

SECTION TEN



MINDING OUR WORLD:
SERVICE AND SUSTAINABILITY

The empirical fact is that self-actualizing people, our best experiencers, are also our most compassionate, our great improvers and reformers of society, our most effective fighters against injustice, inequality, slavery, cruelty, exploitation (and also our best fighters for excellence, effectiveness, competence). And it also becomes clearer and clearer that the best "helpers" are the most fully human persons. What I may call the bodhisattvic path is an integration of self-improvement and social zeal, i.e., the best way to become a better "helper" is to become a better person. But one necessary aspect of becoming a better person is via helping other people. So one must and can do both simultaneously.

—ABRAHAM MASLOW¹

IT IS NO SECRET that we have reached a new and critical time in human history: a time that may decide the fate of our planet, our species, and countless other species. We possess unprecedented powers and possibilities, yet also face unprecedented dangers and suffering. How extraordinary that we should be the first generation that will decide whether we make of earth a heaven or hell: whether we create a sustaining and sustainable society or leave a plundered, polluted, radioactive planet. For we have the power to produce both.

Everyone knows we face dangers, yet few appreciate just how awesome and urgent they are. The following summary therefore outlines some of the more pressing problems.

The population bomb is exploding at the staggering rate of 100 million people each year. It took humankind over a million years of evolution to reach a population of one billion in A.D. 1800. Yet now we add another billion each thirteen years and double our population every forty years. Obviously, this human explosion cannot continue and will end soon, either by our rapidly making birth control available worldwide, or by starvation, sickness and social disruption on a scale so incomprehensibly large as to dwarf all previous famines and epidemics.²

This population explosion is exaggerating the gaping disparities between the world's rich and poor. Income per person in the developed countries is some thirty times that in the poorest.²⁻³ Perhaps poverty's most devastating toll is taken by malnutrition and starvation. Some fifteen to twenty million people die of malnutrition each year while another half billion people go malnourished.⁴ Today starvation kills as many people every four months as did the entire Holocaust.

These are extraordinary, incomprehensible figures, yet they convey little of the suffering and desperation that lie behind them. They are a far cry from the United Nations declaration that "everyone has the right to a standard of living which is adequate to the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care."

The population explosion is of course gobbling up resources and destabilizing the environment. We have only a few decades of oil supplies left, the world's forests are shrinking, species are being extinguished at a rate unheard of since the dinosaurs died out, and much of the world's farmland is deteriorating. Meanwhile, above our heads, air pollution, acid rain, ozone depletion, and rising carbon dioxide concentrations are destroying the atmosphere.

Yet while the world's natural resources are depleted, huge amounts of human resources are sucked into massive military budgets and weapons of inconceivable destructive power. The total explosive power of the world's nuclear weapons is equivalent to billions of tons of TNT.

The world's military expenditures now exceed one trillion dollars each year. The president of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War pointed out, "A small fraction of these expenditures could provide the world with adequate food and sanitary water supply, housing, education, and modern health care." Indeed, the Presidential Commission on World Hunger estimated that it would cost only six billion dollars per year to eradicate malnutrition, an amount less than one week's arms expenditure.⁴ Pope Paul IV lamented that the arms race kills, whether the weapons are used or not.

What these and many other facts make clear is that we are in a phase of unprecedented ecological disruption and are consuming the planet's resources faster than they can be replaced. We are mortgaging our future and that of all future generations. Yet as Erik Dammann pointed out in his book *The Future in Our Hands*:

The world is not threatened by catastrophe in the future. The greater part of mankind is already experiencing catastrophe today. None of us would talk in terms of future catastrophe if our present family income amounted to less than one dollar a day, if we lived with our family in a hut or shack without water or electricity, if we were starving and lost every second child which was born, if our surviving children were physically or mentally destroyed by deficiency diseases, if there were no doctors available. If we lived like this, it would be perfectly clear that catastrophe was already an accomplished fact. This is the way humanity lives today. Not distant, small groups. Mankind is living like this. The majority of us.⁵

