

Touching the Earth with the Heart of Enlightened Mind: The Buddhist Practice of Mindfulness for Environmental Education

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Abstract

This paper argues that the current ecological crisis arises from our dualistic consciousness which separates mind from body and self from world. This dualistic consciousness prevents us from experiencing the value in nature, and therefore leads to instrumentalist treatment of nature. We explore the Buddhist practice of mindfulness to help cultivate a nondualistic consciousness. We show how this practice may lead to compassionate attitudes and conduct towards the other-than-human.

Résumé

On soutient que la présente crise écologique vient de la dualité de notre conscience qui différencie l'esprit du corps et le soi du monde. Cette conscience dualiste nous empêche d'apprécier la valeur dans la nature et pour cette raison mène à une approche instrumentaliste de la nature. Nous analysons la pratique bouddhiste appelée pleine conscience pour aider à cultiver une conscience non-dualistique. Nous montrons comment cette pratique peut porter à des attitudes de compassion et conduire à l'au-delà-de-l'humain (other-than-human).

Keywords: intrinsic value, intersubjectivity, interbeing, mindfulness, Buddhist, bodhicitta

We are the environmental crisis. The crisis is a visible manifestation of our very being The environmental crisis is inherent in everything we believe and do; it is inherent in the context of our lives. (Evernden, 1993, p. 128)

Prologue

I held back my surprise and dismay in a discussion with first year university students enrolled in an introductory humanities course this past fall semester. During the semester the students encountered a range of thinkers in the western canon who can be viewed as taking one of two general understandings of what it is to be human. On the one hand, some thinkers articulate an understanding of humans as benevolent, compassionate, and sympathetic towards others. On

the other, some suggest humans as essentially egocentric, violent, and concerned primarily with self-preservation. I asked students first to “consider” this pervasive dichotomy in western thought, and then invited them to voice their own opinions on what it is to be human. I was startled when the majority of students asserted that humans were undeniably—by nature—violent, competitive, and egocentric! Do these students, beneath their moral conscience, actually feel themselves to be violent and selfish? I asked them, “How have you arrived at such a dim and grim conclusion about the nature of the human self?” Their conclusion must be true, they argued, for they based it on their observation of the social habits of other students, friends, family, and citizens around the world. Fair enough. But could it be that we possess both parts of the dichotomy of the self? At any rate, the important question for us educators is, which part of the self is going to be nurtured into blooming? I am reminded of a version of an Indigenous story I heard: that there are two hungry wolves inside us, and the one we feed is the one who will inhabit us. If we feed the selfish and violent one, then that’s who we will be. If we feed the good and compassionate one, we become that. While reflecting on the students’ responses I am wondering if today the selfish and aggressive wolf has gained the upper hand? Now, how do we access the other one?

From Greg’s Teaching Journal

Raimundo Panikkar (1992), one of the greatest contemporary philosophers of religion and a tireless proponent of inter-religious dialogue, has masterfully penned nine priorities for humanity, one of which is “peace with the Earth” (p. 244). He asserts, “No ecological renewal of the world will ever succeed until and unless we consider the Earth as our own Body and the body as our own Self” (p. 244). We resonate deeply with Panikkar’s understanding, and this paper is dedicated to achieving this insight. But how do we get to this place of seeing “the Earth as our own Body and the body as our own Self”? This is a supreme educational question. The present paper is an attempt to answer this question with help from Buddhist thought and practice.

Central to Buddhism is the embodied understanding of interdependence or co-dependent arising (*paticcasamuppada*) and the practice of compassion (*karunā*) and lovingkindness (*mettā*). Buddhism posits that such insights and practices are the natural part of who we (really) are. Hence, in that sense, we do not need to learn interdependence, compassion, and so on, anew *as if* these were new and foreign to us. Rather, the approach to learning them takes the form of uncovering and undoing certain habits of mind and heart that have denied, concealed, and marginalized these original insights and practices. Students of Buddhism are fond of repeating the metaphor that, what we need to do in the way of education is remove the dust off the mirror. The mirror in this Buddhist metaphor is the original human “mindheart” prior to the socially constructed conditioning of the subject-object and self-other dualisms. Extending the dust metaphor, education referred to in this imagery takes the form of blowing the dust off the mirror. But often metaphors are

more than just figures of speech: they can also refer to an actual practice. It is no coincidence that the primary curriculum in Buddhism as a system of education¹ is breath work (mindfulness of breathing or *Anāpānasati*).² Our paper addresses this breath work. But, first, where is the dust we need to blow off? Where did the dust come from?

