

‘The Fourth Turning’: climate crisis, consciousness, and the evolution of mind.

The appropriating consciousness is profound and subtle indeed; all its seeds are like a rushing torrent. Fearing they would imagine and cling to it as to a separate self, I have not revealed it to the foolish.

Buddha, *The Arya-samdhi-nirmocana-sutra*,
(*The Noble Sutra Unlocking the Mysteries.*)

It is well known that some of the great creative achievements of humanity emerge from periods of great suffering and anxiety, when we are faced with existential extremes. It hardly needs to be said that now must be the extremest, when the survival of all life on earth is threatened as a result of Western industrial civilisation. I write this as the negotiations of COP26 are ongoing and there is a face-off between the street activists..., demonstrating against what they see as the unreal blah-like discussions of the Parties, and the protracted debates, seemingly controlled by the rich nations, within the conference.

‘Blah, blah, blah’ cries may have a cutting point when, as seems to them, no action is taking place, but blathering - or debating - is what we, as the speaking animal, do. My point is that we may well be in the midst of a very significant change in consciousness, despite or because of the global extremity we are facing. Our thinking may be being transformed. Action is necessary, of course, but if we succeed in confining the average global temperature to 1.5 degrees Celsius without changing our view of ourselves, then the problem - our construction of the fixed separate self we take ourselves to be - will remain. Perhaps the two - real action and mind transformation - are inseparable. Bodies, like the Climate Psychological Alliance for instance, addressing the psychological factors of the climate crisis, are as important as the activists. Out of ‘blah, blah, blah’ may emerge the transformation of consciousness that must accompany any action. This is known today by some contemporary reforming buddhists as ‘the fourth turning of the dharma wheel’. ¹

Given the crisis that our industrial way of life in the modern West has brought us to, it makes sense to look outside our occidental mindset to other non-European cultures.

¹ See Wilber, K., 2017, ‘Part One; A Fourth Turning of the Dharma’ in *The Religion of Tomorrow: A Vision for the Future of the Great Traditions*, Boulder: Shambhala.

Indigenous peoples can teach us a lot. And Buddhism, for example, is older - and wiser in many ways - than our Western Christian culture. Its knowledge is based on a profound science of mind and it has a developed understanding of its karmic - or evolutionary - history. For instance, it is taught that 'Buddha' - awakened humanity - has 'turned the dharma wheel' at different times in history. The word 'dharma' - in Sanskrit - refers both to the teachings of the Buddha and to the reality of universal truth and law.

The 'first turning' consisted of the therapeutic and ethical teachings of the historical Shakyamuni Buddha in 600 BCE. These were followed by the 'second turning' in the second century CE, when *Mahayana* - the 'Great Vehicle' - added wisdom and compassion to the original, more individually oriented teachings of the early Theravada practices. A central concept of the Mahayana view was 'emptiness', - *shunyata*, - meaning openness to the infinite and boundless. The spirit of Mahayana was expounded in the *prajna-paramita* sutras - wisdom 'beyond' teachings - particularly the writings of Nagarjuna, the great Indian sage. The 'third turning' was in the fourth to the sixth centuries CE, when the *Vijnanavada*, or *Yogachara* - 'application of yoga' - 'mind-only' school was established. It was led by the Indian brothers, Asanga and Vasubandhu, and focussed on the themes of consciousness and Buddha nature.

The 'fourth turning', taking place today, is not just a Buddhist experience but a global phenomenon stimulated by the mutual challenges - and potential integration - of far-eastern perennial thought and the sciences - natural and human - of the West. Western science is a fragmented knowledge and the political values of the eighteenth century European Enlightenment - liberty, equality, fraternity and the 'dream of reason' - are now, fatally, too anthropocentric and culturally narcissistic. The perennial and ageless truths of Buddhism may provide the counterbalance to the excesses of twentieth century Western consumerist and material values. At the same time, nonetheless, the discovery of the reasoning intellectual mind, the power and dignity of the human ego, and the social and political ethics of the European Enlightenment are a challenge to a fundamental Buddhist tradition that has not changed much for over a thousand years.

Perhaps there is a resonance between the quantum revolution of early twentieth century physics and the 'emptiness' teachings of Nagarjuna in second century India. Also the consciousness-only teachings of the third-turning Yogacharan school are reflected in our interest today in neuro-science on the one hand and mindfulness and subjective realities

on the other. Central to Western civilisation is the split between 'objective' material science and our understanding of human nature from a psychological view. Traditional objective science has viewed the universe as a mechanical phenomenon but, at the same time, the human sciences have tended to consider 'human nature' as an autonomous, fixed and unchanging entity.

