

Article

Buddhist Praxis toward Global Healing—Cultivating Clarity, Wisdom, and Kinship

Ruben Habito

Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75205, USA; rhabito@smu.edu

Abstract: Our twenty-first century global society is in critical condition, with intertwined symptoms including ecological deterioration verging on ecosystem collapse; polarization of the human community across racial, ethnic, religious, ideological, and other lines, triggering violent conflicts on different levels; and gross inequality in economic status and opportunity, with many needlessly losing their lives due to hunger and malnutrition, and impoverished multitudes consigned to living in dehumanizing conditions. Taking the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha as a therapeutic approach to our dis-eased human condition, we examine symptoms of our Earth community's severely disjointed condition, tracing their root causes to the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion, as manifested in the personal and in the collective, structural/institutional levels of our being. Eradication of these causes would usher in a wholesome and sustainable way of life for us all. The Buddha's Eightfold Path is taken up as a strategic approach to global healing, transposing guidelines for personal spiritual practice into the socio-ecological dimension. This essay is offered not only for Buddhists but for all people of good will, of different religious backgrounds or none, who seek to live in a wholesome, sustainable, and awakened way together in one Earth community.

Keywords: ecological crisis; tribalism; inequality; global *dukkha*; institutional greed; institutional ill will; institutional delusion; Doughnut Economics; Four Ennobling Truths; Eightfold Path; *samatha*; *vipassanā*; *samādhi*; Zen; Insight meditation; kinship



Citation: Habito, Ruben. 2022. Buddhist Praxis toward Global Healing—Cultivating Clarity, Wisdom, and Kinship. *Religions* 13: 315. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040315>

Academic Editor: Deborah Orr

Received: 27 December 2021

Accepted: 31 March 2022

Published: 2 April 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

“The environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis.” This is a quote from Thomas Berry, a Catholic priest, cultural critic and prophet of the late twentieth century.

Noted linguist, social critic, and philosopher, Noam Chomsky, in an interview in September of 2020, declared about our times that “the world is at the most dangerous moment in human history.” (Eaton 2020).

Chomsky was referring specifically to the climate crisis, compounded with the ongoing threat of nuclear war and the rise of authoritarianism in different parts of the world, which together pose a threat to our global survival, a threat which has risen to an alarming degree in recent years.

David Loy, Buddhist philosopher and Zen Teacher, cited Chomsky's ominous statement above at a recent International Dharma Teachers' Conference (held virtually, 21–24 October 2021), with over one hundred participants from different traditions, including Theravāda, Tibetan, Chan/Zen, Pure Land, Nichiren (Lotus), and other Buddhist practice lineages. Loy was inviting those present to take a fresh look at Buddhist teaching and praxis, and to consider how these could address the multiple threats to our global community.

Backed by his lifelong (Zen) Buddhist practice, scholarly reflection, and active engagement in ecological healing, Loy coined the term “Ecodharma”; the term is now accepted in common parlance as a contemporary development in Buddhist thinking that looks to resources found in Buddhist tradition to address the acute ecological crisis facing our world today. The background of this term involves an enriched understanding of the science of ecology, combined with a view of Buddhist dharma as liberating praxis (Loy 2019). In

another work, Loy also presents proposals for a Buddhist social theory that takes traditional teachings from a level of spiritual practice for personal liberation, transformation, and awakening toward the socio-ecological dimension, as keys for global awakening through the transformation of social structures and institutions (Loy 2003).

In a keynote speech at the same International Dharma Teachers' Conference, Bhikkhu Bodhi—a prominent American Theravāda Buddhist monk who is also the founder of Buddhist Global Relief, an international organization of socially engaged Buddhists with a mission to combat chronic hunger and malnutrition worldwide—challenged the participants in the audience to incorporate the following two urgent tasks into their role as Buddhist teachers: (1) to establish the social and economic conditions essential for everyone on this planet to live a life of dignity and purpose" and (2) To safeguard the natural environment on which we depend from irreversible damage, especially through climate destabilization.¹

In laying out a concrete vision of such a global order that would fulfill these two urgent tasks, Bhikkhu Bodhi proposed the vision of Doughnut Economics, mapped out by British economist Kate Raworth; this vision opens up a path wherein we would all be able move together from our present crisis toward a scenario wherein everyone may be able to live a life with dignity and purpose, and in an ecologically sound way that would sustain Earth's ecosystem for a long future (Raworth 2017)².

Another Buddhist teacher, Dharma Master Hsin Tao of Taiwan, who practiced meditation in a cave for many years, came out of his period of solitary practice and took bold initiatives in addressing global issues, which he ascribes to the fruits of his meditative practice. (Habito 2016) He gathered the support of many followers to establish a Museum of World Religions in Taipei, the capital city of Taiwan, with the mission of "inspiring and encouraging interfaith dialogue so we will all work together to create peace and understanding in the world we share."³ Through the help of his growing number of followers in international locations, Dharma Master Hsin Tao also established the "Global Family for Love and Peace", an organization that "works to transform the power of love into action through intercultural and interfaith dialogue, activities related to the United Nations Culture of Peace and the International Day of Peace, and peace education."⁴ More recently, moved by the deepening ecological crisis facing our Earth community and realizing the role of the education of youth in remaking the future of Earth, he has gathered scholars, religious practitioners, and supporters, and focuses his efforts toward the establishment of a University for Life and Peace; the aim is to establish an institute of higher learning whose main purpose is to bring Buddhist teachings and spiritual practice to action for the wellbeing of Earth and its inhabitants, to be taught to incoming generations.⁵

Joanna Macy is another person who stands out as bringing her spiritual practice from the meditation cushion to the messy field of socio-ecological activism. A renowned Buddhist activist, spiritual guide, and author, Macy, early in her career, studied the socially engaged Buddhist world view and praxis of the Sarvodaya Sramadāna Movement in Sri Lanka, founded by Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne (Macy 1985). She develops her thought by comparing the Buddhist vision of an interconnected reality with General Systems Theory, and presents an insightful picture of our current world based on an interface between Western science and ancient Buddhist wisdom (Macy 1991). Her keynote work, *World as Lover, World as Self*—integrating her insights into deep ecology, General Systems Theory, and the Buddhist understanding of the universe as an intimately interconnected reality—provides a scenario of a world wherein destructive, conflictual, and unjust attitudes have been overturned, giving way to a creative, harmonious, just and sustainable world (Macy 2021).

There are many other socially engaged Buddhists who show us the way forward in bringing Buddhist teaching and praxis from the level of individual personal practice to exploring their implications in socio-economic, political, and ecological engagement, toward transformation (See Fuller 2021; Gleig 2021; Queen 2000; Queen and King 1996).⁶

This essay takes the therapeutic method of the Four Ennobling Truths as a grid to explore ways in which we might collectively work together toward the alleviation and

overcoming of our global malaise. In undertaking this task, we will first lay out symptoms of our collective dis-ease, which we can refer to as global *dukkha*. Secondly, we will trace the root causes of this ailing condition to the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion; we will explore them at the collective, structural, and institutional levels, in addition to their effects of our individual personal lives. Thirdly, we will explore scenarios of a “healed” global society, that is, one that is equitable and just, compassionate, and sustainable. As a fourth step in forging a pathway towards an awakened global community, we will look at some guidelines for praxis developed in the Buddha’s Eightfold Path; we will highlight the eighth step, which entails the practice of Buddhist meditation in various forms, toward cultivating the “wisdom of seeing things as they are”, and bringing forth a heart of compassion that would inspire and empower an active stance of engagement with the affairs of the world.⁷ This is a path involving an integrated vision of personal and socio-ecological transformation, bringing forth fruits in the well-being of all, beginning with one’s own.

This vision and aspiration toward the well-being of all is encapsulated in a verse from the Pāli scriptures, often recited in Buddhist communities in different parts of the world and contained in the Sutta on Lovingkindness (*Mettā Sutta*): *Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittatā!* which is translated to “May all beings be well! May all beings be at ease!”

This essay, while using Buddhist terminology and conceptual frameworks to convey its key points, is offered not only to Buddhists but to all people of good will of different religious backgrounds or none, who aspire toward a personal and collective way of life that may bring about a wholesome, sustainable, and awakened Earth community.

