

Awakening II. Climate Psychology and Beyond.

Wakefulness is the way to life.....

So awake, reflect, watch.

Work with care and attention.

Live in the way

and the light will grow in you.

“Wakefulness”, *The Dhammapada*

(Thomas Byron translation)

You don't have to change to awaken, you only have to awaken to change.

Mark Epstein, *Going On Being*

In 2017 I posted an essay on the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) website, entitled “Awakening. Further thoughts on Radical Hope”.¹ This current piece continues the theme since waking up is absolutely central in this twenty-first century. In the original essay I drew attention to two essential kinds of waking up: firstly, waking up to the evidence of climate change, our part in causing it, and what it means for the future of the planet; and secondly, waking up to ourselves. Perhaps it is awareness of this second form of waking up that will help us understand our denial of the first. After all, the challenge of climate change and mass extinction calls for a change in our own nature.

The focus of “Climate Psychology”, according to the CPA handbook,² aims firstly to understand the defences of denial, the cultural factors that inhibit change and the difficulties individuals and groups face in negotiating change with family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. But it also highlights “the psychological resources - resilience, courage, radical hope, new forms of imagination - that support change”. There is a problem with mainstream positivist psychology, which, in reducing “the human being to an object to be measured, controlled and then harnessed to the profit-making machine that now threatens our collective future”, fails to offer “a deeper perspective”. The CPA, in employing a “psycho-social” approach, 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”.

But is the depth of the “depth-psychologies” - and the width of ecological awareness - deep - and wide - enough? Is it sufficient, for instance, to analyse our personal paralysis in the face of climate change? If climate change is a *hyperobject* - something too big for our rational, scientific and modern minds to grasp - do we not need to call on resources that go deeper still? If our purely personal sense of agency is inadequate to meet the challenge, no wonder we deny, or fear, climate change, since it threatens to extinguish our personal identity.

A different kind of indifference

Indifference to disaster, the subtitle of *Climate Psychology*, the collection of research papers written by CPA members and edited by Paul Hoggett, ³ may, as the CPA knows, hide an array of unconscious feelings below the surface and call for a dimension of intersubjective understanding in all research work, but perhaps there is another level of “indifference” that might help us face the existential dangers and empower our sense of agency at the prospect of catastrophe. What used to be called “divine, or poetic, indifference” is very different from personal indifference. On the contrary it may be central to the psychological resources - “resilience, courage, radical hope, and new forms of imagination” - we see emerging in this new century. From a relative perspective, everything matters, every little thing; from an absolute view, nothing matters. There is a contemplative state of mind which knows - despite the horrors we are responsible for - that, in the words of the fourteenth century feminine mystic, Julian of Norwich, “all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well”.

The word “divine” summons up for the modern mind the myth of an omnipotent and intolerant God the European Enlightenment turned its back on several centuries ago. But perhaps we need to revisit the sense of the notion of an absolute reality, from a philosophical, psychological and practical perspective. Our conventional, progressive scientific culture is blind to the idea of nature as divine or sacred but, as forms of nature ourselves, perhaps we can begin to look within our own minds for a depth of reality that goes beyond the personal, whether conscious or unconscious.

Though we in the West have a tradition that explores this kind of philosophical and psychological depth, it has historically been persecuted as heretical by the Church or

regarded as an irrational form of mysticism by modern science, unlike in Asia where it is a tradition that has been revered and cultivated. Perhaps we in the West can learn from a tradition of introspective thought that is founded on thousands of years of experience. In fact the immemorial tradition of spiritual knowledge is known to most of history's cultures; only our "modern" society is asleep, or unaware of it, which connects to the way in which psychoanalysis, depth psychology, and behavioural and scientific psychologies are all essentially related to, and have emerged from, a particular cultural form and understanding of ourselves - i.e. "the Modern".

Contemplative and psychotherapeutic practice

Eastern and Western cultures used to be seen as very distinctive, though we can now begin to view them as part of an integrated whole. While it is sometimes difficult to see how anyone's individual life and activity can make a difference to the global problems we now face, at the level of consciousness each of us can do more than we realise, particularly in the field of psychotherapy. Awareness is all.

The late John Welwood, the American psychotherapist and buddhist, for instance, wrote for much of his life about the complementary nature of Asian contemplative and Western psychotherapy practices. He was drawn to the thought and practice of buddhism in the 1960s, particularly through the writings of D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts, and, at that time, found Western psychology and psychotherapy too narrow and limited. Later, however, he came to recognise the difference between the realisation of our sense of being in any contemplative practice and the actualisation of that being in our modern way of life.