What is the Matter with Mind?

In his provocative essay, “What is the Matter with Mind?”, Ronald Laing (1980) provides a brief account of the transformation of the western mind by philosophical and scientific thinking over the last 2000 years. Laing, a maverick psychiatrist and psychotherapist of significant influence in contemporary thought, interrogates western philosophy and reveals in his essay a rupture of a bond that we experience between ourselves (mind) and nature (matter). The experience of a bond or a relation between ourselves and nature, as abstract as it sounds, should be somewhat familiar to all of us who profess a dedication to, and love of, the non-human world. After all, is it not the experience we encounter with nature that motivates us to not only value nature, but to defend it and protest on its behalf? To this end, we will begin with Laing’s insights to help us argue that the present ecological crisis is due in large measure to the ruptured relationship between mind and nature.³

Long before an ecological crisis loomed large in intellectual and public conscience, the ancient architects of our scientific worldview had begun preparing a transformation of the western mind for the value-free objective study of nature. As Laing (1980) explains, the foundation of scientific thinking originated in ancient Greece with the pre-Socratics, and its aim was to strip reality of any relationship to our senses, sensibility, values, and feelings. The enabling of the experience of our relationship to the world, which we feel, revere, wonder about, and express awe over, was judged by early scientists as “valueless” (p. 16). Indeed, Laing explains, as the history of modern science unfolded with further contributions from Galileo and Francis Bacon in the 17th century,⁴ it adopted a strategy of the elimination of our “sense of reality” (p. 9) from the process of discovering the reality of nature. Laing warns that the implications of the elimination of subjective experience from knowledge are significant and entail “a profound transformation of our whole being in the world” (p. 11).

How can the exclusion of our values and experience from scientific inquiry result in a profound transformation of our being? Laing answers the question by pointing out that a world perceived to be void of subjective values has no meaning for the participant. When we lose the source of meaning in our experience of the world, we begin to see ourselves apart from nature instead of a part of it. As Laing warns in another essay, it is not difficult to conclude that “[o]ur behaviour is a function of our experience. We act

according to the way we see things” (as cited in Evernden, 1993, p. 51). Who we are, how we relate to and act in the world, depends crucially on who we think we are in relation to the world. And vice versa. If we think that humanity (mind) is separate and independent from nature (matter), and moreover, that the former is superior to the latter, then it follows (psycho)logically that humans *can* manipulate, control, exploit, and even destroy nature. This central problem was taken up by Neil Evernden (1993), who places Laing’s ponderings on mind and nature within the context of environmentalism, and asks in effect: What is the matter with environmentalism? Is the contemporary environmental movement falling into the same metaphysical problem that R.D. Laing was railing against two decades ago?

What is the Matter with Environmentalism?

In *The Natural Alien*, Evernden (1993) elaborates at length on the meaning and dilemma of environmentalism. For Evernden, a broad definition of a person devoted to environmentalism is one who insists on defending, protesting, and speaking on behalf of the significance of the value they experience in nature. Many would support this definition, and we certainly do. Bai (2001) has been explicit about calling this kind of value, “intrinsic value.” By “intrinsic value” we mean valuing something not for its utility or instrumental value to us, but for its own existential integrity and legitimacy of right to *be for itself*. At the sensuous and emotional level, the intrinsic value of other beings is most often experienced as awe, wonder, gladness, intimate knowing and belonging, and various nuances of appreciation. Which language do the environmentalists speak today? Does the language they speak match their experience of nature that inspired them to become environmentalists in the first place?