2. Global *Dukkha*: A Survey of Our Twenty-First Century Earth Community

That our Earth community is in an acutely dysfunctional state is a matter that no-one can dispute. Taking a term from the Buddhist tradition as our point of take-off, we can say that we are enmeshed in *dukkha* of global proportions. *Dukkha* (*duhkha* in Sanskrit) is a term in Pāli, a Middle Indo-Aryan language in which the early scriptural texts of Buddhism were transcribed and handed down for posterity. This is the first of the Four Ennobling Truths taught by the Buddha; it is often translated as “suffering”, but more appropriately refers to a condition that is “dis-eased”, “dysfunctional”, or “dissatisfactory”⁸. This word is a compound comprising of two elements, *-kha*, an Aryan word originally meaning “axle hole” (i.e., of a wheel), and “*duh/duk*”, a prefix which means “wrongly” or “badly.” *Dukkha* then refers, in concrete imagery, to a wheel whereby the axle hole is badly or wrongly aligned, such that it will not roll or move forward or function properly as a wheel; this causes dislocation and vexation, derailing riders from where they want to go, and even possibly falling in a ditch by the wayside! Its antonym would be *sukha*, from the Sanskrit/Pāli prefix *su-* meaning “good, well, right”; it refers to a situation wherein the axle hole is properly aligned and centered, allowing the wheel to rotate without obstruction and roll along smoothly on its journey. The term *sukha* is used in early Buddhist scriptural texts to refer to a desirable state of well-being, a place of ease and inner peace.

The current situation of our Earth community can be characterized as global *dukkha*, a woundedness of global proportions that cries for healing, with three prominent features that clamor for radical transformation.

First, we are living our individual and collective, interconnected lives in the midst of a rapidly deteriorating ecosystem, decimating and killing off thousands of living species annually, and threatening our very survival as a human species. We are experiencing climate change to the extent that if nothing is done to change our course, there will be catastrophic outcomes that will occur within the next few decades. Needless to say, this is a crisis of first magnitude that calls for all hands on deck to address it.

Secondly, there is a felt and pervasive animosity and hostility between segments of the human community, based on national, racial, ethnic, gender, class, religious, and other differences, leading to a sense of insecurity felt on different levels. Underlying all of this is a mentality that can be described as tribalistic—that is, characterized by an “us vs. them”

attitude that sharply separates our human community into factions, and often erupts in violent confrontations or attacks against those perceived as outside one's own grouping (Newby 2020; Wright 2020; Zelman 2015). Given the fact that some powerful nation-states possess the capacity to use nuclear weapons, situations may build up that make their detonation possible on short notice at any given time, with cataclysmic repercussions for the entire Earth community.

Thirdly, there is gross inequality among the inhabitants of the planet in terms of economic status and opportunity. The top 1% of all households own 43% of the total wealth of the world, while the bottom 50% owns only 1%.⁹ In short, while a small segment of our human community is able to wallow in luxury and wasteful lifestyles, vast numbers of the human population continue to live in abject and dehumanizing poverty, and are deprived of their basic right to a decent human life—a situation of “injustice that cries out to heaven.”¹⁰

All of this does not yet consider the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic that has swept the face of Earth since late 2019, having taken the lives of more than five million people globally since its inception, and still counting. The pandemic has particularly taken its toll on the poorer segments of the population in different countries of the world and has, thus, served to heighten the inequality and class divides among the haves and the have-nots of the world.¹¹

Let us look at these symptoms of our acute global malaise outlined above in greater detail.

(a) Deterioration of our Earth's Ecosystem

One looming threat over our collective existence on this planet is the impending collapse of our Earth's ecosystem. The maintenance of our current lifestyles and modes of production and consumption is supported by the rapacious destruction of vast areas of our natural habitat on the one hand, and the dumping of massive amounts of toxic waste on the land, in oceans, and in the atmosphere, on the other. The latter includes the release of the greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, and other gases) that trap the heat in the atmosphere, thus leading to the phenomenon of climate change, with its dire consequences manifesting in the rise of sea levels and catastrophic disasters in different regions of the planet. In this rapidly deteriorating situation, we are already witnessing the loss of our biodiversity due to the death of thousands of living species per year.¹²

In stark terms, we are on the verge of a veritable ecocide, and it is not an exaggeration to say that the very survival of our own human species—acknowledged to be the one most responsible for all of the destructive effects on the ecosystem—is under threat, given all that is happening.

A United Nations Climate Change conference (called COP26) held in Glasgow, Scotland in October 2021—with twenty-five thousand delegates from almost 200 countries, including around 120 heads of state participating—elicited pledges from participating nation states to take steps to mitigate climate change. The event was covered widely in the media, and called the attention of the people of the world to the seriousness of our global ecological crisis.¹³

Other aspects of this rapidly deteriorating ecological situation include the quality depletion and pollution of air, water, and soil; the destruction of the natural habitats necessary for maintaining life; the extinction of wildlife; the desertification of arable lands; the destruction of the oceans through the dumping of voluminous amounts of pesticides and other chemicals used in agriculture; the dumping of sewage and toxic wastes from factories; and the dumping of millions of tons of plastic each year, leading to the suffocation and death of marine life, among others.

All of these features combined make up a scenario that brings our Earth community closer to catastrophic scenarios of global proportions, unless steps are taken to change the course of this path toward destruction. We can compare our situation to a large steamship called Mother Earth, wherein the passengers and crew gradually come to realize that the

ship is moving headlong in the disastrous direction of colliding with a huge iceberg, and thus, needs a radical change of course to ensure the survival of all on the ship. *We are those passengers*, and unless we get our act together, collectively, as a global community, this will soon be close to impossible.

(b) Mutual Animosity Among the Human Population

A second feature of our global situation presents a major challenge to such decisive collective action. Our global community is fragmented into factions or sectors at odds and in various degrees of conflict with one another, based on many factors including ideology, race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality, and a host of many others. This fragmentation is manifested in various ways, and at its core is a mentality that is described as “tribalism.” This is a human penchant, also detectable in our primate ancestors, toward wanting to identify with and belong to a group; it is likely to quell an inner sense of insecurity at being left alone in the world, isolated and alienated from others from whom one seeks approval and affirmation, giving one a sense of togetherness with and of belonging to a larger entity. “Once people connect with a group, they can become powerfully bound to it. They will seek to benefit members of their group even when they gain nothing personally. They will penalize outsiders, seemingly gratuitously. They will sacrifice, and even kill and die, for their group.” (Chua 2018).

In his work, *Tribalism: An Existential Threat to Humanity*, author Ron Newby ascribes this tribalistic mentality to genetic traits that generate fear, aggression, greed, prejudice, but conversely, also moral behavior as well as compassion toward others; these are elements that influence human decisions in social relationships, with consequences in the economic, political, and ecological realms (Newby 2020).

This genetically ingrained “us vs. them” mentality is also behind many of the problematic features characterizing our contemporary societies, including issues of racial injustice and discrimination, gender and sexuality, class, and others; these divide us into factions based on the side with which we identify or are identified, or with which we ally ourselves. The different factions formed by these identifications and alliances tend to bear animosity toward “those others”, which can erupt into incidents of conflict and violence.

This tribalistic mentality can readily be pointed out as being behind populist or supremacist movements that lend themselves to authoritarianism, wherein people who feel threatened by “those others” tend to seek strong leaders or rulers who will act decisively in favor of their tribal goals, which does not exclude the elimination of those perceived as outside the tribe.

In the political realm, the sharp divisions between the “right” and the “left”, including the categorizations of “far right” or “extreme left”, can be seen in the light of this tribalistic mentality, in encounters marked by antagonism and passive or aggressive hostility vis-à-vis the other side; this makes it extremely difficult to convince the differing sides to even sit down and talk to one another in civil ways that could pave the way for cooperative ventures. Instead of civil conversation toward the resolution of differences through negotiations that entail give-and-take on both sides, public protests and demonstrations, often resulting in violent confrontations and expressions, are resorted to as a way of conveying one’s own group’s specific demands and goals.

The global political scene is marked by alignments that sharply demarcate the opposing sides, making it a constant challenge to finding diplomatic means of solving international conflicts and tensions. All of these tensions and animosities among nation-states make the different sides feel the urgent need for military strength and a build-up of arms, in the name of “self-defense” from “those others”, further fanning an aggressive stance toward one’s perceived enemies. The fact that there are a number of countries (the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, China, and more recently, India, Pakistan, and North Korea) that possess the capacity to detonate nuclear weapons, with a few others in a frantic race to develop this capacity themselves, imposes an ongoing threat to all of the inhabitants of this Earth community. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, still very much in progress at the time of this writing, exemplifies this danger in which we

are all enmeshed, and has heightened the possibility of a nuclear war that could possibly exterminate our entire global community.

(c) Gross Inequality in Distribution of Wealth

A third feature of the dissatisfactory and dysfunctional characteristics of our global society is the gross inequality that consigns hundreds of millions of our fellow human beings, or roughly one-tenth of the human population, to dehumanizing conditions of life; they are besieged by chronic hunger and malnutrition, and a lack of clean water, access to health-care, a decent place of shelter, and a modicum of education. Meanwhile, a very small minority—less than one percent—spend their lives in extravagant excess and luxury, using up a large portion of the world's resources as they do so.

