

## **Climate psychology and liberation: beyond grief and sorrow.**

‘He meditates on extinction but does not embrace extinction.....He meditates on Nonaction but continues always his acts of service and education’.

Thich Nhat Hahn, quoting from the *Vimalakirtinirdesa Sutra*,  
‘. ‘Not dwelling on the Nonconditioned’

‘Climate change’ is an umbrella term which covers the whole gamut of the ecological crisis, such as ocean warming, deforestation, and the mass extinction we are causing. But it also includes an existential crisis for us - ‘the human phenomenon’. We have all the technical knowledge we need to fix climate change. What’s stopping us, though, is ourselves. There may be many and complex reasons for this, but the essential one is because we do not know who, or what, we really are. Nor, even more mysteriously, do we know that we don’t know who we are.

This may, however, be changing as it dawns on us what may be emerging now from current consciousness. Traditional scientific evolutionary theory focuses solely on biological or material phenomena. But those who are aware of a human awakening suggest there is also a new step in consciousness as momentous as the emergence of life from matter and consciousness from life. It is a consciousness of consciousness itself, an awareness that goes beyond what has been available to the human mind up till now. It raises questions about the nature of real liberation

### **The “interesting” story of climate change**

On the opening page of Mike Hulme’s book *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*, it states:

Climate change is not a ‘problem’ waiting for a ‘solution’. It is an environmental, cultural and political phenomenon which is reshaping the way we think about ourselves, our societies and humanity’s place on Earth. <sup>1</sup>

Mike Hulme was Professor of Climate Change in the School of Environmental Services at the University of East Anglia in the U.K. and founding director of the Tyndall Centre for

Climate Change Research. In the preface to his book he presents climate change as an 'idea' as much as a physical phenomenon that can be observed and measured. It is now 'a social phenomenon' and our cultural, social, political and ethical practices are reinterpreting what it means. In the book he examines this 'mutating idea', seeing how from the different perspectives - "depending who one is and where one stands" - the unfolding idea of climate change means different things to different people and implies different courses of action.

The story of climate change is not one that begins in ignorance and ends in certainty. It is "much more interesting than that". It is a story about "the meeting of Nature and Culture and about how humans are central actors in both of these realms and about how we are continually creating and re-creating both Nature and Culture".<sup>2</sup> In his book Hulme reframes the question. We should ask ourselves not just what we can do about the climate emergency but how it changes us.

### ***Bardo***

The implications of climate change for human consciousness can be viewed from all sorts of angles. In 1998 B. Alan Wallace, a principal translator for the Dalai Lama, published a book, entitled *Natural Liberation: Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos* - in it he had translated Padmasambhava's own original book *The Profound Dharma of the Natural Liberation* with the help of Gyatrul Rinpoche, who also provided a commentary.<sup>3</sup>

Padmasambhava was an Indian Buddhist Tantric master, who helped bring Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century CE at the request of the Tibetan king, Trisong Detsen. Apart from his actual teaching and the founding of Buddhist monasteries, Padmasambhava, as Wallace describes in his introduction, "concealed many of his teachings in the manner of 'spiritual time-capsules' known as 'treasures'....to be gradually revealed over the centuries when human civilisation was ready to receive them".<sup>4</sup>

Wallace's 1998 *Natural Liberation* was the first English translation of this 'treasure', though it had been discovered and revealed in Tibet in the fourteenth century by Karma Lingpa who also revealed another of Padmasambhava's texts, known to us as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and which was partially translated and published by OUP as early as 1927 by the American scholar Evans-Wentz and Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup.<sup>5</sup> The latter was a companion text to *Natural Liberation* and its actual Tibetan title was *Bardo*

*Thoedal* - 'The Great Liberation by Hearing in the Intermediate States'. (*The Book of the Dead's* misleading title was chosen at the time because of the more popular *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Even in the complete and authoritative version, translated by Gyurme Dorje and edited by Graham Coleman in 2005, the original English title is retained, though the correct translation is also explained.)