Evernden uncovers in *The Natural Alien* that, like with the mind for Laing, something is the matter with environmentalism. The environmentalist has “come to adopt the strategy and assumptions of their opponents” (p. 10). Evernden blames the environmentalist’s “fatal flaw” on the science of ecology, because ecology is not interested in experiences, intrinsic values, or quality. Ecology “cannot illuminate the experience that inspires one to be an environmentalist” (p. 22). In our own teaching in environmental education programs, we have witnessed the intense conflict between the experience that inspired our students to become environmentalists, and the scientific paradigm of ecology in which they were trained to become ecology majors and environmental educators. The latter has no language and no validation for their early formative experiences in the intrinsic value of nature.

Ecology removes the involved subject from the context of their experience and “transforms all relationships to nature into a simple subject-object or user defined one” (Evernden, 1993, p. 24). Thus, science’s assumptions

about the world—namely that it can be split and reduced to subjects (mind) and objects (matter)—are adopted by environmentalists. That which is the matter with mind for Laing, is also relevant to the state of environmentalists’ minds today.⁵ For example, to briefly illustrate how a subject-object dualism prevails within modern reformist environmentalism, consider the Sierra Club of Canada’s recommendations for minimizing climate change, which they claim we experience “through erratic weather patterns, forest fires and [melting] glaciers” (Sierra Club of Canada, n.d.). They explain that “we must drastically reduce our greenhouse gas emissions... that trap heat in the atmosphere ... thereby spurring climate change” (Sierra Club of Canada, n.d.). We do not deny that greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced, but the relational context that is implied with this kind of language is one of separation between us and the heat, forests, glaciers, and weather.⁶ The weather appears apart from us. It is an object “discursively submerged” (Seaton, 2005, ¶ 9), and only affected by our greenhouse gas emissions. As a state of science, experienced by us as heat that we can measure, or images that we can gaze upon and visually digest—our feelings and values about climate change are totally absent from the Sierra Club’s description. What we want to inspire instead is a *feeling* for the heat of climate change: an emotional involvement in its relationship with us that dissolves the subject-object gap. But “feeling nature” requires understanding with it beyond the kind of relationships we have with conceptual categories (Seaton, 2005). As Evernden (1993) remarks, it is *relationships* that determine how we live in the world, those so primary to the origins, inspirations, and commitments of environmentalism. What we are critiquing here along with Evernden is a kind of relationship that prevents us from being emotionally involved in the environment, commonly accepted to be separate from us.

But it is not only the environmentalists who have adopted a scientific and objectivist map of reality (the one that Laing spoke of), but most of the public has adopted this map too. Public education plays a major part in encoding this map onto our minds. David Orr (1994) tells us that “much of what has gone wrong with the world is the result of education that alienates us from life in the name of human domination, fragments instead of unifies . . . [and] separates feeling from intellect” (p. 17). Similarly, Orr suggests that the map that alienates us from the world excludes those particular features of reality and experience so crucial to articulating what, for example, Mick Smith (2001) calls a “feeling for life” (p. 168). Orr is explicit about mainstream education being the major instrument of inscribing a *biophobia* in the minds of the citizens. Hence his insistence that the current environmental crisis is a “metaphysical disorder” of the mind that inhibits *biophilia* or love of life.

Then, what do we do? How can we dispel the metaphysical notion that nature is simply a means, uninvolved in our Being? Is it even possible to shift one’s metaphysics? If so, how do we go about it? In the next section, we will argue that working directly with attention and perception has the most potential for changing one’s metaphysics and re-wiring the mind.

Learning to See the World Intrinsically

Central to what both Evernden and Laing emphasize as a problem in the development of the western conception of self—what we have singled out as a metaphysical disorder—is the predominance of a dualistic mode of perception. Dualistic perception disrupts the subject’s consciousness from intermingling with the world she experiences. Instead it fosters a mode of consciousness that denies the self a “gradient of involvement” (Evernden, 1993, p. 64) in the phenomenal world that she feels (and perceives) is significant, value laden, sensuous, and loveable. And when she, the subject, does not perceive being involved-in-the-world, she finds it difficult to readily encounter the value that so many of us experience in it.

