Surely this is the time to re-examine ourselves – to wonder who and what we are, while we are still here to do so. The human mind is one of the most astonishing inventions of evolution but it is part of the nature of everything, not an entity in itself. Understand this about mind and we may begin to understand all things.

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I have divided the book into an introduction and five parts. Chapter one is a general introduction to the subjects of climate science, the perennial importance of myth, and the idea of cultural evolution. The concept of “One Earth” - the new symbol of transformation – underlies the discussion and it makes sense to focus on comparative perspectives across the whole world rather than rely on those of any one culture alone. The notion of a “perennial philosophy” – or “ageless wisdom” - is re-emerging today. It is the idea that there is a common inner core at the heart of all the world’s philosophies or religions alongside the many different outward forms they take. To appreciate this requires more than an intellectual understanding. Most spiritual ways emphasise the “understanding” of the heart as well as the mind. Wisdom is the product of both. <sup>v</sup>

I have chosen Buddhism as an example of a perennial practice that has profound psychological and philosophical understandings and, at the same time, a practical approach that has enabled it to adapt itself historically to many different cultures throughout Asia. It is also a dynamic force now in the West and, as a result, is experiencing a transformation of its own in the growing dialogue with Western science and culture. In this introduction I give a brief historical account of the arrival of *Buddha-dharma* - the term in the East for what we know as “Buddhism” - in the West and the importance of its values to a world in crisis. This leads to the idea of a Western dharma and the “fourth turning of the dharma wheel” today. <sup>vi</sup>. Buddha’s teachings were said to have turned the dharma wheel at different points in the world’s history.

In part one I focus on apocalyptic themes – some thoughts on the nuclear threat followed by a brief coverage of the extensive ecological literature documenting what we are doing to the Earth, including the view that we may be contributing to an imminent sixth mass extinction. I end part one in chapter 4 with a discussion of some of the themes in the history and literature of apocalyptic thinking. While “the sense of an ending” - as myth - has always been with us, the difference now is that the threat of a man-induced doomsday is substantiated by scientific evidence. While these chapters may have a doomsday feel, I include them in the assumption that when we face up to the worst that can happen – when things look hopeless - we may find resources in ourselves we didn’t know we had.

Part two includes four chapters on the art of living and dying. Death brings suffering and millions today die in great misery because of a corrupt geopolitical order we seem powerless to reform. But death is also a great equaliser and our fear of it often conditions the way we live. In the affluent world we need - to quote Montaigne - to "learn how to die" in order to learn how to live again. I would maintain that only when we do may we be able to fashion a more just world. In this section I look at a number of texts that offer different perspectives.

Part three comprises four chapters that discuss concepts and practices that may help us understand and realise the way in which consciousness is being transformed. For this I rely more on the wisdom teachings of Asian cultures. The language of these may at first be unfamiliar but, although these perennial traditions also find expression in Western cultures, they have, unlike in Asia, historically been proscribed and suppressed, initially by the Church as heresy and then later by orthodox science as mysticism. As a result they tend to be disguised and esoteric in their presentation, whether as forms of the Gnostic tradition, alchemy, or theosophy. It may be that Asian teachings will lead to more understanding of our own spiritual traditions.

In Part four I suggest how a new wisdom is finding expression across the world in this twenty-first century, despite the ecological and existential collapse we are also facing. This may be difficult to see today, but it can be viewed as a turn from a materialist- to a values-based culture.

Crucial to any new coherence is the question of values, particularly in the core spheres of ethics, science and aesthetics, known classically as the Good, the True and the Beautiful. I describe and discuss these three in separate chapters but view them also essentially as a continuum. Ethics, for instance, without the understanding of science and expressiveness of art, can be an abstract morality or sterile code of laws. Science, without ethics and an understanding of the world as sublimely beautiful, is apt to be scientistic. While an art that has lost touch with ethics or any sense of truth can become simply nihilistic, or art for art's sake. The re-integration of these three core value spheres are essential to the re-enchantment of our fragmented modern world.

In the chapter on aesthetics I focus on ourselves as an aesthetic phenomenon. We are surely the Earth's most sublime work of art, though also the most destructive. Perhaps we are so destructive because we don't know ourselves. The "'I' of the Beholder", the subtitle of the chapter, is a new sense we have of being a witness to everything. This is revealed as an inner awareness which raises us above and beyond our destructive nature and leads to the care and compassion so needed by the world which gave birth to us in the first place. It is the light inside everyone, which spiritual and mystical paths all point to.