Both texts dealt with the Tibetan notion of *bardo*, which means 'transition phase' or 'in between state'. What distinguishes the 1998 text is that it extended the meaning of *bardo* to apply it to transition stages in life itself, namely living, dreaming, and meditating, as well as to dying, death and rebirth. What I am suggesting is that the publication of *Natural Liberation* answers to the need we have to understand ourselves in a different way in this apocalyptic century. We are living in a major civilisational transition phase and, though living and dreaming were given much attention in the twentieth century, the focus on meditation and dying, as transformational - and potentially liberating - belong to this 21st century and are a more adequate response to the climate emergency.

### **Breathing and mindfulness**

Meditation is a contemplative discipline that begins with breath awareness, which is also the foundation of mindfulness, two practices that the contemporary Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hahn, has also taught and written about extensively. One of the best things to come out of the Vietnam war was the publication in 1975 of his classic, *Miracle of Mindfulness*. He has written many books but in 1988 he published *Breathe! You Are Alive*, which was a commentary on Shakyamani Buddha's original *Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*,<sup>6</sup> and then in 1993 he followed this up with *Transformation and Healing*, which, in turn, is a commentary on *The Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*.<sup>7</sup> In *Breathe! You Are Alive* he wrote:

Breathing is a means of awakening and maintaining full attention in order to look carefully, long, and deeply, see the nature of all things, and arrive at liberation.<sup>8</sup>

The 'transformational breath' movement today, which takes its inspiration partly from Thich Nhat Hahn, point out that many of us have learnt to breathe poorly - or 'incorrectly' - as a result of traumas in our upbringing.<sup>9</sup> Babies and young children breathe fully with their

bodies but, as we grow up we 'learn' to reduce breathing to parts, rather than the whole of our bodies. As a result, we lose the power and agency that deep breathing brings. But, as the literature on breathing insists today, full-body breathing can be recovered, past traumas can be re-experienced and understood, and a life of effectiveness and well-being achieved. Some even claim that learning to breathe properly in a few sessions is worth two years of psychotherapy! They clearly complement each other. Breathing helps us to 're-embodiment' ourselves, while psychotherapy also brings awareness of how we are 'embedded' in the many levels of our culture. Breathing, as the foundation of all contemplation, also opens us to the life of the spirit, which is the primordial ground of body and mind.

### **Breath and spirit**

As Donna Parhi, the yoga teacher, also says in her impressive *The Breathing Book*, 'the essential breath' is a potent elixir, which we have lost connection with.<sup>10</sup> Learning how to breathe fully again opens the door to a natural way of being and is our own natural energy resource. We have reduced breathing 'to a mere respiratory exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen' but, in Greek, *psyche pneuma* meant breath, soul, air and spirit and in Latin *anima spiritus* was breath and soul, while in Sanskrit, *prana* refers to the life force which death (when physical breathing stops) makes us more aware of. In short, to the ancients:

The breath was seen as a force that ran through mind, body, and spirit like a river running through a dry valley giving sustenance to everything in its course.<sup>11</sup>

Parhi also suggests most people today are unaware they breathe poorly. Many common illnesses, physical and mental, are the result. Correlations between breathing and the state of our body and mind have been understood for thousands of years in other cultures, for instance in ancient Taoism, in Yogic scriptures and in the medical practices of Indian Ayurveda and Chinese and Tibetan medicine. 'Breath therapy' is very effective for our physical and mental health, but calm and regular breathing supports us in whatever we do. Parhi again: "Integrated breathing can be the cornerstone for all other human movement patterns and processes, allowing us to be confidently engaged in the world".<sup>12</sup> No climate activist, one thinks, should be without it!

Breathing properly - full body breathing - is also the gateway to liberation. Breathing is not just something we do but a part of the nature of everything, a universal process of oscillation, as it were, to which animal - and human - breathing can attune itself. I have often thought that what science calls 'the big bang' was actually the first breath, the universe taking its first step in becoming manifest, a cosmic process of breathing that has continued for billennia - on a macro and micro scale - and which finds its expression in us today. Breath potentially connects us with all life.