But if experiencing value in nature is so crucial to our relationship with it, then why not treat the existence of (intrinsic) value in nature theoretically (instead of confronting our dualistic mode of perception head on), and consequently derive axiological moral “oughts” from knowledge of its existence? Could moral theory not provide a solution to our metaphysical disorder with perception? Indeed the environmental philosopher J. Baird Callicott expressed as early as 1985 that the most important “theoretical problem of environmental ethics [is] the problem of intrinsic value in nature” (1985, p. 271). However the proof of intrinsic value, the necessity for it, and its practical consequences (Fox 1990) are not so easily resolved, as can be witnessed by heated and lively debate on this topic over the last 25 years.⁷ Nevertheless we would like to refer to some of the recent history in environmental ethics that concerns such questions. These questions are important for us to consider because our motivation for a Buddhist mindful practice, which we will consider later, is not a naïve suggestion that serves only to skirt around the complex domain of eco-philosophy and ethics, but instead is informed and motivated by the recent debates and contributions extending from that discourse.

Extending moral consideration to non-human life forms has often focused on a shared natural property between the non-human and the human. For example Paul Taylor (1986) attaches the property of a “good of its own” to another life form that is capable of being disturbed (by human intervention) from its own species-specific goals. But doesn’t every species have a goal and therefore equal worth? How do we deal with a biological egalitarianism whereby every living thing—bacteria, insect, elephant, human—receives equivalent “inherent worth” (Smith, 2001, p. 33)? But more importantly, these moral judgments, based upon a single natural attribute, are evaluated by a *separate* judgmental, discursive self (Fox, 1990). Respecting nature in this shared-attribute way becomes a conceptually discursive, “acontextual” activity (Smith, 2001, p. 34). This kind of biocentric morality, it seems, does not provide a new path for experiencing the value in nature or for treating our dualistic mode of perception.

A more eco-holistic approach, such as that taken by Callicott (1985), avoids the naturalistic fallacy that plagues Taylor's approach. Instead of assuming an isolated self outside of nature, Callicott postulates a self that is embedded and interconnected to the web of life by using the insights offered by quantum physics. For Callicott, quantum physics undermines the Cartesian dualism and allows for a new sensibility of the self that overcomes its separation and distance from nature. This new "I" interpenetrates with the fabric of reality and makes "nature intrinsically valuable to the extent that the self is intrinsically valuable" (p. 274-275). But as Smith (2001) points out, quantum mechanics cannot provide us any ethical direction since we do not experience value in nature on the peculiar quantum scale but instead on a human scale. We value flora, fauna, rivers, and mountain ranges on the scale at which we experience them with our senses. Knowing that on the quantum scale we interpenetrate and merge with other life and objects does not give us the necessary *experiential insight* to move us beyond a dualistic mode of perception towards a nondualistic experience (Zimmerman, 1988).

Something then is absent from theoretical accounts that propose to help us consider things morally. A wider, more expansive context that includes our emotional experiences with other sentient life, wild spaces, and cherished places is excluded in the previous two examples. We must, however, concede that in considering these attempts to rationalize the existence of intrinsic value, our intentions are sincere and coherent with searching for and reclaiming what Evernden and Laing refer to as "value in nature." Yet we must also conclude that theorizing is not helping us locate it, experience it, or feel it!