The final section contains two chapters. One explores the notion of mirror wisdom, that capability we can develop to discriminate between the world as it appears and "as it is" - the difference between illusion and reality and, especially, between who we think we are and who we really are. I refer to the writing of the Japanese Zen master, Kigen Dogen, particularly his reflections on the sun, the moon, and the Earth, as mirrored in a simple dewdrop.

The final chapter underlines the main theme of the book which is about the importance of understanding ourselves in a new way. This may lead to a new sense of coherence and meaning. The notion, for instance, that the uni-verse might be a unified, integral, living entity may be strange to the modern analytic mind. Moreover, although this unity is - akin to God - ineffable and beyond description, it is not beyond our understanding, viewed through the light of contemplative practice. Like Blake's "world in a grain of sand" and the Dalai Lama's "universe in an atom", it is also there in us. We have only to discover and realise it.

## Notes and references

<sup>i</sup> It is difficult to keep up with the literature but see the reports of the IPCC as they come out. Also Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species. Why we resist the truth about climate change*, Earthscan 2010; Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*, Penguin, 2014; and David Wallace-Wells, *The Earth: A Story of Our Future*, Penguin, 2019.

<sup>ii</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*, translation of *Le Phenomenene Humain* by Sarah Appleton-Weber, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2015 (1999)

iii See verse 4 of Lao Tzu, *The Tao Te Ching*, translated with an introduction and commentary by Ralph Alan Dale, London: Watkins, 2002 - "The Great Integrity is an endless abyss. Yet, it is the inexhaustibly fertile source of the universe".

iv See, for example:

Duane Elgin, *Awakening Earth. Exploring the evolution of Human Culture and Consciousness*, William Morrow, 1993;

Georg Feuerstein, *Wholeness or Transcendence: Ancient Lessons for the Emerging Global Civilisation*, New York: Larson Publications, 1999;

Willis Harman, *Global Mind Change: The Promise of the Last years of the Twentieth Century*, New York, Winner Books, 1988;

Anodea Judith, *Waking the Global Heart: Humanity's Rite of Passage from the Love of Power to the Power of Love*, Santa Rosa: Elite Books, 2006;

Peter Russell, *The Global Brain: The Awakening Earth in a New Century*, Edinburgh, Floris Books, 2008, published in Great Britain as *The Awakening Earth: Our Next Evolutionary Leap* by Routledge and Kegan Paul in 1982 and in the USA as *The Global Brain: Speculations on the Evolutionary Leap in Planetary Consciousness*, published by J.P. Tarcher in 1983;

Robert Thurman, *Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Real Happiness*, foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, London: Rider, 1999 (1998)

v See Aldous Huxley's landmark anthology, *The Perennial Philosophy*, New York: HarperPerennial, 2009 (1944) As Huxley writes in his Introduction: "Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditional lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions" p vii.

vi 'Dharma' is an important concept in Indian thought. In the Hindu tradition it refers to the cosmic truth or law underlying the universe, and in Buddhism it also refers to the Buddha's teachings, known as *buddha-dharma* which, historically, spread from India across the whole of the Asian East in the first millennium CE.

Shakyamuni Buddha's ethical and practical teaching in the 6th century BCE is often referred to as "the first turning of the wheel of dharma". In the history of Buddhism it is also taught that there were two further "turnings" of the dharma wheel: the second, in the second century CE, focussed on the teachings on "emptiness" - in Sanskrit, *shunyata* - associated in particular with the sage, Nagarjuna; the third turning was the consciousness teachings of Asanga and Vasubhandu, of the "mind-only" school - *Yogachara* - in the fifth century. It is thought by many that, with the spread of Buddhist ideas in the West, we are now living in the midst of a "fourth turning".

This is a global phenomenon, not just a challenge for Buddhism.

It could be said that the quantum revolution in physics at the beginning of the twentieth century has contributed towards a "second turning" in our understanding of the "emptiness" of the Universe, and the interest today in neuroscience and mindfulness resonates with the profound teachings of the mind-only school. If the challenge of Western natural science and the West's social and political awareness constitute a possible fourth turning for Buddhism, then equally, with the ecological crisis and mass extinction happening now across the Planet as a result of our modern way of life, we desperately need a spiritual infusion from the profound ethical, philosophical and psychological traditions of the East.

See also Ken Wilber's *The Religion of Tomorrow*, Boulder: Shambhala, 2017, as well as *Trump and a Post-Truth World*, Boulder: Shambhala, 2017 for a discussion of the concept of a "fourth turning".