## **Modern illusions**

Breathing is therefore a symbolic and mental, as well as physiological act. The mind breathes. It is constantly 'inhaling' and 'exhaling' and thereby renewing and liberating itself. We could free ourselves today - 'exhale' - from some of the more confused and obscure, or over-complicated, thinking of twentieth century thought. Truth may be approached by analysis and rational thought but it also has a simplicity which we have lost touch with. There are some illusions we are beginning to see through. Four of the principal ones are:

1. The assumption of the separate individual self.
2. The fact of an objective universe, separate from ourselves.
3. The fundamental reality of opposites.
4. Consciousness as a phenomenon of human beings alone.

1: Freud believed 'narcissism' to be the disorder of modern man yet still founded his psychoanalysis on the notion of the separate individual person. This was perhaps unavoidable for someone who believed "anatomy is destiny" and the body to be a fundamental reality of our identity. Yet, clearly, we are born into a family and a culture and our identity is essentially interdependent from the beginning. Body and mind can no longer be conceived only as individual attributes of our being.

2. The universe is assumed by science to be an objective given into which we are thrown at birth, but this assumption was questioned by the revolution of quantum mechanics in the early twentieth century. The more we examine the world, the more we realise it is stranger than we could imagine, and the more we appreciate that the world we see is not the world as it really is. The world as it appears is a product of our imaginations. You don't have to

have read Immanuel Kant to begin to understand that the universe we examine is also a phenomenon of our own minds.

3. We assume the world to be split in two - a material entity on the one hand and an object of the mind on the other. The modern axis of thought is a dualistic one - opposites are, in William Blake's words, 'contraries' and 'without them there is no progress'. Today they are viewed only in conflicting terms. But the modern mind fails to see that the universe is also a unity, has 'one taste' as the Buddhists say. Opposites are not just contrary but also a continuum. They are 'nondual'. They are complementary or, as Blake goes on to say, they are also 'a marriage'. Heaven and Earth are inextricable, as are all our mundane contraries. The new axis is, as the Neoplatonist Plotinus described it in the second century CE, 'the One and the Many'. We also know it in the relationship between the universal and the particular, unity and diversity, or in difference as connection.

4. Consciousness is not just a product of the brain or merely a phenomenon of the human mind. The universe evolved us, so it must also be the source or root of consciousness. As a supreme intelligence it is an infinite mystery to the cognitive mind. We cannot 'know' the universe but, as products of nature ourselves, we can share in its awareness. We can 'be' it. We 'are' it. We may have bodies and minds but we also have a spirit which sees beyond the opposites, particularly of the conscious and the unconscious. We cannot know the supreme, cognitively speaking, but we can realise our 'being' of it. In doing this, it is as if we are beginning to wake up to who, and what, we essentially are.

## **The big picture**

Liberation, then, is not 'of' the personal but 'from' the purely personal, to something absolute in us all. If we are really serious about tackling the climate emergency - in the existential and psychological, as well as technical sense - we must see that our view, and experience, of ourselves is changing. The twentieth century was a very violent one in which the industrial revolution conducted, not only a war on nature but enabled us to create weapons of mass destruction to use on ourselves. The slaughter was unprecedented, and it's as if we are still in a post-traumatic state, from which grief and sorrow are an all too understandable response. The modern practice of psychotherapy, for example, has sometimes seemed like a form of bereavement counselling rather than a true exploration of mind. But, as Gautama Buddha counselled, the fact of our suffering and

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sorrow has to come before we realise its cessation.

If we think in terms of the 21st century as a *bardo* - the transition phase of our time - then the major change is from modern and analytic thinking to a post-modern and integrative view, or from a purely scientific culture to an ecological one. This implies a transition from a specialist consciousness, where detail is relentlessly pursued, to a mandalic consciousness which also has a big picture focus, a unifying view in which we can see the wood as well as the trees. We can think in terms of both *either/or* and *both/and*.