Locating value in nature is a very contested proposition. Indeed nature itself—its ontological status—is contested terrain. If nature is what culture is not, then where is such nature, and what relevance is it for us cultural beings? It makes little sense to look for and theorize about value per se *in nature*, whose very essence and reality is in doubt. Smith (2001) eloquently summarizes this complex debate to conclude that values are "transitory" and "shifting" (p. 126) qualities dependent upon a culture that is often in rapid change, and that even our values about nature can be shown to be constructed from our changing social and cultural circumstances (p. 109-129). For Smith it is more important to pay attention to *where* values are produced and mediated rather than focus on their ontology. Thus, Smith argues, we should be paying attention to nature as a medium that has "constitutive values" (p. 129),⁸ and we can only experience and participate in their constitution if we are careful and attentive to the circumstances in which they arise. We would suggest that careful "attentiveness" to these circumstances presupposes and requires a very attuned consciousness. Our perception of, and attention to, the circumstances is always, lastly, mediated by our psychological state of consciousness. Therefore, to pay attention to the natural and social mediums

we live in, where value is constituted, requires us to see and feel ourselves as part of it, and this, we propose, requires a wider sense of self—a nondualistic sense of self.⁹

Finally, before we introduce our practice, we would like to acknowledge that it is not as though eco-philosophy has nothing to offer when it comes to overcoming a dualistic mode of consciousness. In fact much of what we have talked about here, with respect to consciousness, concerns the philosophy of deep ecology. Warwick Fox (1990), in *Towards a Transpersonal Ecology*, points to the distinctive philosophical feature of deep ecology as that of the transpersonal. He argues for psychological methods (and practices) opposed to axiological methods of self-realization. Transpersonal ecology, as articulated by Fox, emphasizes that the (psycho)logical connections between an ego-less self, interconnected with nature, leads to a disposition and conduct of care for the expanded self. These psychological connections are not theorized. They are, as Fox comments, “referred to as experiential invitations” where participants are encouraged to *experience* the feeling of being interconnected and bound up with the surrounding world (p. 244). As Fox admits this is not easy to explain. Language does not help us communicate interconnected experience, which is why it “belongs to the realm of the training of consciousness (or perception) that is associated with...Zen Buddhism” (p. 250). It is to this practice in training the consciousness that we now shift our attention.

Mindfulness: The Buddhist Contribution to Keeping the Earth in Mind

For the rest of this paper, we will introduce and examine a well-known attentional practice called “mindfulness,” which is central and fundamental to the enlightenment work in Buddhism.¹⁰ Buddhist mindfulness has been practiced for over 2500 years, and its roots go back into prehistory. In the way we understand and practice Buddhism, we see it as an educational philosophy and practice-framework for working with consciousness. Robert Thurman (personal communication, 2008), renowned historian of Buddhism, is most emphatic in communicating that Buddhism is a system of education and that its educational objective is to change the mind-and-heart of our civilization. Specifically, the desired change aimed at is to go from the dualistic consciousness of subject-object dichotomy that precedes and precipitates instrumentalism, to the nondualistic consciousness that experiences intersubjectivity or “interbeing,” as Thich Nhat Hahn (1998) calls it. In the way we understand “intersubjectivity,” it means a sense of knowing the other as a “fellow being” whose identity and welfare are bound up in some ways with one’s own. That is to say, there is a sense of consanguinity. The relevance of this educational objective to the issues and concerns surrounding environmentalism that we have presented in this paper should be apparent

to the reader. We see mindfulness practice as an effective way to cultivate a sense of interbeing or consanguinity between ourselves as human beings and all other beings that make up the ecological community that we call earth. Mindfulness practice cultivates subject-object integration and bonding, rather than subject-object dichotomy and alienation. From this integration and bonding flows love of life (*biophilia*) and deep appreciation of other beings' sacred existence. How does mindfulness work? And how do we integrate it into education?

A Mindfulness Primer

The basic practice of mindfulness is simple enough to explain in terms of instruction. You do not dwell on your thoughts (sensations, percepts, feelings, mental objects), but just pay attention to them rising and vanishing, all the while anchoring your attention to your in-breaths and out-breaths.¹¹ The practice of not dwelling on the *content* of consciousness (thoughts, percepts, feelings, sensations), but letting it come and go, brings about a profound change to our consciousness. Basically what happens is a shift of attention from focusing on what is in the consciousness (content) to the consciousness itself (container). A common everyday experience that suggests what this shift in attention is like is when one shifts focus from looking at the clutter of objects in a room to the room itself and noticing how spacious the room is. It is this spaciousness of consciousness that we are after when we meditate. (Paradoxically, when we pursue spaciousness as a narrow-focused goal, it becomes a self-defeating and a counterproductive effort because the mindset of intense pursuit is anything but spacious! Mindfulness is simple enough to understand but difficult to practice.)