By "realisation" Welwood meant "the direct recognition of one's ultimate nature beyond the conventional ego" while "actualisation" is about how we live that realisation in all the situations of our life. People can experience genuinely transformative changes as a result of an alternative course or retreat - however long or brief - they might attend, but can find it difficult to sustain the sense of transformation when they return to their everyday life. Welwood concluded, the genuine changes have often not made sufficient difference to their sense of self, which seems to have remained intact and generates the same behaviour patterns as before.

“Spiritual bypassing”

This is partly because Western students are not always easily suited to the meditative practice and teachings of Asia. Nor is the Western psyche, with its personal and cultural problems, well understood by Eastern “gurus” or Tibetan lamas, for instance, who may have had deep insight into the mysteries of the mind but come from a cultural world that seems to us more medieval than modern. Consequently they sometimes fail to appreciate the personal difficulties Western students experience on account of the culture of individualism and the concept of the individual self basic to modernity, and which can lead to a negative self-view. Welwood used the term “spiritual bypassing” to describe the attempts by Western students to practise “spiritual” ways that are culturally foreign to them, difficulties their Asian teachers may not have appreciated:

“They (the Asian teachers) often do not understand the pervasive self-hatred, shame and guilt, as well as the alienation and lack of confidence in these students. Still less do they detect the tendency toward spiritual bypassing - a term I have coined to describe the tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep personal, emotional ‘unfinished business’ to shore up a shaky sense of self, or to belittle basic needs, feelings, and developmental tasks in the name of enlightenment. And so they often teach self-transcendence to students who first need to find some ground to stand on”.⁴

Clearly this is an area where psychological work might serve as an ally to contemplative, or spiritual, practice. It would help “to bring awareness into all the hidden nooks and crannies of our conditioned personality, so that it becomes more porous, more permeable to the larger being that is its ground”.

Beyond psychology

At the same time, Welwood recognises that spiritual work has “a much larger aim than psychological work”. It involves “liberation from narrow identification with the self-structure altogether and awakening into the expansive reality of primordial being”.

Moreover, this kind of awakening can be glimpsed whether or not one is happy, healthy, psychologically integrated, individuated, or in fulfilling relationships. What Welwood was suggesting is that, prior to personal integration, “the increasingly desperate situation of a

planet that humans are rapidly destroying cries out for a new kind of psycho-spiritual integration".⁵

Modern-day psychotherapists, who are also concerned about the urgent nature of climate change and ecological degradation, often wonder how their psychotherapeutic work can be relevant to the current state of things. But clearly, "saving the planet" means little if human nature itself does not also change, since we are responsible for the crisis in the first place. In fact, psychological work can be crucial to people who wish to "wake up". As buddhist psychotherapists like Welwood would say, it helps to be a functioning self before you can understand and practise "no-self".

At the same time, psychotherapy can open itself to the work of transformation and contemplative awakening by engaging with the processes of a wider integration. Conventional therapy has traditionally been viewed in the medical context of pathology, diagnosis and cure. Therapy as liberation is different, less, perhaps, about changing the content of therapeutic practice and more about practitioners themselves engaging with contemplative traditions. In doing so, a new sense of well-being in the therapist communicates itself consciously or unconsciously to patients and may well be reciprocated. Moreover, personal activism is more effective as a result of professional transformation.

The Cognitive Analytic Therapy (CAT) school is an interesting and progressive integration of cognitive and analytic approaches. Their reframing of "object relations" as "reciprocal roles" makes the complexity of object relations theory more understandable and practical for clients. Childhood relationships with significant others - benign or abusive - are formed internally - or reciprocally - and then taken, as a template, into adult life, conditioning future relationships. The aim of therapy is to review these reciprocal roles and "revision" them, by way of beginning to build on or free clients from childhood conditioning. The therapist works collaboratively and empathetically with a person to maximise the effectiveness of the therapy.⁶

What CAT and other schools of therapy don't consider - or theorise - is the template everyone is born with - the reciprocal role a person has with the whole of life, as it were, their ecological and universal inheritance. It is more ontological than purely physical or genetic and would make sense of that mystifying Zen question about the nature of the

face you had before your parents conceived you. It goes by different names - destiny or karma, for instance - but points to the resourcefulness and resilience we all have beyond, and additional to, parental or family inheritance. We may think of this as a form of soul strength which opens us up to the infinite resources of Life with a capital L. Many therapists may be working with this potentiality without being fully aware of it as a powerful therapeutic resource.

