

In Search of the Sacred

Buddhist reflections on the secular

By [David Loy](#)

Today Buddhism faces what is likely its greatest challenge ever, as it makes its way into a modern world completely different from anything it has encountered before. In sharp contrast to the traditional Asian cultures that have long been its home, Buddhism now finds itself part of a global civilisation with apparently limitless possibilities, where new modes of communication and transportation enable us to interact on a scale unthinkable just a few generations ago. It is also a world where reductionist science and all-powerful technologies fuel the apparently irresistible value system of consumerism, which is converting more people more quickly than any religion ever has. The result is a ravenous economic juggernaut that is endangering the whole planet.

The common denominator of all these characteristics is their *secularity*. In contrast to all the major premodern civilisations we know about, the modern world is resolutely secular: earthly, nonspiritual, irreligious, materialistic. Many people today take such secularity for granted, assuming that—once superstitious beliefs have been removed—the modern secular view is an accurate description of what the world really is. Yet secularity is not simply the everyday world we actually live in: it is a historically conditioned understanding of where and what we are—a worldview, moreover, that becomes quite questionable when we look into its origins and implications.

It was with Darwin that the transition to a secular ethic was made complete. Darwin refuted the “argument from design,” the last remaining proof for God’s existence. Because evolution by natural selection doesn’t need a God to direct it, an all-powerful deity was no longer necessary to create the extraordinarily complex organisms, including us, that compose the web of life. In fact, for the secular world, God wasn’t needed at all.

That final Darwinian stroke left the modern West stranded, for better or worse, in a mechanistic and desecralised world, without any binding moral code to regulate how people were to relate to each other. The new secular

universe, ruled by impersonal physical laws, is indifferent to us and our fate. We may not as individuals believe that or feel personally oppressed by its implications, but this secularisation continues to remould our economic, political, and educational institutions. As the modern mind-set spread beyond the West, it has come increasingly to determine the social environment within which people around the globe live and act.

Although Darwin himself was religious—and troubled by the implications of his work—his theory was soon used to rationalise a new social ethic. Human life, too, is a struggle, in which only the fittest survive and thrive. This perspective seemed to justify the most ruthless forms of economic and political competition, as recent history shows.

According to the predominant secular paradigm, biological evolution is the result of material processes operating according to impersonal laws. But what if, instead of reducing biology to mechanistic physics and viewing the cosmos as a machine, we try the opposite and understand the physical universe according to a biological model—that is, as *alive*? As Joseph Campbell observed, “If you want to change the world, you have to change the metaphor.”

What if we try to understand the physical universe according to a biological model—that is, as *alive*?

At the cutting edge of contemporary science a remarkable insight is surfacing: the universe, with all things in it, is a quasi-living, coherent whole. All things in it are connected. . . . A cosmos that is connected, coherent, and whole recalls an ancient notion that was present in the tradition of every civilisation: it is an enchanted cosmos. . . . We are part of each other and of nature. . . . We are a conscious part of the world, a being through which the cosmos comes to know itself.

The notion that the universe is “connected, coherent, and whole” accords well with Buddhist teachings about interdependence. One might even call the idea an updated version of Indra’s net, a Mahayana metaphor that compares the cosmos to a multidimensional web with a jewel at each knot. Each of these jewels reflects all the others, and each of those reflections also reflects all the other reflections, ad infinitum. According to Francis Cook in *Hua-Yen Buddhism*, Indra’s net “symbolises a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of

the cosmos.” Because the totality is a vast body of members each of which sustains and defines all the others, “the cosmos is, in short, a self-creating, self-maintaining, and self-defining organism.” In biological language, such a cosmos is *self-organising*.

The American cosmologist Brian Swimme spoke in an interview of what he saw as the “greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise: you take hydrogen gas, and you leave it alone, and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans. . . . If humans are spiritual, then hydrogen’s spiritual.” Needless to say, such an organic perspective differs considerably from the materialist and reductionist paradigm that has been so successful in explaining the world and bending it to human will—a model that an increasing number of contemporary scientists and complexity theorists no longer find persuasive. One such difference lies in the implications of the new model for how we understand the integral role of consciousness. We usually assume that we are “in” the objective world in much the same way as other physical objects are, yet considerable experimental and theoretical evidence suggests that what we experience as reality does not become “real” until it is perceived. Consciousness is necessary to collapse the quantum wave into an object, which until then existed only in potential. According to the Nobel laureate Erwin Schrödinger, the father of quantum mechanics (and an early exponent of Buddhism and Vedanta) in his collection of lectures *Mind and Matter*: “Subject and object are only one. The barrier between them cannot be said to have broken down as a result of recent experience in the physical sciences, for this barrier does not exist. . . . The material world has only been constructed at the price of taking the self, that is, mind, out of it, removing it; mind is not part of it.” And if our minds are part of it, we need to revise our understanding of the secular world. Such perspectives call into question the common reductionist view that consciousness is only a product of physical processes.

Laszlow’s statement that we are “a being through which the cosmos comes to know itself” suggests that we are an integral part of it, and that we have a role to play. If the cosmos is a great organism, it is something more than the place where we happen to reside. Human beings are an organ of that far greater coherent whole.

For all ancient civilisations, humanity is part of a larger pattern, and we have an important role to play in maintaining that order. The performance of religious rituals was essential in this process. For moderns, the ancient myths and rituals don't hold the same power they once did, for the beliefs that underpin them no longer reflect our deepest sense of the world. But our commonly held belief that the universe is ultimately pointless is problematic in its own fashion. From one perspective meaning is inescapable: it is built into our priorities. If my focus is "looking out for number one," the meaning of my life becomes the promotion of my own self-interest. This orientation, however, is based on the premise that I exist as separate and independent from my world. But in a universe that is a living, coherent whole, this premise is nothing short of delusion, and my own well-being cannot really be separated from the well-being of others. The more widespread the delusion, the more harmful the consequences for the functioning of a whole society.

One uniquely human characteristic, emphasised by Buddhism, is that we can develop the ability to "dis-identify" from anything and everything, letting go of the individual sense of a separate self. This can be extended as well to our collective selves. We can dissolve the dualisms that are basic to patriarchy, nationalism, racism, and so forth. The non-attachment developed in meditation can allow us to dis-identify with either side of any dualism and realise ourselves in and as the whole. As the great 13th-century Zen master Dogen wrote, "I came to realise clearly that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars."

The fact that human beings have the capacity to recognise themselves as a manifestation of the entire cosmos opens up a possibility that, if embraced, may help us through the crises that now confront us. Recognising that we are not separate from the rest of the biosphere brings a deep sense that the whole earth is our body and an aspiration to live out the implications of such realisation. Instead of continuing to exploit the earth's ecosystems for our own supposed benefit, we can choose to work as contemporary bodhisattvas, for the well-being of the whole. Enlightenment, we might well say, is the means by which the self-organising cosmos wakes up.

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