Experientially speaking, whenever we direct and fix our attention on mental objects—the details of the content of consciousness—our focus becomes narrow, delineated and rigid. We see objects as bounded (or discontinuous from their surrounding) and as categories (subject to identity). For example a narrow and categorical attention would see a tea mug as *not* the table on which it sits, and *not continuous* with the table and the sky that shows up in the background. Compare that mode of perceptual consciousness to another kind, namely, seeing first of all, the boundless space that holds all objects, and moreover, seeing the relatedness and sensing a kind of continuity and flow among objects. A tea mug, table, and the sky, along with everything else within view, show up in the limitless space with a sense of somehow being held together and flowing through vast space and time. This latter mode of perceptual consciousness typifies mindfulness experience. In Zen and other meditation communities, this mode of perceptual experience is characterized as “soft gaze” or “soft eye,” which is achieved by half-closing the eyes, relaxing the eye muscles, and slightly blurring the focus so as to encourage greater peripheral vision.

There are two more pieces to add here to the mindful experience: a sense of self and biophilia (feeling for life). The sense of continuity in the world of objects that we mention above applies equally to the experiencing self. In mindfulness, the self does not sense and feel itself separate from everything else that enters its consciousness. Typically, in the ordinary everyday consciousness we practice, this self-other separation and discontinuity is very strong. This is the consciousness that objectifies everything, turning them into an “other” that the subject—the self—regards from without and acts on. Here, one experiences, “Of course, I’m not the tree. The earth is not ‘me.’ I am not that homeless person on the street.” But mindfulness which is opposed to such an objectifying consciousness, is a mode of consciousness that connects, integrates, and transfuses everything, whereby we can experience varying degrees of the self-other continuity and unity or integrity. One experiences “interbeing” and resonance with all beings without losing the sense of distinct individuality. In mindful experiences there is this sense that self and world phenomenologically arise together moment by moment.

Another important aspect of mindfulness experience is the charged sense of and appreciation for life. How does this happen? Consider how the narrow and bound attention (that sees objects as separate from the perceiving self and from each other) would modify the *feel* of consciousness. This results in a lessening of the “warmth” and “radiance” that typically characterize blissful experience. In the way we work and live in the contemporary world, most of our attention is this kind of narrow and bound focusing. No wonder bliss is not an everyday experience for most people! But when we look at the world in a state of mindfulness, it glows with a degree of radiance and vividness that is usually missing or diminished in dualistic perception. Awe, wonder, and gratitude fill our hearts naturally and easily when we see the world through mindfulness. In other words, we appreciate and love the world for its intrinsic value, and not *just* for its utility or instrumental value. The biophilia that Orr (2004) speaks of turns out to be a feature of mindfulness. In the Buddhist tradition, the term that is used to talk about this radiant and loving quality of consciousness is *bodhicitta*—enlightened or awakened mind-heart. *Bodhicitta* is the source of compassion and wisdom.¹² In the teachings of this tradition, *bodhicitta* is said to be inherent in all human beings, and in that sense, *bodhicitta* is everyone’s birthright. It is also understood as the primordial layer of our psyche, and is always there to be accessed. Mindfulness as a practice is about accessing this *bodhicitta*.