Awakening and buddhism

In their introduction to *The Psychology of Awakening* - a book with contributions from many theorists and practitioners exploring the field of contemplative psychotherapy - the editors, Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor and Guy Claxton (all buddhist practitioners, as well as knowledgeable about the schools of Western psychotherapy), draw attention to the unfamiliarity of the concept of “awakening”. What is awakening? What are we waking up from, what waking up to? Academic psychologists might question its relevance to psychology. But others, particularly outside conventional academic boundaries, would argue that psychology is also the study of mind in its widest sense, which includes study of what we think of as the soul, cognition, emotion and consciousness - individually and collectively. ⁷

Buddhism, throughout its thought and practice, has always viewed psychology in this way and as the editors write: “At this time, both practitioners of psychology and of the path of awakening realise that they have much to gain from each other.” ⁸ As the Dalai Lama himself has always made clear, there are, in particular, two areas of dialogue between Buddhism and psychotherapy. One is the investigation of mind - particularly as consciousness - itself. The other is that investigation for therapeutic reasons - how to help people live healthier, happier lives.

On the one hand Buddhism’s understanding of mind leads from orthodox science’s purely objective and detached approach to reality to a science of embodiment and inter-subjectivity, as some schools of contemporary cognitive science are currently exploring. On the other, Buddhism offers, not only theory but a way: “This is a way of practice, a cultivation, a path towards change and clear sight leading to happiness, authenticity and connection.” This is a path now recognised by more and more people in all walks of life as both profound and practical.

Nor is this a one-way relationship but a true dialogue. Interestingly the authors ask:

“Can Western psychology’s understanding of ‘endarkenment’ complement Buddhism’s quest for enlightenment? Can scientific studies of consciousness and its relation to unconsciousness also help us to live more happily, more wisely, and can they be used in the service of spiritual progress?”⁹

The notion of “endarkenment” presumably includes the exploration of the shadow side of psychological and social life, which the modern West has studied in depth. Shadow work, it should be remembered, leads to light, since light and shade belong together. Too much concentration on light neglects the shadow but to remain in the shadow is to miss the light altogether.

Western natural and human science may have much to offer Buddhism, as it struggles and learns how to respond to a culture which is new and strange to it. Historically, Buddhism’s success in transforming other cultures has been in tolerating and understanding the nature and cultural habits of other peoples. It does so by learning wisely from them, rather than controlling and dominating. In that way it transforms itself. With respect to the modern culture of the West, Buddhism is the one “religion” not intimidated by Western science. Indeed, the one great contribution it can offer us is the science of mind, in its widest and most liberated sense.

What we can learn from Asia

There are three concepts, in particular, that Asian thought - including Buddhism - can bring to Western science and which we would do well to think about. These are the realities of “emptiness”, “non-duality” and *buddha nature*.

“Emptiness”, as a translation of the Sanskrit term, *sunyata*, can be difficult to understand, and even intimidating to the positivist Western mind, because of its supposed material association with “void”, abyss, or emptiness as vacuity. In fact, it describes the mind but also implies a world which extends our human consciousness to an awareness of space, openness, infinite possibility and fulness. It is the “emptiness” of apparent forms - including the human personality - which are actually an expression of the infinite and

ineffable reality - or spirit - that lies within them. It points to Life in its absolute essence. Hence the paradoxical notion of emptiness as a fullness. It is the “modern” failure to understand that its own creativity is an expression of this absolute Life - or emptiness.

“Non-duality” - *advaita*, or “not-two” - is based on an understanding of the unity of all things. We tend to think dualistically in terms of opposites as simply opposed, rather than also as complementary, though our poetic traditions know otherwise. William Blake, for instance, acknowledged that “without contraries there is no progress”, but he also knew they were a continuum - the contrary of contraries - and wrote his celebrated one-line proverbs in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* - “Eternity is in love with the productions of time” or “One thought fills immensity” - and, likewise, in the famous “Auguries of Innocence”, is his sense that the small is as full of significance as the great:

“To see the world in a grain of sand,
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And eternity in an hour.”

As a poet, Blake expressed the spirit of what the eminent writer on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, called “the unitive life”, a phrase which, in our own mystical traditions, captures the Eastern spirit of *advaita*, or non-duality. ¹⁰

The third principle we would do well to think about - particularly the psychological professions - is that of *buddha nature*, which simply means awakened human nature. This has been characterised in Asia as “original sinlessness”, basic goodness or, even, perfection, despite, or including, all our flaws and imperfections. This suggests we have a source of infinite resilience within, if we know how to look for it, or simply trust that it is so.

This is in contrast to the Christian Church’s emphasis on sin and sinfulness that has too often characterised our religious life and left its mark on our psychological and psychoanalytic traditions. In addition to the importance of understanding and learning from emotions such as guilt, shame and grief and the feelings of hatred, malice and envy, Buddhism, for instance, also teaches about “bliss” and the joy of living, qualities that were less understood, and appreciated, by pessimistic enthusiasts such as

Schopenhauer and even Nietzsche, despite his writing “The Gay Science”. Shakyamuni Buddha taught the truth of the cessation of suffering as well as its inescapability. Grief and joy are often close to each other and sometimes it is impossible to tell tears of either apart. The key to buddha nature is about turning your life into the cultivation of a practice. Today we might think of this as “mindful” activity, awareness of one’s better nature in whatever we do.