The climate crisis offers us in the psychology world an opportunity in fact to reframe our most cherished views. Cognitive and behavioural approaches could begin to consider the meaning and mystery of all life - to be explored at the same time in our subjective experience - while material science could step down from its arrogance and customary hubris where knowledge is concerned. But so also could the 'depth psychologies' begin to look again at their own theories and practice. We could start, for instance, by re-thinking the concept of 'the Unconscious' and exploring again the relationship between conscious and unconscious processes. This would also imply changes to our understanding of 'boundaries'.

We might, for instance, think about 'height' and 'width' - as well as 'depth' - as dimensions of the human psyche. Height, as subtle - even spiritual - consciousness, reframes depth. It allows depth to go deeper still. In fact the two can be thought of as a continuum, since height and depth define each other. Similarly, width - as, for example, in ecological awareness - adds greater substance to the human mind. 'The Unconscious' may be thought to have a horizontal dimension, as well as a vertical one. All three - depth, height, and width - could be considered a unity.

Perhaps, in the idea of a fourth turning of the dharma wheel today, we really are resonating with the historical three in the East that preceded it, between 600 BCE and 700 CE, comprising a transition that, in the words of the American political writer, Naomi Klein, "changes everything". In the third century *Sandhinirmochanasutra* - 'Scripture Unlocking the Mysteries' - the sutra from which the Yogacharan school - and the Zen and Tibetan traditions, which came after - drew inspiration, there is the idea of 'the three natures' of human consciousness - the imaginary nature, the interdependent, and the perfect, fulfilled nature.² Perhaps we are beginning to rediscover these three natures - the 'imaginary' individual, personal self, the other-dependent, ecological self, and the

² See chapter 5, 'Essencelessness', in Cleary, T's 1995 translation of this difficult sutra, *Buddhist Yoga: A Comprehensive Course*, Boston: Shambhala.

timeless, unconditioned Self the perennial teachings write of.³ Perhaps we can see this in the studies on consciousness that are beginning to appear in our own psychological community.

Everything begins, of course, with right understanding and right ethics. First, we need to understand how we have brought all life on Earth to the brink of extinction. An impressive depth psychological analysis of this, *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis* by the psychoanalyst, Sally Weintrobe, tells the story of a fundamental struggle between an uncaring and caring imagination.⁴ Weintrobe argues that achieving the shift from one to the other requires us to stop colluding with the 'Exceptionalism', by which modern Western man feels entitled to the lion's share of material wealth and can "rearrange reality with magical omnipotent thinking whenever reality limits their felt entitlements". We have reached the limits of 'the culture of uncare' and, as the climate bubble bursts, we are forced to face our feelings and to look for 'frameworks of care' and 'the power of love' to contain our Exceptionalism.⁵ As in the first turning of the dharma wheel - Shakyamuni Buddha's historical teachings - the emphasis is on right living and healing.

At the same time enlightenment is central. Examples of the new framework are appearing. While twentieth century modern therapies remain bound to a more solipsistic view of human nature, there are signs everywhere that people in the West are beginning to look beyond it. *Climate Crisis and Consciousness*, subtitled *Re-imagining Our World and Ourselves*, is the title of a book written and published by Sally Gillespie, an Australian, trained in Jungian depth psychology.⁶ In her introduction she tells about a 'sea change' in her thinking in 2010 when she embarked on a Ph.D investigating the relationship between psychotherapy and climate change and convened a research group of people from

³ The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's re-ordering of psychoanalysis in terms of his three registers of 'The Imaginary, The Symbolic and the Real' bears some resemblance to 'the three natures' of the *Sandinirmochanasutra*. In his approach, it is as if Lacan turned psychoanalysis inside out and thereby made it more accessible to disciplines outside psychology.

⁴ Weintrobe, S., 2021, *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare*, New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁵ See *ibid.* Part Eight: 'The New Caring Imagination Today'. Interestingly, the book caught the eye of Bill McKibben, who included a substantial account of it in an article in the *New Yorker* ('The Particular Psychology of Destroying a Planet', May, 2021) and, as a result, he was linked up in a very thoughtful online discussion with Weintrobe and journalists, arranged by the North American branch of the CPA - 'A Conversation About Climate', 20 Sept 2021.