Statistical data from the year 2018 report that roughly nine million people across the world die of hunger and malnutrition each year, a daily count of twenty-five thousand, or a little over one thousand each hour of the day.¹⁴ Nearly half of these deaths are of children under the age of 5. The same website that reports this death count also notes that this number is more than that of those who die of AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, combined. Although rates of hunger had been falling since the 1990, these have picked up again since 2015, according to the same source. Another angle that brings this statistical fact into greater light is that the number of those dying from hunger and malnutrition daily is more than eight times the number of those killed in the murderous attacks on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001.

British Economist Kate Raworth suggests that humanity's greatest challenge for our twenty-first century is "to meet the human rights of all peoples within the capacity of Earth's life support system."¹⁵ This includes the basic rights to food, clean water, a basic livable income, education, health care, gender equality, social equity, the right to have a voice in society, and so on, which Raworth lists as the key elements of humanity's social foundation (Raworth 2017).

Forbes magazine reports that in 2021, there were 29 billionaires in the world whose net worth totaled more than USD 50 billion each, with the top ten of these owning over USD 100 billion. The report also notes that due to several economic factors that favor them, many of these billionaires have gained even more during the pandemic.

According to US State Department data, the world's military expenditure amounted to almost USD 3 trillion per year in 2017, having seen a dramatic increase in the ten years since 2007 when it was estimated to be between USD 1.5 trillion and USD 2.15 trillion. The US alone spent USD 766 billion in 2020, a reported "decrease" from 2010 when the amount was USD 865 billion.¹⁶

Ideally, diverting but a fraction of this military expenditure and directing the amount toward solving world hunger seems to be an obvious solution, but alas, the actualities of our real-life situations do not easily lend themselves to such a resolution.

Inequality, one might argue, has been a feature of human societies since ancient times, and our twenty-first century global society is not at all notable in this regard. One might even ironically cite "The poor you shall always have with you", a classic remark of Jesus in the New Testament (Matthew 26:11). In response to this, the issue of our time is that given the abundance of resources—coupled with the technological advances of recent decades and with the process of "globalization" enabling ready access to almost any place on our planet as desired—it is hard to find an excuse for allowing so many of our fellow human beings to be consigned to such dehumanization and death that could have been avoided otherwise.

This is not, of course, a matter of simply doling out the money; rather, it would entail a process that would bring about the transformation of social, economic, political, and educational structures—as well as of other structures and institutions that are part and parcel of our collective lives as a human community—toward greater equity and justice and the protection and assurance of each human being's fundamental rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness".

In summarizing our bird's eye view of our current global *dukkha*, we have highlighted the escalating destruction of our Earth's ecosystem nearing a point of no return; the fragmentation of the human community into tribal units at odds and in ongoing conflict with one another; and the acute inequality in the distribution of resources that consign a significant number of our fellow human beings to dehumanization and needless loss of life. Is there another way of conducting our collective life on the planet that might ensure the continuance and sustainability of Earth's ecosystem, wherein we could all live together in peace and harmony and general goodwill toward all, and wherein everyone is assured the basic necessities to live a decent and honorable human life? We will first need to look at the causes of this deplorable situation in which we find ourselves.

3. Tracing the Roots of Our Global *Dukkha*

The second of the Four Ennobling Truths laid out by the Buddha is about tracing the root causes of our dissatisfactory human condition. This is our task in this section, wherein we take our hints from the Buddha's exposition of these root causes, seeking to apply them in the concrete of Earth's current dysfunctional state of affairs laid out in the previous section.

The key term used in the Buddha's discourse about the root cause of human dis-ease and dysfunction is "craving" (*trsnā* in Sanskrit, or *tanhā* in Pāli). This is a state of mind and is described as "thirsting for" or an "eager longing for" something that will satisfy an inner lack, a perceived "hole" in the core of our being that drives us to "incessant efforts to fill that hole up." (Loy 2018, p. 27).

David Loy focuses on this sense of "lack" in describing an existential problem of human existence, based on the delusion of the nature of the self (Loy 2018). This sense of lack brings with it anxiety, fear, restlessness, and a sense of insecurity that seeks to be quenched.

It is in the attempt to quench this inner thirst that the "three poisons" come into play—greed, ill will, and delusion. These three are intertwined in causing the dysfunction and dissatisfactory condition of our individual human lives. There is a sense of lack and inadequacy within myself, which I am driven to fill by grasping for things I feel I need and do not yet have—material possessions, power, prestige, and fame. In my quest for these things to fill my sense of lack, I tend to regard other persons as my competitors, rivals vying for the same things, and at worst, as my enemies. As such, I tend to harbor animosity and hostility toward them, and become prone to attitudes and acts of aggression vis-à-vis those I consider my enemies. In doing so, they respond in kind toward me. All this is based on the fundamental delusion that I carry within me, of my "self" as something I need to claim to make "real", to affirm and assert vis-à-vis those other selves. The cycle continues, reinforcing all these forces that drive me to thoughts, words, and actions that are harmful to others, and also to myself.

The above is a short description of how the fundamental craving at the core of our being operates and generates the destructive forces of greed, ill will, and delusion, making our lives miserable and dissatisfactory.

David Loy transposes these elements that operate in our individual human lives to the collective, institutional level; this move provides the framework for his "Buddhist social theory." (Loy 2003). Institutionalized greed is manifested in "globalizing capitalism and the economic development of 'underdeveloped' societies" (chp. 2–4); institutionalized ill will in the American "war against terrorism", and the retributive criminal justice system (chp. 5, 6), as well as in the multinational military-industrial complex; and institutionalized delusion in the collective fascination with biotechnology, in the dualistic—not to mention instrumentalist—exploitative relations of human beings vis-à-vis Earth (chp. 8, 9), as well as in the profit-motivated manipulative strategies of the mass media that so greatly influence our ways of seeing and interpreting events before and around us.

In a detailed short essay summarizing the views he has developed in his many writings (Loy 2003, 2008, 2014, 2018), Loy poses the question, "[I]f the Buddha is correct that greed,

ill will, and delusion are the causes of our suffering, and if we have indeed institutionalized them . . . [h]as awakening to the nature of these three institutional poisons become just as important as the individual awakening”, in order for us to address and overcome the global *dukkha* that infects us all? (Loy 2014).

As we look around and consider the factors that motivate our attitudes and actions in the social, economic, political and other spheres of our societal life, the word “consumerism” comes up as a prominent feature. This can be said to be the “engine” that runs our social life, namely, the preoccupation with the acquisition of consumer goods, the more, the merrier, and on and on in an endless cycle.

The term “affluenza” has emerged in English parlance with the premiere of an American film with this title in 1997, presenting a diagnosis of our global illness, which is likened to a virus that has infected every member of our human society to various degrees. Its producer, John de Graaf, gave its definition in a later co-authored book as “a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.” (De Graaf et al. 2001, p. 36; cited in Kaza 2005, p. 1) It is this unceasing pursuit of more that drives human beings in lives characterized by continually grasping for material possessions, power, prestige, and more of these; it is an endless cycle which, as an end result, drives Earth toward destruction. Responding to this hankering for more consumer goods on the part of the general populace, corporations are fueled into various kinds of activities of production, marketing, and distribution, while also pouring large sums into advertising to lure people to buy their products.

The hankering for, and the acquisition of, more and more “stuff” never leads to contentment, but to the desire for *even more*; this is what drives corporations and enterprises to continue coming up with products that will feed this desire, leading to their rapacious harvesting of Earth’s natural resources, and in the course of production, the piling up of toxic wastes in the atmosphere, on land, and in the oceans. This is the *institutionalized greed* that propels the engine running this transnational, globalized, consumeristic society of ours.

From another angle, as our advanced technology has enabled almost instantaneous means of communication with multitudes of human beings across wide geographical distances—and electronic devices with Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and other forms of social media have become accessible to almost anyone across the globe—one would hope and expect that human beings would become closer and find a sense of community with one another. It is ironic and rather sad to note that with a number of intertwined factors at play, social media and the advanced means of communication available to us have only served to bring about greater alienation, polarization, and division among members of our human family.

This alienation and polarization is acutely felt in countries such as the United States and Western Europe, wherein the “right” and the “left” sides of the political spectrum grow further and further from one another on the basic issues of how to run their societies and who should belong to them. Differences in race and ethnicity, skin color, class, gender and sexuality, and other aspects come into play in determining the groupings.

The large influx of immigrants, from regions characterized by political, economic, and social instability, into these hitherto more stable and affluent countries is one key factor that has fanned this polarized situation; this polarization is based on what attitudes and policies to implement vis-à-vis the incoming groups, both at a private, individual level and on the level of public and governmental policy. In Europe for example, so-called far-right political groups have emerged with blatantly anti-immigrant attitudes, and their proposed policies have recently enabled them to attain their critical mass and, therefore, have some leverage on the political arena; these continue to gain support from more and more people.