The importance of values

Another way of challenging our dualistic mind is to think in terms of values rather than ideological positions. There are three main value spheres - morality (ethics), science (truth) and aesthetics (art) - three values rather than the axis of two opposing stances of dualistic thinking. The three are a unity. Science, for instance, is also an imaginative art, as well as a quest for truth, and is best guided by an ethical truthfulness and political sensitivity. Equally, psychotherapy is both an art and a science and should be based on ethics in its individual and social focuses.

The greatest value is the unity of each person’s heart and mind. Buddhists declare that the experience of body, speech and mind in each of us has a universal quality. We all have a potential for pursuing the Good, the True and the Beautiful, however they are conceived and felt. The personal is the political, is the scientific, is the sublime, is the universal.

Awakening today

The buddhist writer, David Loy, called *The Great Awakening* the most important development in human consciousness, ¹¹ evident in the increasing number of books and writings about it in current times. Sam Harris, the neuroscientist and best-selling author, for instance, wrote about “the mystery of consciousness” and “the riddle of the self” in his book about the contemporary spiritual search, *Waking Up*. The book is, predictably, a polemic against traditional religion, which, in his view, can put our minds to sleep, but it’s also a clarion call to awaken to our true nature. In his concluding chapter he writes:

“It is within our capacity to recognise the nature of thoughts, to awaken from the dream of being merely ourselves and, in this way, to become better able to contribute to the well-being of others.”¹²

Freud opened the twentieth century, as it were, with *The Interpretation of Dreams*, though he also conceived of a solid scientific reality this side of our dreams. By contrast, the twenty-first century is redefining reality in an immaterial as well as material sense. Buddhism has always thought of life as a bubble or a dream, as has Shakespeare and the poets - “we are such stuff as dreams are made of” - and now we are all waking up to the dream - which, for many, also seems like a nightmare.

At the same time we are awakening to a new sense of self and to an awareness of the difference between who we take ourselves to be and who we really are. This awakening is crucial to the political and existential crises of our times. If the strategies of the left and the true populism - the authentic ethic of the common people, the heart of democracy - are to prevail against the rich, the corrupt, the vulgar and the elite, then a psychology of an awakened consciousness is essential to its success. Human nature, itself, will always be flawed. Reforming humanity is a Sisyphean task.

But there is, within our flawed nature, a seed of wisdom and goodness, a sense of shared identity that goes beyond the individual self, a solidarity that is known as buddha (awakened) nature. In my view this is the key to democracy. Solidarity extends beyond our relations with one another. It has an ecological dimension but also a sense that the spirit of ecology is to be found within each of us. We are a part of nature. Nature and culture are not distinct but an interconnected unity. Human culture is an expression of the whole universe.

The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, suggested that the ecological dangers we now face mean the question of Being - who we are and “that we are” - is only too timely and that the prospect of our extinction raises these fundamental ontological questions for us in a new and urgent form. This is reflected in the teachings of the twentieth century Indian sage, Sri Ramana Maharshi, who taught radical self-enquiry - for Ramana, the essence of meditation was to take oneself as the object and continually to ask the question: “Who am I?” This invitation to a new self-discovery may not guarantee our survival of climate change or the achievement of global social justice, but it **will** enhance

our chances, and, at the same time, give us an experience of ourselves as the timeless and absolute beings we also are.

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Notes

¹ If you can't find it on the CPA website, it's also posted on my own - thetimelessaxis.com.

² See the Handbook in the CPA website.

³ Paul Hoggett, editor, (2019) *Climate Psychology: On Indifference to Disaster*, Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴ The article - and quotes - I draw on are from John Welwood (1999), "Realisation and Embodiment: Psychological Work in the Service of Spiritual Development" in Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor and Guy Claxton, editors (1999), *The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and Our Day-to-day Lives*, London: Rider, p 150. See also Welwood (2002) *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal Transformation*, Boulder: Shambhala.

⁵ Ibid. p 143.

⁶ See Claire Corbridge, Laura Brummer and Philippa Coid (2018), *Cognitive Analytic Therapy*, Abingdon: Routledge

⁷ Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor and Guy Claxton, editors, (1999), *The Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Science and Our Day-to-day Lives*, London: Rider.

⁸ Ibid. p vii.

⁹ Ibid. p viii.

¹⁰ Evelyn Underhill, (2020,1911), *Mysticism*, Digireads.com Publishing.

¹¹ David Loy (2003) *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, Boston: Wisdom.

¹² Sam Harris (2015), *Waking Up: Searching for Spirituality Without Religion*, London: Black Swan, p 206.