The difficulty of accessing *bodhicitta* stems from the conditions of objectified consciousness, which is the same concern raised by Laing and others that this paper began with. Mindfulness practice is a way of “blowing the dust” (of objectification) off one’s consciousness so as to recover the underlying integrative consciousness, whereby one feels the continuity of self and other. Here, continuity must not be understood as a total identification. It is not as though a mindfulness practitioner cannot distinguish his or her self from other

beings! Rather, we are talking about a sense of openness and receptivity to, and resonance with, the other. In other words, intersubjectivity is what we mean. Incidentally, there is now enough brain and consciousness research to support the explanation of what mindfulness practice does in terms of changing one's disposition and conduct, and how everything we have discussed above is a function of our brain and body.¹³

Touching the Earth, Mindfully

We are interested in mindfulness practice in the present context because we see the possibility of its vital contribution to our goal of helping ourselves to discover a better intersubjective connection with nature and hence being able to appreciate its intrinsic value. If we can feel this deep inter-being and resonance with the earth and its myriad sentient beings, and can regard the earth as continuous with one's body, then most naturally we would be the kind of environmentalist that Evernden valorizes: one who can defend, protest, and speak on behalf of the significance of the value they experience in nature. In this final section, we wish to explore a variation of mindfulness practice that is specifically designed by us, the authors of this paper, to cultivate a sense of inter-being and resonance with nature or earth. This exploration aims at seeing how we may introduce and integrate mindfulness practice into curriculum. Believing as we do that environmental education should not be a separate subject matter for study (for it is too central and critical), nor a special interest for citizens, we propose that mindfulness awareness towards all beings be broadly and essentially infused into all that we teach and learn.

Being One-bodied with the Earth

Here we would like to offer a short embodiment meditation session that we have devised for our reader:

- Take the basic meditation posture.¹⁴ That is, sit comfortably but with your spine naturally straight and tall. Relax all your muscles, half-close and soften your gaze, or close your eyes, and anchor your attention on your in-breaths and out-breaths. If your attention wanders off, thinking about this or that, gently bring it back to your breaths. Neither resist nor dwell on whatever thoughts, feelings, sensations, sounds, and sights come to you. Let them come and let them go. Become intimately and sensuously involved with your breathing.
- When you are established in the basic mindfulness process as above, for say, five to ten minutes, you then attend, in a natural and relaxed manner, to sensing all kinds of fluid in your body (saliva, blood, sweat, tears...) running their course. In each instance of noticing the presence of liquid activity, note to yourself that you *are* water: "I am water." Imagistically *feel*

- your self being one with the oceans, rivers, lakes, streams, waterfalls, clouds, and rain in the sky. “I am a stream . . . a river . . . a waterfall...”
- Repeat the above with the three other elements: air, fire, and earth. For air, pay attention to the air that goes in and out of you and any other gaseous presence in your body. Use your imagination to feel yourself being one with all kinds of wind—small, large, soft, or fierce—blowing across the land and over the ocean: “I am air.” For fire, you feel the presence of heat in your body here and there, and then again envisage feeling your self being one with volcano, lightening, forest fire, and summer sun. For earth, you feel the solidity of your bones and flesh, and envisage feeling your self being one with rocks, soil, mountains, trees, flowers, and animals—all that is solid and “fleshy.” “I am a mountain...a riverbed...”

Coda: Educating with Earth in Mind

Education is a supreme means by which each generation is prepared to meet the particular challenges that they will have to face in an ever-changing world. Today, there is no dispute that the relationship between humanity and nature (i.e., our environmental problems) is possibly the most critical challenge that faces us. However, it would be entirely delusionary to think that these challenges are problems *in* the environment, and hence we need to do something *to* the environment. Raimundo Panikkar (1999), with whose inspiring insight we began this paper, wisely observes: “Peace with the Earth excludes victory over the Earth, submission or exploitation of the Earth to our exclusive needs. It requires *collaboration, synergy, a new awareness*” (p. 244, emphasis added). In this paper, we have attempted to blow away the thick dust of ideologies that normalize domination, violence, and exploitation of the earth, and to show how, beneath all the dust, there exists the layer of human consciousness that naturally connects to and integrates with the earth. Call it the *bodhicitta*, the wild mind, the Aboriginal mind, the ancestral mind, the primordial mind, or what have you. Regardless what it is called, education today must teach us to access this layer of consciousness and release in us the spirit of “collaboration, synergy, a new awareness.” Our survival, let alone the survival of the entire biotic order, may crucially depend on a shift in consciousness. What more urgent task is there in education than this?