In a growing number of countries, the emergence of authoritarian leaders with staunch groups of supporters has tended to exacerbate this polarization among the populace, with attitudes of hostility and animosity coming to the fore between the different sides of the divides.

Members of a society comprised of multitudes of individuals living in a highly technologized, information-based society—insecure about themselves and anxious about their safety and their future—tend to seek support and look for alliances among those whom they regard as being on their side; thus, they form their own “in-group” that demarcates them from “those others” who think (and vote) differently. This “us vs. them” mentality, also referred to as “tribalism”, has become a prominent feature of our contemporary society across and within national boundaries, and is a continuation of the same mentality that divided our global society into opposing camps based on ideological differences. In the post-Second-World-War society, there was the “Iron Curtain” vs. the “Free World”, and then the so-called “Third World” divide. Now, with new realignments formed in the last half-century, there are new divides that demarcate certain nations vis-à-vis others, and tensions continue to rise.

It is against this background of the ideological “divides” among nations that the conglomerate known as the “military–industrial complex” has continued to thrive, fed by the tribalistic mentality that breeds hostility and animosity against those of other tribes. In this regard, the existence of nuclear arsenals in the nine countries noted earlier, that are poised to use them, remains an ongoing danger and threat to the entire global community. This is a picture of a global system propelled by *institutionalized ill will* that affects and looms over all of the inhabitants of our Earth community.

Further, insofar as we human beings think and act in ways that are centered on our own little egoist selves, and see other beings and the rest of the world as outside of our circle of concern, this tribalistic “us vs. them” mentality holds sway over us. This is based on the fundamental delusion that we all carry, that we are independent beings that can stand on our own, not realizing the degree to which we depend on one another for our existence. Our individual delusions are lifted to an institutionalized level, as the means through which we receive our information and knowledge about the world and about the events around us—the media—are influenced by factors such as profit motive, or by political, ideological, or other factors.

To cite David Loy once more,

“The institution most responsible for moulding our collective sense of self is the media . . . Since they are profit-making institutions whose bottom line is advertising revenue, their main concern has to do with whatever maximizes those profits. It is never in their own interest to question the grip of consumerism. Thanks to clever advertisements, my son can learn to crave Nike shoes and Gap shirts without ever wondering about how they are made. I can satisfy my coffee and chocolate cravings without any awareness of the social conditions of the farmers who grow those commodities for me, and, even more disturbingly, without any consciousness of what is happening to the biosphere: global warming, disappearing rainforests, species extinction, and so forth.” (Loy 2014)

In short, *institutionalized delusion* prevents us from realizing how our individual and collective everyday decisions and actions have wide-ranging implications on what happens in other parts of the world.

These three institutionalized poisons together can be pinpointed as among the root causes of our global malaise. Eradicating these, or overturning them, would pave the way for a “more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.” (Eisenstein 2013).

4. The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible

It would be a relatively straightforward matter to conceptualize a scenario of global well-being, to tell the New Story our shared future, by simply describing a state of the world in which things are *not* as they are now, as explored in the two previous sections above.

This would be a world wherein we are *not* heading toward ecological destruction, a world whereby we human beings are collectively cognizant of what it takes to continue our interdependent lives together on this planet, in a sustainable manner, for generations to

come. This would mean halting the rampant destruction of forests, and instead planting more trees to raise the level of oxygen and other nutrients in the atmosphere; putting a stop to our use of fossil fuel products, which pile up carbon dioxide emissions into the atmosphere, thus reversing the disastrous effects of climate change; refraining from dumping toxic wastes into the land, air, and oceans, maintaining their natural freshness and beauty, as the matrix of our shared life on this planet.

This would be a world wherein we human beings would treat one another with respect and dignity, with acceptance of our differences, overturning animosity and hostility and, thus, enabling us to co-exist harmoniously on this one planet that we share as our common home. This would mean that groups of human beings with differing views and perspectives on fundamental matters would not resort to violence against one another, but would be open to negotiating in ways that would allow for co-existence and mutual thriving. In this vein, this would mean that nation-states would be able to deal with one another through diplomatic means, and together agree to renounce war as an instrument of national policy, “turning our swords into ploughshares”, as the prophet Isaiah foretold in the Hebrew scriptures.

This would be a world wherein no child would needlessly die of hunger and malnutrition, and no human being would be deprived of the basic needs to live a decent human life, including food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, the right to a meaningful occupation, and so on.

Taking the root causes of our global illness as laid out in our Buddhist-based analysis, this would be a world wherein *greed, ill will, and delusion* have been overcome; these would be overturned into their opposites, namely *generosity, goodwill, and wisdom that flows into compassion*, both on a personal, individual level, and on the institutional, collective levels of our life on Earth.

May we envision a world wherein consumerism is mitigated by moderation and a sense of contentment with what one has, instead of a system that keeps feeding the desire for more? A sense of contentment is what enables a person to be grateful for what one has, instead of continuing to covet more. It enables one to be generous and have a heart that can share one’s gifts with others who may have less, instead of comparing what one has—or does not have—with others. May we look to a world wherein animosity and hostility have given way to neighborliness and friendliness, and to mutual negotiation and cooperation instead of violent confrontation? In such a world, indeed, weapons of mutual destruction would no longer be seen as a means of resolving differences, and the military–industrial complex would lose its steam. The huge sums of money spent to fuel it could be used for improving agriculture, education, health care, and providing for human needs, instead of being used for destructive purposes such as the manufacture and sale of lethal weapons.

Indeed, “what a wonderful world this would be”, as the song goes. However, the realist and pragmatist in us raises its voice as we lay out such scenarios: are you kidding? Are you dreaming? Perhaps. However, echoing Martin Luther King, Jr., yes, “I have a dream.” And echoing the oft-repeated song of John Lennon, “Imagine! All the people living life in peace!”

Is this just an unrealizable dream of the idealist, romantic dreamer in us? Or can this be upheld before us as a possible scenario to which we human beings can aspire, and for which we can at least begin to take steps toward the realization of? There are visionaries among us who are also actively engaged in bringing us closer to such a dream, and who are leading the way in offering concrete steps for all of us to move in the direction of a different world in the making.

Following up on his inspirational work calling for a New Story of a different future, as cited in the subtitle of this section (Eisenstein 2013), Charles Eisenstein considers aspects that might contribute to building a regenerated living world for all of us, instead of the death-dealing world that we currently inhabit. He reflects on issues including the water paradigm; dealing with carbon from the point of view of ecosystems; regeneration of the

soil; issues in energy, population, and development; and money and debt, as he lists the elements involved in an ecological economy (Eisenstein 2018).

Kate Raworth, cited earlier, is an economist who challenges conventional economic thinking. She has proposed Doughnut Economics, an economic model that takes into account both human needs and planetary boundaries; with appropriate measures taken, she envisions a future wherein everyone on Earth has access to resources that satisfy their basic human needs, while maintaining sustainable ecological balance in protecting Earth's ecosystem (Raworth 2017).

Paul Hawken, an environmental activist, entrepreneur, and author, presents a comprehensive plan of what it would take to reverse climate change, with the details carefully laid out (Hawken 2017). In a subsequent work, he proposes ending climate change in one generation, addressing the particulars of the regeneration of oceans, forests, wilding, land, people, the city, food, energy, and industry (Hawken 2021). In a foreword to this latter work, Jane Goodall notes how the author sees the acute problems facing our current world in crisis as being interconnected with one another, and for which the author thereby proposes an integrated way of addressing these various issues. She, herself, describes her own hopeful outlook for our future, bolstered by Hawken's discussion of how "people are finding innovative solutions to these problems." (p. 6).

There are many others—whom we are not able to name here—who have taken bold and unique initiatives and are actively engaged in bringing about such scenarios of a different world from what we have now on many different levels. These people are scholar-activists presenting scenarios of a desirable state for the world from their own respective fields (such as economics, social sciences, and natural sciences), working in interdisciplinary ways; community organizers and social activists working within their given socio-economic and political structures toward a more just, more equitable, less violent, and ecologically sustainable way of life at local and grassroots levels; spiritual leaders who see precisely how the problems we face are not simply matters that can be addressed on the technological or even strategic levels, but are issues deeply rooted in the human spirit, as outlined earlier in this essay, and are addressing our global malaise through spiritual transformation.

As one minuscule contribution in this direction, following the trajectory mapped out above, we will now explore a strategic framework for addressing our global *dukkha*, inspired by the teaching of the Buddha, taking its key terms from an individual, personal level and seeking to apply them to the socio-ecological, institutional levels of our being.