⁶ Gillespie, S., 2020, *Climate Crisis and Consciousness: Re-imagining Our World and Ourselves*, Abingdon: Routledge.

different walks of life to face and discuss honestly and openly their feelings about the climate emergency. She writes about ‘the collective sigh of relief around the room’ when members of the group began to discuss the emotional and psychological implications of climate change, and is of the firm view that, even to begin to tackle the climate crisis responsibly and effectively, ‘we need to engage in the work of changing consciousness’. In fact she has come to believe that engaging with climate change issues is ‘one of the most potent and compelling catalysts for psychological growth today’.⁷

Sally Gillespie’s career and writing focus on emotional resilience and action but also on ecological consciousness. Another recent book, written also by a psychotherapist trained in Jungian analytical psychology, is *Towards an Ecopsychotherapy* by Mary-Jayne Rust.⁸ In her Introduction she reminds us that “the web of life is not just a collection of beings but more like a continuum of earth-water-sky-tree-air-creatures-sun-human.” Trauma results when that continuum is disrupted, but a psychotherapy that honours the ecological nature of our lives can help to restore the balance. Ecopsychotherapy “include(s) our earth story, the continuum in which our human relationships sit.” In her interesting first chapter, “Practising therapy outdoors”, Rust offers her own account of how this might be imaginatively done, while still respecting the spirit of the boundaries and practicalities ‘indoors’ psychotherapy has established.

There is a vivid description of the experience of her initial ‘outdoors’ therapy, which was tentative and experimental. She relates how, sitting together in the forest, the silence between her client and herself was eased by ‘the conversation of birds and the wind in the leaves’. They then noticed how the tiniest of spiders had weaved a web between them, as though it was a bridge. They didn’t need to give words to this symbolic event. It was as if they had entered a state of shared mind that only outdoors nature could provide. “We both sat back into a very different kind of silence: contemplative, awestruck.”⁹ This kind of therapy may not be for everyone. Its success depended on Mary-Jayne Rust’s own feeling for nature in the first place, but it suggests that the contemplative spirit of outdoors nature may affect indoors therapy too.

⁷ Ibid. p 4

⁸ Rust, M-J, 2020, *Towards an Ecopsychotherapy*, London: Confer Books.

⁹ Ibid. p 11.

Enlightenment today is also questioning the dualist structures of modern conceptualised thought. Evidence of new thinking and traditional boundary challenges is growing. For instance, the psychoanalytic writer, Stephen Frosh, published his book on psycho-social interventions in 2010, *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic*.¹⁰ Psychoanalysis has always had a huge cultural impact, perhaps more than a clinical one. The clear distinction between outdoors and indoors therapy may not stand up to those of us who see them also as a continuum, a 'nonduality' in actual fact. But, of course, they need to be carefully thought of in respect of each other when drawing up guidelines for each.

Nick Totten, the body-mind psychotherapist, has also written and talked on this theme.¹¹ He has just published the second edition of his 2011 *Wild Therapy*, subtitled *Rewilding our inner and outer worlds*.¹² Again, we are beginning to reframe our traditional binaries and to question the reality of a clear boundary between them. Jay Griffiths, in her remarkable, best-selling *Wild: An Elemental Journey*, discovered in her travels that 'wild' places are home to the people that live there, gentle, even 'kind' places which can be a source of wisdom and real knowledge.¹³ Totten also celebrates wildness in global ecosystems as well as in the human psyche. In the modern West we have grown to equate the word 'wild' with dangerous, savage, crazy, and out of control descriptions. As Totten suggests, embracing unpredictability and boundlessness may be vital for our well-being and for all life in the present-day environment.

Indigenous cultures may teach us a great deal about our relationship with nature and what we have come to call 'the Environment'. We think of it as something that surrounds us, but, of course, it also lives within us. We are a part of the environment and the human mind is an integral product of nature. We may not think so at the moment but that is perhaps because we have lost awareness of who we essentially are. Modern man may

¹⁰ Frosh, S., 2010, *Psychoanalysis Outside the Clinic: Interventions in Psychosocial Studies*, palgrave macmillan

¹¹ See the interesting interview with Totten in the BACP magazine, *Therapy Today*, 'Rewilding Therapy' issue, November, 2021. Also included in this edition are two main feature articles, one is 'Breaking out of the climate bubble' by Linda Aspey and the other, 'Healing collective heartbreak' by Halina Pytlasinska.

¹² Totten, N., 2021, second edition, first published 2011, *Wild Therapy: Rewilding our outer and inner worlds*, Monmouth: PCSS books.

¹³ Griffiths, J., 2008, *Wild: An Elemental Journey*, London: Penguin.

feel estranged and alienated from the universe and cosmos out of which humanity has emerged, but other cultures can teach us how we might begin to integrate again.