I am curious how my students would respond if next time I ask them not to “consider” but to “contemplate” the nature of the human self. Of course, “contemplation” too is not quite the right word, and the students will rely on analysis again. Contemplation mingles too closely with our discursive habits. I want them to experience what they “feel” the self is like. A tricky task though, especially in the academic context of university coursework. My request of them to “feel” their

self will still tempt them to theorize about the self, as if the self is some abstract concept, separate from their bodies and minds, etc. Yikes. What can I do to help them to find a way into the layer of consciousness that senses and feels the interbeingness of the world—their interbeingness with the world? Okay, I will ask them to: “Quietly close your books, gently sit up straight, slowly close or half-close your eyes. . . deep breaths, in . . . and out. . . feel your warm and cool breaths, feel the vast and radiant emptiness that fills you. . .”

From Greg’s Teaching Journal

Notes

- ¹ In this paper, Buddhism is understood and presented as a system of education, rather than a religion or even spirituality, whose primary aim is to shift the matrix of consciousness from a dualistic base to a nondualistic base.
- ² *Anāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing) is a fundamental form of Buddhist meditation taught by the Buddha, and is presented in the *Anāpānasati Sutta*.
- ³ For the sake of scholarship, we must mention that another very important thinker who critiqued the mind/nature dichotomy and argued for their seamless integration is Gregory Bateson (1979).
- ⁴ Laing continues in his essay to elaborate on the contributions to the modern scientific worldview made by Galileo and Francis Bacon (Laing, 1980). Indeed we acknowledge that we are skirting around and skipping over the vast domain of the history of science (not the least Descartes’ contribution to the split between mind and matter). For more detail on the role science has played in our ecological crisis and relationship between humanity and nature see Leiss (1994), Chapter 2 in Merchant (2005) and chapters 1 and 2 in Plumwood (2002).
- ⁵ We refer to most environmentalists as those who support shallow environmentalism or rationalize environmental values. See Zimmerman (1994) and Chapter 1 in Smith (2001).
- ⁶ Our goal here is only to use the Sierra Club as an example of the kind of scientific language that describes climate change. We want to illustrate what we have been referring to as a lack of experiential relationship in the language of environmentalists. We are not suggesting that the Sierra Club’s efforts are insincere, miscalculated, or ineffective at confronting climate change. We simply want to exemplify the pervading dualism present in environmentalism’s language.
- ⁷ These debates are widely discussed in the journal *Environmental Ethics*. See McShane (2007) for a recent defense of its significance.
- ⁸ Evernden (1993, p. 74) also talks about the constitution of values as a property of consciousness.
- ⁹ Evernden (1993, pp. 129-137) is also very much keyed in on the importance of context.

- ¹⁰ “Mindfulness” is a translation from the Pali word “satipatthana” which means “establishment in awareness.” Here, “awareness” or “mindfulness” (*sati*) refers to the quality of our consciousness that does not see the world in terms of self-other dichotomy (“me” and “not me”), but in terms of self-other unity within the field of unified consciousness. The experience of self-other unity under mindfulness is seeing the co-arising or simultaneity of self and other, which generates a sense of “we.”
- ¹¹ Again, the classic canon detailing this practice is *Anāpānasati Sutta*. To note, there has developed over the long history of Buddhism an inexhaustible array of methods and techniques for achieving this simple objective, which creates a rich variety of schools and traditions of Buddhist contemplative practices. In this paper, we will not be exploring this historical and cultural richness of Buddhist practices. We are focused instead on the essential practice of mindfulness.
- ¹² Quality books and articles abound on this topic. We refer the interested reader to Das (1997).
- ¹³ For example, we refer the reader to Siegel’s (2007) highly acclaimed work that integrates mindfulness meditation with contemporary brain research.

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