5. An Eightfold Path toward Socio-Ecological, Institutional Transformation

As noted earlier, the Four Ennobling Truths that the Buddha laid out for his followers is not so much a doctrinal proposition as a therapeutic approach to healing the ailing human condition. This fourfold framework is a time-proven way of enabling individuals to enter into the path of awakening and embody this in their personal lives, as they recognize the dissatisfactory condition of their mode of being (*dukkha*); look into their root causes arising from constant craving (*tanhā*) and manifested in the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion; envision a mode of being that has extinguished those root causes (*nirodha*); and follow specific steps or prescriptions toward a path of healing (*magga*).

In this essay, we apply this therapeutic approach and transpose it from the level of the individual in a life on the path of awakening, to our collective, institutional lives as inhabitants of our common home, the planet Earth.

Having surveyed the ailing condition of our Earth community, naming it as our collective global *dukkha*, we have traced the root causes of this malaise which now has come to threaten our very survival as a species, in the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion; these are understood not only at the level of individual human lives, but more significantly for us, at the institutional, collective levels of our shared existence on Earth. We have also sought to envision a different kind of scenario for our world, "a more beautiful world our hearts know is possible" (Eisenstein 2013), as all people of good will would aspire to. Now, the question is: how do we move forward in the direction of this kind of world?

The Buddha's Eightfold Path acts as a reference point for us, originally presented as a set of practical steps to be taken by an individual in launching into the path of awakening (see [Rahula 1974](#), chp. 5). These steps can also provide us with concrete guidelines toward our earnest aspirations for a holistic kind of socio-ecological healing on a global scale, which would entail a transformation of structures and institutions. Below is a very cursory and preliminary outline of how the Buddha's Eightfold Path can be lifted from its original context as a guide for individual seekers on the path toward overcoming *dukkha* to partake of the fruits of *sukha* (well-being), and taken as reference for a strategic approach to global healing and transformation.

The first item on this Eightfold Path, Right View (*sammā ditthi*), can be taken as an appropriate assessment and due appreciation of the dire situation of our planetary community, with threats to our way of existence if we do not change our ways. It is a view that rightly recognizes the gravity of the problem and acknowledges the need for urgent response.

This would be in contrast to a stance of actively outright denying that there is a problem—an attitude taken by those who are referred to as “climate change deniers” or “climate change skeptics”—dismissing the evidence presented as “pseudoscience” or as “propaganda.” These are putatively persons and groups with vested interests in the *status quo*, such as those whose lives are invested in fossil-fuel-related industries or in corporations dumping toxic wastes into the environment, or those allied with political groups whose ideological platforms and financial interests would be jeopardized by an acknowledgment of the problem.

There are also those among us who go about their day-to-day business without realizing the impact of the situation before us—an attitude of nonchalance or of indifference. Many of our contemporaries in different regions of the world may have seen or heard of reports in the media about climate change and the impending disasters, or of violence occurring among people in various places, or about the dire situations of hunger and malnutrition in certain areas of the world or even in one's own country; however, they tend to brush it out of their field of concern, for various reasons. It could be that they are too busy eking out their livelihoods and trying to survive to feed their families. They could be those too swamped by the multitudes of tasks they face day to day in trying to achieve their goals of success, or of gaining more possessions, more power, or a combination of these. It could be that the implications of these reports about our global situation are so overwhelming that they have tended to avoid confronting them or even considering them.

Right View, taken on a socio-ecological level, would, thus, entail an appropriate assessment of the situation, which would elicit an appropriate response. It is a stance vis-à-vis the problematic situation of our global community that regards it as an issue that profoundly affects one's own life, and of one's own children, and children's children. In short, it is taking the matter of our global malaise as one's very own personal concern, and not just as “something out there” that requires fixing “by somebody out there”.

Such a stance can come from direct exposure to the pain and suffering of those affected, and experiencing these as one's very own. The suffering and pain and deleterious effects on our lives, all together, are no longer merely on an objective, conceptual level, but something one has experienced directly in a way that is up close and personal. One's engagement toward socio-ecological transformation would thereby not be based on an ideological position, nor even on a conceptualized “sense of injustice” that needs to be corrected. It comes with an urgency that calls for one's engagement as a matter of taking care of one's own dear life.

From this point, the second of the Ennobling Truths becomes operative: Right Intention (*sammā sankappa*). This second stage entails a resolve—individual but also collective and institution-based decisions to act decisively on the matter, based on an acknowledgment that, indeed, “Houston, we have a problem!”. Such decisions would include adopting public policies and collective actions toward alleviating specific aspects of our global malaise, by corporations and non-governmental groups, as well as local, regional, and national

governments. Decisions and policies geared toward action at the collective, corporate, institutional, and governmental levels need the consensus and the support of a critical mass of people, who are the stakeholders in those entities; thus, collective action will only take place with the active participation and support of individuals who are already so disposed.

Right Speech (*sammā vācā*), the third step in the Eightfold Path, involves giving the appropriate verbal and written formulations that convey the situation to all concerned, instead of misleading people through “fake news” or misleading accounts, or blaming this or that sector for the problem in a way that incites resentments and division among the populace. In the era of social media and instantaneous information transmission, this would also include the use of such means to disseminate accurate, appropriate, and relevant data about the issues in question, without being distracted by the avalanche of misleading kinds of information that proliferate in social and other media.

Right Action (*sammā kammanta*) would refer to the actual measures and initiatives taken by individuals and groups—again including non-governmental organizations, corporate entities, and government agencies on various levels—toward addressing ecological damage; mitigating situations of conflict, hostility and divisiveness; alleviating poverty and dehumanization; and the promotion of creative, harmonious, just, and life-giving policies and actions. It would also include action toward transforming social, economic, political and other structures that contribute to the ecological damage, violence, inequality, and injustice that characterize our current situation, and replacing these with those that promote ecological healing, harmony, equality, and justice in society. There are numerous initiatives already being taken in this regard at a local, grassroots level, as well as at more public, governmental levels and in international forums such as the United Nations.¹⁷

It would be a monumental but worthwhile task simply to document these so that they could be known to all concerned, for networking purposes and for facilitating the sharing of resources toward these goals of global healing.

Right Livelihood (*sammā ajīva*) follows from all of the above; it can be taken to mean the maintenance and systematic continuance of the individual and collective activities, and of the social, economic, political and other policies and structures that support and foster ecological healing, social harmony and reconciliation, equality, and justice in society.

Right Effort (*sammā vāyāma*), in many ways, overlaps with Right Action, summarized above, and also refers to continuing to promote initiatives at a local, grassroots level, as well as at regional, national, and international levels; this could prevent, as well as mitigate or reduce, the level of ecological destruction; stem animosity and hostility among groups of people or sectors of society and direct them toward dialogue and reconciliation, to live together in harmony; reduce poverty, hunger, and malnutrition; promote education and health care; and provide resources to satisfy the basic needs of everyone. The Sustainable Development Goals set forth by the United Nations, to be accomplished by 2030, can serve as a reference point for such initiatives and efforts (See note 19).

Right Mindfulness (*sammā sati*) refers to vigilance—at the individual and collective, private and public levels—in continuing all the steps outlined above; it would ensure that the processes and activities—as well as structural readjustments and transformation conducive to ecological healing, harmony and cooperation among peoples, and the promotion of justice and equity, with assurances of basic rights for all—are upheld and maintained.

The eighth item, *sammā samādhi*, translated as Right Concentration, refers to a state of equanimity and clarity beyond all dualistic opposition. It does not lend itself readily to being taken or interpreted on a socio-ecological or institutional level, beyond conveying an aspiration that all members of this Earth community overcome all our divisive tendencies and tribalistic mindsets, and find an ecologically sustainable way of living together in harmony, peace and well-being for all. The only way for this to take place is for a critical mass of the global population to undergo a transformation in mind and heart, from a self-preoccupied way of being to a way of seeing and of being that embraces everyone and everything in a bond of kinship. Is this a realizable scenario, or an impossible dream?

We are brought back to the level of personal and individual spiritual practice, where a transformation of consciousness happens. The task, then, is to provide the opportunities and the setting for more and more individuals to engage in spiritual practice conducive to *samādhi*, and thereby undergo a transformation of mind and heart; this entails a transformation from a self-centered mode of being—driven by greed, ill will and delusion—to a way of life grounded in deep inner peace and contentment, with eyes of wisdom that see into the deep interconnectedness of all beings, and a heart that flows out into compassion toward all.

6. Right Samādhi: At the Heart of Buddhist Spiritual Practice

The term *samādhi* can be translated in English in different ways, including the conventional “concentration”, or sometimes, “clarity”, “tranquility”, “transparent awareness”, or “single-pointed consciousness.” It refers to a non-dualistic state of awareness in which “the consciousness of the experiencing subject becomes one with the observed object.” (Diener et al. 1991) This state of awareness, wherein the experiencing subject and the observed object are no longer separate, has very significant existential implications; it transforms one’s way of seeing oneself and the world as a whole from this point of view of an all-embracing oneness: put forth in a straightforward and blatant way, *there is no “self”, there is no “other”!* What does this entail for the way of life of a person who arrives at such a state?