Buddhism, with its many schools and traditions of thought and practice, is currently experiencing a renaissance in its engagement with Western natural and human science but has much to teach us at the same time. ¹⁴ While embodying the whole spirit of East Asian mind science, *buddha dharma* spread throughout the Eastern world, from its origins in India, to pervade and transform many cultures in Southern and Northern East Asia. The two traditions that are attracting particular attention in present times and influencing our thought in the post-modern West are Zen - Chinese Chan - and Tibetan Buddhism, though the basic teachings of all schools of mindful practice on suffering and its cessation are widely attractive today.

Someone who has written an impressive book about *Vijnanavada*, the third-turning Yogacharan school, is the Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hahn. Hahn has a reputation for writing a prolific number of books about simple mindfulness in all we do. But he was also a Buddhist scholar with a sound knowledge of all the schools of Buddhism - and a skilful exponent of them - from early Theravada to the subtle and paradoxical traditions of Chan and Zen. His book, *Understanding Our Mind*, is a translation and commentary on the auspicious *Thirty Verses* of the Indian sage, Vasubandhu, who, with Asanga, established the Yogachara school. ¹⁵

In *Understanding Our Mind* Hahn has in fact translated fifty of Vasubandhu's verses and offered us a systematic insight into the Yogacharan understanding of mind, all the more significant today because Yogachara offers an interpretation of the unconscious mind which extends beyond the personal subconscious, central to our modern culture. ¹⁶ The word 'unconscious' led us in the twentieth century to assume a mysterious, 'uncanny' world that we cannot know directly, only through dreams and the 'parapraxes' - Freudian slips - that Freud wrote about in his 1901 *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. The

¹⁴ See the many writings of Stephen Batchelor about the relevance of buddhism to the world today. See, especially, his 2015 *after buddhism: rethinking the dharma for a secular age*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

¹⁵ Hahn, T.N., 2006, *Understanding Our Mind*, Berkeley, California: Parallax Press.

¹⁶ See Waldron, W.S., 2003, *The Buddhist Unconscious: The alaya-vijnana in the context of Indian Buddhist thought*, London: Routledge.

Yogacharan school, in contrast, goes beyond 'free association' to teach a contemplative, or meditative, practice that offers direct knowledge of the universal 'Unconscious'.

As essentially a 'nondual' school, Yogachara thought of The Unconscious, not just as a repressed personal phenomenon but as a truly dynamic 'Store Consciousness'- not simply the universe as a 'stream of consciousness' but a river, a torrent, and an ocean - a storehouse which contained the 'seeds' - the potentials - of everything in, and beyond, the mind. In fact Hahn likens the active human mind - the 'mindful' mind - to a gardener, who, through following a contemplative practice, waters wholesome rather than unwholesome seeds. Moreover, these are teachings that not only provide an insight into primordial mind - human and other-than-human - but at the same time take account of the personal projective processes that have been analysed extensively in twentieth century depth psychological schools.

Vasubhandu, in Hahn's translation, begins with describing the nature of the store consciousness. In Sanskrit this is known as the *alaya-vijnana*. *Vijnana* means consciousness. *Alaya* is a difficult word to translate. 'Store' doesn't really do it justice. As Waldron points out, it has the meaning also of 'basal' and 'home' consciousness - the base of the other seven consciousnesses, ¹⁷ which Vasubandhu analyses as: the five senses; mind - which is also considered a sense in Buddhist thinking; and *manas*, which is the separate personal self, the human ego, and depends on the store consciousness. The latter is, in Waldron's words, a spontaneous 'awareness of unawareness' which the Indian Yogacharan Buddhists were able to describe and delineate in great detail. Hahn begins with the verses that treat of the *alaya* because it is the base and fundamental nature of the mind. It may be helpful to remember that 'seed' can be thought of as a potential, and leads eventually, of course, to a fruit that continues the life of the seed.

There isn't space here to go into the complexity and depth of Hahn's commentary, but the Yogacharan school - and its influence on the Zen and Tibetan traditions - might help us to reinterpret our understanding of 'the Unconscious' and the way in which our consciousness of it today is evolving. We hold human nature's industrial instincts to be responsible for climate change and mass extinction, but the development of the human ego and the discovery of reason were huge evolutionary steps at the time. Our error is to

¹⁷ Ibid. p xi of the Preface. And the 'Thematic Introduction: A Buddhist critique of the construction of self and world' sketches the main thesis of his book, pp 1-6. Ibid

imagine that our egoic mind reveals our essential nature. Today's challenge is to discover and realise the seed of our 'second' interdependent self before, as 'third-turning' Buddhism teaches, we can begin to see our fulfilled and complete 'nature', the fruit that is the original, essential and timeless Self - as well as being the key to our, and all life's, survival in this and the following centuries,

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