But one might ask where this new holistic view comes from. It is there in us all of course, but, perhaps, we in the modern Western world need some help from outside to see it. Hence the interest today in non-occidental and global cultures. The modern Chinese, for instance, could be said to have done the world a favour by invading Tibet and unwittingly encouraging a global Tibetan teaching diaspora.

## **Beyond suffering**

Buddhism accepts the truth of suffering as the universal experience of us all, but what is sometimes forgotten is that it also teaches the end of suffering and even a way to realise what it calls 'the four immeasurables' or divine qualities within us. In Hindu Vedanta these were known as the *Brahma-vihara*, or 'divine states of dwelling', four positive states of mind that could be realised in meditation and radiated out in all directions, for the benefit of the meditator and all those who are the object of the meditation.

These four immeasurables are known as: limitless **kindness** (*maitri*) towards all beings, limitless **compassion** (*karuna*) toward those who are suffering, limitless **sympathetic joy** (*mudita*) particularly over the release of others from suffering, limitless **equanimity** (*upeksha*) toward friend and foe alike. <sup>13</sup>

*Maitri* is sometimes translated as 'loving kindness', a phrase that can seem rather meek in English, but 'love' is based on the understanding of the unity of all things and 'kindness' on our essential identity with each other. It is not just physical or emotional desire but goes much deeper. *Karuna* (compassion) is something we understand well, though it is complemented by the other three qualities and is best practised with true wisdom. *Mudita* (sympathetic joy) is often too little understood or appreciated. Joy sometimes seems

conspicuously absent from the modern psychotherapeutic project. *Upeksha* (equanimity) may be difficult to realise in a strongly competitive culture where hostility towards the 'enemy' is conditioned in us, but it is an essential quality we all potentially have. These qualities are to be found universally in cultures around the world now and throughout history, despite the wars and violence that currently seem so prominent.

The issues of climate change challenge us in so many ways. The Dalai Lama even thought our response to the climate emergency could result in the realisation of our true human potential.<sup>14</sup> It may seem paradoxical that it can liberate us. But the message of the perennial wisdom - in all its forms - is that we should live - and act - without thought for tomorrow. If the only true time is now - 'the living present' - and the future is an anticipation from this present, then the future will look after itself if only we live with real integrity now. This is the way of natural liberation.

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## References

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<sup>1</sup> Hulme, M, 2008 *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*, Cambridge University Press, UK.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p xxviii

<sup>3</sup> Wallace, B. Alan, 1998, *Natural Liberation: Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos*, translation by Wallace, commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche, Boston: Wisdom

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p x

<sup>5</sup> Evans-Wentz, W.Y. compiler and editor, 1960 (1927) *The Tibetan Book of the Dead, or The After-Death Experience on the Bardo Plane, according to Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup's English Rendering*, London: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Hahn, Thich Nhat, 1990 (1988), *Breathe! You Are Alive: Sutra On the Full Awareness of Breathing*, London: Rider.

<sup>7</sup> Hahn, Thich Nhat, 1993, *Transformation and Healing: The Sutra on the Establishment of Mindfulness*, London: Rider

<sup>8</sup> Hahn, 1990 p 22

<sup>9</sup> See, in the States, Kravitz, J., 2002, *Breathe Deep, Laugh Loudly: the joy of transformational breathing*, Sandwich, NH: Free Breath Press, and in the UK, Dennis, R., 2017, *And Breathe: the complete guide to conscious breathing for health and happiness*, New York: Da Capo Press

<sup>10</sup> Farhi, D., 1996, *The Breathing Book: Good Health and Vitality Through Essential Breath Work*, New York: St Martin's Essentials

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p 5



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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p 8

<sup>13</sup> See the *Brahma-vihara* entry in Fisher-Schreibur, I. et al, 1994, *The Encyclopaedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion: Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Zen*, Boston: Shambhala.

<sup>14</sup> See The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, 2009, 'Mind, Heart, and Nature. Universal Responsibility and the Climate Emergency' in John Stanley, David R Loy, and Gyurme Dorje (Ed.s) *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*, Boston: Wisdom Publications.