First, we must ask what concrete modes of spiritual practices are available in Buddhist traditions leading to *right samādhi*, which brings about such a transformation of mind and heart and which will enable one to arrive at deep inner peace, acquire the eye of wisdom to see things as they are, and thereby cultivate a heart of compassion for all. Secondly, there is the question of how one may carry over such a transformation at the individual, personal level to the socio-ecological, institutional dimensions of our life together in this Earth community.

Regarding the first point, there are different forms of meditation developed within Buddhist tradition, and disseminated across wide geographical regions through the centuries of the development of Buddhism. These forms of spiritual practice can be traced back to the guidelines given by the Buddha to those followers who asked him, “Sir, please teach us: How can also we be awakened like yourself?”. As is well-known, the kernel of his response to such requests is in the phrase, *Ehi passiko*, a phrase in Pāli meaning “Come and see for yourself!”

Two features are highlighted, which describe what the Buddha taught his followers in concrete and practical terms, gleaned from his extensive discourse with them. The first is *samatha* (*śamatha* in Sanskrit) translated as “a calmed mind”, also referring to a state of mind that is “cooled down” or “at rest”, and thereby, “clear”. The cultivation (*bhāvana*) of such a mind of peace and tranquility is a fundamental feature of Buddhist meditation as developed in the various traditions. The second is *vipassanā* (Sanskrit: *vipaśyanā*), which is “seeing into things (without obstruction)”, that is, “seeing things just as they are”, with an eye of true wisdom.

The Buddha’s instruction to those who sought awakening for themselves can be summed up, in colloquial terms, as “*Stop, and see!*”. In other words, “Stop your inquisitive, analytic, and discursive mind from its usual penchant to compare, analyze, anticipate, etc., and let it just be calm and still.” And with a calmed mind, “open your eyes of wisdom and see the way things are, just as they are (*yathābhūtam*) unobstructed by desires, expectations, and delusions.”

These two features of Buddhist spiritual practice, “stopping” (*samatha*) and “seeing”, (*vipassana*) form the key components of the various paths of Buddhist meditation taught and handed down through the ages. Insight meditation, Chan/Zen, and Tibetan forms of meditation are among the well-known paths of Buddhist meditative practice. These are accessible not only to those who have committed to the monastic life but—especially within the last century—to more and more lay people in many different parts of the world,

through centers of practice, with communities under the guidance of authorized teachers in these traditions.

Insight meditation, derived from early Buddhist meditation and handed down in monastic communities through the centuries, focuses specifically on the cultivation of *samatha* (clarity) and the development of *vipassana* (wisdom). Many Western-born teachers found their way to Buddhist monastic practice centers in Asia, undergoing training by revered teachers in this form of meditation for many years. Having received authorization from their monastic teachers to guide others in this form of practice, they have gone on to establish centers for the practice of Insight meditation in different parts of the world.¹⁸

Zen (Chan in Chinese, Son in Korean) Buddhism has also been widely received beyond its original cultural matrix in East Asian countries, and since the mid-twentieth century, has become part of the cultural and spiritual landscape in Western societies and elsewhere. Transmitted through various lineages deriving from different styles of practice, arising from the creativity of different Masters through the centuries, it is also centered on the cultivation of *samādhi*, through (a) taking a posture conducive to stillness; (b) paying attention to the breath; and (c) letting the mind come to rest in the here and now. Its earnest practice brings forth a threefold fruit of (a) developing and deepening the power of *samādhi*; (b) opening the mind and heart to the direct experience of awakening, that is, of “seeing one’s true (Buddha) nature” (*kenshō*, or *satori* in Japanese); and (c) the personalization of this awakening in one’s day to day life, through a life characterized by deep inner peace, the wisdom of discernment, flowing into a heart of compassion for all beings (Kapleau 1989, pp. 46–49; Habito 2001, chp. 2).

Tibetan Buddhism has also developed variegated forms of meditative practice deriving from these basic features shared with other Buddhist traditions. Lama Surya Das, a Western-born teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, highlights these common features, first offering a working definition of meditation as “a way of being aware”, and describing shared aspects of the meditative process taught in different Buddhist schools (Das 2007).

In short, the eighth step in the Buddha’s Eightfold Path, encapsulated in the term *samma samādhi*, is about entering into a state of mind, a focused mode of awareness that transcends the dualistic mode of subject–object consciousness, going beyond conceptual understanding to a direct experience of reality. This focused mode of awareness opens the eyes of wisdom (*paññā*, Sanskrit *prajñā*) that see “things as they really are”.

In Buddhist scriptural texts in Pāli, we often see *samādhi* (translated as “concentration”) and *paññā* (wisdom), combined to form a threesome with *sīla* (Sanskrit, *śīla*); this is translated as “right conduct”, or perhaps more effectively rendered as “responsible moral and social behavior.” These, together, are referred to as the “threefold training” in the path of awakening, a path which overcomes the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion, and thereby enables one to attain inner peace, equanimity, and wisdom. This, in turn, grounds a way of life of lovingkindness and compassion (Bensilver 2018).

7. Seeing Things “as They Are” Is Realizing Kinship with All

Buddhist awakening is about cultivating the wisdom of “seeing things as they really are”, that is, to see each and every thing in this universe not as isolated objects or separate entities, but as being intimately interconnected with each and everything else. This is a mode of seeing whereby the “seeing subject” and the “object that is seen” are no longer separate, but in which this subject–object dichotomy has been overcome. What I consider as “I myself” is not a separate from “others”, but I realize that I am part and parcel of each and every thing that exists; conversely, each and every thing, everyone, is part and parcel of *who I am*. In short, this is a vision of reality in which one is able to see oneself and everything in the universe, everyone and everything around, in *intimate kinship*.

This way of seeing everything and everyone as kin ushers in a way of life and of being in the world that overcomes the delusion of separation, and at the same time, sweeps away the deluded notion of our “sense of lack” that makes us think, say, and do things driven by

greed and ill will. This enables a person to live in equanimity in the midst of all the turmoil in the world.

This equanimity is not a kind of indifference or lack of concern for what occurs. Equanimity is an English translation of the term *upekkhā* in Pāli, or *upeksā* in Sanskrit, which literally means “to see things at close hand”, i.e., without any obstructions. Equanimity comes with contentment, and this state of mind begets lovingkindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), and sympathetic joy (*mudithā*). These four together are called the “four immeasurables” (*appāmaññā*) or four “divine dwellings” (*brahma-vihāra*), which are characteristics of a boundless mind and heart, one that has arrived at the place of peace and *nibbana*; having overcome *dukkha*, it is now in a state of well-being (*sukha*).

Such a mode of life and mode of being intrinsically finds itself bearing the pain and suffering of all who suffer, and by that fact, lives in a way that seeks the alleviation of suffering for all, since one experiences all this pain and suffering as *one’s very own*. Such a way of being, thus, cannot but be concerned and actively engaged in the transformation of the world’s wounded state, experiencing this up close and personal as one’s very own woundedness.

The fruit of meditation is awakening to *kinship*. This is a way of articulating “what the Buddha realized”, as cached in such doctrinal formulations as “not-self” (*anattā*) “interdependent co-origination” (*paticcā-samuppāda*), “cessation of delusive obstructions” (*nirodha*) and “arrival at the place of peace” (*nibbāna*), and other terms from Early Buddhist texts. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, a term most often used to convey this core message is *śūnyatā*—translated as “Emptiness”—which is the realization that “there is no such thing as an independently existing substance, and that each and everything in the universe exists only insofar as everything else exists.” In short, “everything is intimately interconnected with everything else.”

In the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, we are given the image of Indra’s net, a vast and infinite net embracing the entire universe, wherein each eye of the net contains a jewel which reflects all the other jewels in contained in the net. The point of this rich imagery is to convey the fact that each and every one of us contains within oneself the being of each and everyone else, in a vast and wise, and yet tightly knit, web of intimate interconnectedness.

Each of these ways of conveying the “content” of what the Buddha realized as developed in Buddhist scriptural tradition deserves full and well-documented treatment beyond this essay.

Grounded in meditative practice, whether it be Insight meditation, Chan/Zen, some form of Tibetan Buddhist practice, or a combination of these, the cultivation of *samādhi*—a transparent kind of awareness wherein everything is seen in utter lucidity *just as it is*, without the obstructions placed by the deluded mind that operates based on a subject–object mode of consciousness—naturally gives way to a boundless mind and heart of lovingkindness and compassion. This natural outflow of *samādhi* into a heart of lovingkindness and compassion is depicted in the often-quoted and recited Pāli scriptural text, *Mettā Sutta*, Treatise on Lovingkindness, in this way: “As a mother would give her life to protect her child, her only child, have this boundless heart and mind in you toward all beings!”

This is about a level of experiential realization that exceeds any philosophical or doctrinal understanding or formulation, but is precisely what can be ushered in with appropriate spiritual practice conducive to *samādhi*.

In *Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*, best-selling author Robert Wright, in a candidly and winningly self-effacing way, provides readers with an account of and reflections on his personal spiritual journey that includes more than two decades of regular meditative practice in the Insight tradition (Wright 2017). He suggests that the root cause of the major problems of humanity and of our Earth community—the kinds that have led us to the danger point in our history in which we are now—can be traced to a psychological trait; it is a mentality that our nature as evolutionary biological beings has conditioned us to possess as an ingrained mechanism, but which we are now able to see as a “natural distortion of the mind.” This is “the

psychology of tribalism”, described earlier in this essay as an “us vs. them mentality” that tends to isolate us from one another, from those who, when seen with eyes of clarity and transparency, are really an intimate part of our own selves—our *kin*. He adds that this tribalistic mentality is our singular planetary challenge—“the problem of ethnic, religious, national, and ideological conflict that can feed on itself, creating a spiral of growing hatred that leads to true catastrophe.” (p. 256).

While exhorting readers to engage in a kind of metacognitive revolution that can take place as we overcome the cognitive biases that sustain tribalism”, Wright himself disclaims any “step-by-step plan” for such a revolution. What he does offer, however, is refreshing news, based on his own experience: there are experimentally tested ways of correcting our mental distortions that bring about tribalism, “including, though not confined to, meditative practice”; therefore—and this is the important point in Wright’s claim—“*the means to the planet’s salvation is at hand*” (italicization by author) (p. 259). One might suggest here that the “step by step plan” that Wright does not provide can be found in the guidelines and instructions for meditative practice offered in Buddhist centers of the different traditions.

It is in the *clarity* (another way of translating *samādhi*) at which one arrives, as a fruit of meditation, where Wright dares to suggest we can find the key to arriving at our collective well-being as a global family, and that “... the salvation of the world can be secured via the cultivation of calm, clear minds and the wisdom they allow.” (p. 256).

This wisdom that arises out of *samādhi* is what opens the eyes of the heart to recognize and realize one’s intimate kinship with all beings, and thereby be motivated and empowered to give oneself wholeheartedly to the healing of the world’s wounds, which are, after all, one’s very own. In short, if each and every one of us arrived at this state of mind and heart whereby we regard everyone and everything else in this world as *our own kin*, it would be the most natural thing in the world for all of us to join hands and hearts, and put our best resources—intellectual, technological or otherwise—together, to address the critical issues we are all facing as an Earth community.

8. Concluding Reflections

While this essay has focused on the Buddhist tradition as providing resources in spiritual practice as a means of socio-ecological engagement toward addressing our current global malaise, this is by no means to suggest that Buddhism has a monopoly on such resources. The different religious traditions of the world offer various teachings and guidelines for spiritual practice that—in their own distinctive ways, within the contexts of their doctrinal frameworks of understanding ultimate reality and its relationship to this earthly life—can also lead their adherents to beneficial fruits in their lives. These fruits include a calming of the mind, cultivating a heart of compassion with which one relates to the world and to other people, as well as a religiously motivated socio-ecological engagement toward addressing the pains and sufferings of our wounded world.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” These are statements that adherents to all religions, or to no religion, may readily agree upon. However, unfortunately, there is a huge gap between what these sayings are about, and the actual situations of our human societies and human relationships, throughout history and in our contemporary world.

While containing in themselves the vision and the power to lead their adherents to a life that acknowledges and celebrates kinship with all, when we look at their historical track records and their actual function in human society up to the present, the world’s religions have also tended to be factors in bolstering tribalistic mentalities in their adherents, with their absolutistic claims and attitudes of exclusivity and superiority over others. Thus, regrettably, religion—compounded with ethnic, sociological, ideological, political and other factors—has been behind much of the violence perpetrated by human beings against other human beings throughout history (Juergensmeyer et al. 2015; Juergensmeyer 2017, 2020). Exploitative and destructive acts and attitudes toward the natural world have also been

linked with religiously based teachings and motivations (White 1967, and the ensuing debate; Barbour 1973).

If only the different communities of adherents to the various religious traditions of the world truly were faithful to their own core teachings and applied them in their individual and collective lives, and acknowledged one another as allies rather than as rivals or competitors—or worse, enemies to be eliminated—this would be a totally different world to what we have now. Given our critical global situation, it is now a matter of urgency that faithful adherents to the different religious traditions reach out to one another in dialogue, mutual learning, and mutual cooperation; it is important that they make efforts toward mutual understanding, and toward pooling our resources and joining hands and hearts in healing our broken world together, in the midst of doctrinal and other differences. This would be a crucial step in breaking through and overcoming the tribalistic mentality that belonging to a religious community may engender and foster.

Buddhism is not exempt from this tendency of failing to “walk the talk”; this is evinced by historical and current events in countries and regions where Buddhists find themselves in the majority or in a dominant position, where ethnic minorities are subjected to oppressive and discriminatory policies by governments influenced by powerful Buddhist monastic establishments. “Being Buddhist” can also be another kind of tribalistic attitude that demarcates those who belong to one’s group from those who do not.

While acknowledging these tendencies and questionable historical track records among the religions, including Buddhism, this essay has lifted up a gem from the Buddhist tradition for all to consider and try out for themselves. The reader will readily recognize that this is not an “objective” and “detached” presentation of Buddhism as such, but is a reading of Buddhist texts in tandem with a reading of the world in which we live—our twenty-first century global society—with a view to spiritual and concomitant socio-ecological praxis. This essay comes with an invitation to a path that has the potential to transform each of us, from our self-centered and ego-driven insecure ways that drive us to our own destruction, to a way of life suffused with a sense of kinship with one another, with each and every one and each and every thing in this world. It is this deep realization of our shared kinship, which brings with it equanimity, lovingkindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy, that would move us to take care of our Earth as our common home, and to take care of one another as beloved kin to each other. *“As a mother would give her life to protect her child, her only child, have this boundless heart and mind in you toward all beings”*.

One need not be “Buddhist”, strictly speaking, to take on the kinds of spiritual practice outlined here. This essay is not at all to be taken as a proselytizing attempt at promoting the Buddhist way over and above other religious paths. Many have engaged and continue to engage in meditative practices in many Buddhist centers located in most major cities of the world, now made available to anyone who would seek to practice in earnest, while maintaining their commitment to and continuing to observe the practices of their own root religious traditions.¹⁹

Robert Wright’s claim, cited above, that “the means to the planet’s salvation is at hand” (Wright 2017, p. 259), and that this “can be secured via the cultivation of calm, clear minds and the wisdom they allow” (p. 256), prods us and offers assurance that we are on to something here. The invitation is to take up the practice of meditation, which would open us up to a vision and give us the empowerment to address our global woundedness, together with all people of good will.

This assurance helps us to overcome a sense of helplessness and disempowerment that we may feel in the face of the magnitude of the tasks before us. However, this “assurance” is not about the certainty of the outcome, that if we take on this practice of meditation, “everything will be fine, and in the end, we will all succeed in ushering in a just, peaceful, harmonious, and sustainable global society.” Rather, it is about the supreme meaningfulness and immense satisfaction one finds in making a regular habit of “stopping (one’s discursive mind) and seeing (“things as they are”). It is about cultivating clarity and wisdom, which brings forth compassion, grounded in a realization of kinship with all.

In other words, this is an invitation to adopt a regular habitual practice of “being still, breathing with attention, and letting the mind come home to the here and now, with an open heart.” In doing so, we are opened up to an experience of intimate kinship with all, which leads to the direct experience of the pain and suffering in the world as our very own pain and suffering. Partaking of the world’s pain and suffering as our very own moves us and inspires us to engage wholeheartedly in the work of global healing, in the various levels and multifarious tasks this entails. As we find ourselves in such engagement, each of us according to each one’s own capacity, we are led by a deep inner peace and quiet joy, even in the midst of uncertainty about the outcome.²⁰

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The website of Buddhist Global Relief is <https://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/> (accessed on 26 December 2021). The stated mission of this organization is as follows: “Our mission is to combat chronic hunger and malnutrition. Bearing in mind the Buddha’s statements that ‘hunger is the worst kind of illness’ and ‘the gift of food is the gift of life,’ we sponsor projects that promote hunger relief for poor communities around the world”.
- ² See also Raworth’s website, <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/> (accessed on 23 December 2021), which lays out the basics of her vision of “Doughnut Economics”.
- ³ From the statement on the origin and concept of the Museum of World Religions, declared on its website, https://www.mwr.org.tw/mwr_en/xmdoc/cont?xsmsid=0I052359411359500564 (accessed on 23 December 2021). See also (Habito 2016).
- ⁴ From the organization’s website, <https://www.gflp.org/> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ⁵ From the website of the envisioned University for Life and Peace, <https://ulp.world/aboutcontent/about-ulp> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ⁶ See also Javanaud (2020) for a scholarly account of how meditation can “awaken us to the fact of ecological interconnectedness and . . . help us reconnect with nature and expand the circle of our moral concern to include plants, animals, and the wider environment.” (From the Abstract).
- ⁷ Here, I use the Greek-based term *praxis* to denote an integration of spiritual practice focusing on one’s individual, personal life with its implications and *practical applications* in one’s engagement in the collective, socio-ecological dimension.
- ⁸ I refer to “Four Ennobling Truths” (instead of the conventional “Four Noble Truths” for the English translation of the Pāli *cattāri ariyasaccāni*, with the nuance that it is not the truths themselves that are “noble”, but that the realization of these truths ennoble a person. See Habito (2005, pp. 22, 37–40).
- ⁹ See this TRT World website for further details: <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/top-1-percent-of-households-own-43-percent-of-global-wealth-42134> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ¹⁰ From a statement of Catholic Bishops of Latin America who gathered in Medellín, Colombia, 1968. See Gerald W. Schlabach, Medellín 1968 (Excerpts): <https://www.geraldschlabach.net/misc/medellin-1968-excerpts/> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ¹¹ COVID-19 has further aggravated global inequality, taking the lives of those who were most economically disadvantaged more than any others. See this website: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/covid-19-is-increasing-multiple-kinds-of-inequality-here-s-what-we-can-do-about-it/> (accessed on 22 December 2021).
- ¹² See the website of the World Wildlife Fund for some estimates on biodiversity loss. https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our_focus/biodiversity/biodiversity/ (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ¹³ For a description of the outcomes of COP26, see the following website: <https://unfccc.int/conference/glasgow-climate-change-conference-october-november-2021> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ¹⁴ See the following website for further details: <https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/people-and-poverty/hunger-and-obesity/how-many-people-die-from-hunger-each-year/story> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ¹⁵ See her website, with specific recommendations regarding tackling inequality. <https://www.kateraworth.com/2014/10/16/doughnut-inequality/> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ¹⁶ See further statistics on this website: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272473/us-military-spending-from-2000-to-2012/> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- ¹⁷ As one example, a UN-sponsored Millenium Summit that took place in 2000 set forth what is called the United Nations’ Millenium Development Goals, with 2015 as target date, and included the following items: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat malaria, HIV/AIDS and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and promote global

partnership for development. Now, having passed the target year with many still items still to be fulfilled, the target date has been reset to 2030, with the aim of realizing 17 items in what are called the UN Sustainable Development Goals. They invite the cooperation of individuals, private entities, and non-governmental as well as governmental organizations, toward their fulfillment. The 17 goals are stated as follows: no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; taking care of life below water; taking care of life on land; peace, justice and strong institutions; and partnerships among different groups across national and other boundaries. <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (accessed on 23 December 2021).

¹⁸ The following website offers listings of various centers for Insight Meditation in different parts of the world. <https://www.insightmeditation.org/world-wide-centres>; <http://www.buddhanet.net/medlinks.htm> (accessed on 23 December 2021).

¹⁹ Buddhist spiritual practices are being taken up by more and more people coming from other religious backgrounds and who continue to be committed to their own root religious tradition, most notably Judaism and Christianity. There is abundant literature available about and by those who have engaged in “practice across traditions” or “multiple religious belonging” that make this path of Buddhist practice accessible to those who choose to remain committed to their own root tradition. One example known to this author is at the Maria Kannon Zen Center in Dallas, Texas, www.mkzc.org. In addition to those who claim a Buddhist identity, there are long-time Zen practitioners who also continue to be committed to and practice in their root traditions, including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Baha’i, and others, while there are those who profess no religious affiliation.

²⁰ A short essay by Joanna Macy, entitled “Outcome Uncertain”, captures this well. See Kaza (2020, pp. 295–99).

References

- Barbour, Ian. 1973. *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes Toward Nature and Technology*. Boston: Addison-Wesley.
- Bensilver, Matthew. 2018. Sila, Samādhi, Paññā. Talk Given at Spirit Rock Insight Meditation Center. Available online: <https://www.spiritrock.org/articles/matthew-bensilver/sila-samadhi-panna> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- Chua, Amy. 2018. Tribal World: Group Identity is All. *Foreign Affairs* 97: 25.
- Das, Lama Surya. 2007. The Heart-Essence of Buddhist Meditation. *Tricycle Magazine*. Available online: <https://tricycle.org/magazine/forms-buddhist-meditation/> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- De Graaf, John, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor. 2001. *Affluenza: How Overconsumption Is Killing Us, and How We Can Fight Back*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Diener, Michael S., Franz Karl Erhard, and Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber. 1991. *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*. Boulder: Shambhala.
- Eaton, George. 2020. Noam Chomsky: The world is at the most dangerous moment in human history. *The New Statesman*, UK Edition ed. September 17. Available online: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2020/09/noam-chomsky-the-world-is-at-the-most-dangerous-moment-in-human-history> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- Eisenstein, Charles. 2013. *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Eisenstein, Charles. 2018. *Climate: A New Story*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Fuller, Paul. 2021. *Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gleig, Ann. 2021. Engaged Buddhism. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, Available online: <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-755> (accessed on 26 December 2021).
- Habito, Maria Reis, ed. 2016. *The Way of the Heart: Teachings of Dharma Master Hsin Tao*. Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Habito, Ruben L. F. 2001. *Healing Breath: Zen Spirituality for a Wounded Earth*. Dallas: Maria Kannon Zen Center Publications, Revised in 2006 as *Healing Breath: Zen for Christians and Buddhists in a Wounded World*. Boston: Wisdom.
- Habito, Ruben L. F. 2005. *Experiencing Buddhism: Ways of Wisdom and Compassion*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Hawken, Paul. 2017. *Drawdown: The Most Comprehensive Plan Ever Proposed to Reverse Global Warming*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Hawken, Paul. 2021. *Regeneration: Ending Climate Change in One Generation*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Javanaud, Katie. 2020. The World on Fire: A Buddhist Response to the Environmental Crisis. *Religions* 11: 381. [CrossRef]
- Juergensmeyer, Mark, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson. 2015. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2017. *Terror in the Mind of God. Fourth Edition: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2020. *God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kapleau, Philip. 1989. *The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*. New York: Anchor.
- Kaza, Stephanie, ed. 2005. *Hooked!—Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume*. Boston and London: Shambhala.
- Kaza, Stephanie, ed. 2020. *A Wild Love for the World: Joanna Macy and the Work of Our Time*. Boulder: Shambhala.
- Loy, David. 2003. *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*. Boston: Wisdom.

- Loy, David. 2014. The Three Poisons, Institutionalized. The Blog, HuffPost. Available online: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/buddhist-three-poisons_b_4293245 (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- Loy, David. 2008. *Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution*. Boston: Wisdom.
- Loy, David. 2018. *Lack and Transcendence: The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism, and Buddhism*. Boston: Wisdom.
- Loy, David. 2019. *Ecodharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis*. Boston: Wisdom.
- Macy, Joanna. 1985. *Dharma and Development: Religion as Resource in the Sarvodaya Self-Help Movement*. Hartford: Kumarian Press.
- Macy, Joanna. 1991. *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory. The Dharma of Natural Systems*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Macy, Joanna. 2021. *World as Lover, World as Self. 30th Anniversary Edition: Courage for Global Justice and Planetary Renewal*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Newby, Ron. 2020. *Tribalism: An Existential Threat to Humanity*. Lulu Publishing Services. Available online: <https://www.scribd.com/book/485865009/Tribalism-An-Existential-Threat-to-Humanity> (accessed on 23 December 2021).
- Queen, Christopher S. 2000. *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Boston: Wisdom.
- Queen, Christopher S., and Sallie B. King. 1996. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Rahula, Sri Walpola. 1974. *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Evergreen Grove.
- Raworth, Kate. 2017. *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist*, Illustrated Edition. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- White, Lynn, Jr. 1967. The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis. *Science* 155: 1203–7. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Wright, Robert. 2017. *Why Buddhism Is True. The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment*. New York: Simon and Shuster.
- Wright, Robert. 2020. *How Mindfulness Can Heal the World: Evolving Beyond Tribalism*. Audible Audio Book. Boulder: Sounds True.
- Zelman, Elisabeth Crouch. 2015. *Our Beleaguered Species: Beyond Tribalism*. Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.