The global crises we face today are unique in many ways, not only in their scope, complexity, and urgency, but also in that for the first time in human history each and every one of them is caused by humans. They are creations of our individual and collective behavior and can therefore be traced, in significant part, to psychological origins: to our individual and collective beliefs, greed, fear, fantasies, defenses, and misperceptions. Our global problems are global symptoms, and the state of the world reflects the state of our minds.⁶

Of course, this is not to deny the importance of social, political, and economic forces. It is to emphasize that political, economic, and military interventions alone are insufficient and that truly effective long-term cures require responses at all levels. In other words, we need not only to feed the starving and reduce nuclear stockpiles, but also to understand and correct the psychological and social forces that led to this situation in the first place.⁷

Unfortunately, while there is growing awareness of global crises, to date most responses have been only military, political, or economic. This is changing slowly, as more people emphasize the importance of both inner and outer work to change both the psyche and the world.

One of the most eminent advocates of this integrated approach is the Dalai Lama. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, "A Call for Universal Responsibility," he emphasizes the increasing extent of interconnection and interdependence in the world. Environmental crises affect us all. The Dalai Lama therefore points out that our sense of responsibility and compassion must encompass our entire planet and all people. He argues that our current crises can be solved only by balanced development

of outer scientific and inner psychological capacities. Two of the most valued inner capacities are transpersonal emotions: love and compassion. Ram Dass explores "Compassion: The Delicate Balance," while John Welwood explores the possibility of using romantic relationships to foster "Conscious Love."

Just as the transpersonal movement has been based on an expanded sense of identity, so too has the movement of "deep ecology." This important discipline takes its name from its commitment to asking ever deeper questions about humankind and nature and their optimal relationships. The conventional Western worldview perceives humans as superior, separate, and dominant over other creatures and nature. This anthropocentric view sees humans as the most important part of the universe. Deep ecology, on the other hand, argues for the importance of shifting our perception to recognize the intrinsic worth and interconnection of all creatures and nature. Moreover, it emphasizes that our true (transpersonal) identity encompasses all nature and the world. It therefore argues for a shift in identity from anthropocentric to biocentric, from egocentric to ecocentric, together with corresponding shifts in attitudes, values, and behavior. Deep ecology goes beyond environmental efforts such as resource conservation and wilderness preservation, which implicitly assume that the primary reason for preserving nature is for human benefit.

Since their worldviews have so much in common, the deep ecology and transpersonal movements obviously have much to offer each other. Deep ecologists could benefit from greater psychological sophistication, while transpersonal psychologists could develop greater ecological sensitivity and concern.

Transpersonal psychology also raises two central issues for deep ecology, the first ontological and the second practical. Deep ecologists call for a transpersonal expansion of identity beyond our skin-encapsulated ego to fulfill Albert Einstein's request that we "embrace all living creatures and all of nature in its beauty." However, some transpersonalists feel that the expansion of identity that deep ecologists propose may be partial because it is usually a horizontal extension encompassing the physical world, but not necessarily a vertical expansion that encompasses other realms of psyche and consciousness.

The second question is how this expansion of identity, be it horizontal, vertical, or both, is to be achieved. Most contemplatives believe that developing a stable transpersonal identity requires long-term inner work. However, deep ecologists do not usually address this issue, and some imply that inner work, particularly spiritual work, is a distraction from the desperately needed work in the world. Yet the Dalai Lama argues that balance between inner and outer work may be essential, and as Eric Damiani said, "Nothing can be changed until we change ourselves."⁵

The possibility of combining the wisdom of both deep ecology and transpersonal psychology in a mutually enriching synthesis to create a transpersonal ecology is obviously attractive. The Australian ecologist Warwick Fox began this synthesis in a thoughtful book appropriately called *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology*.⁸

In "The Tao of Personal and Social Transformation," Duane Elgin suggests that expanded awareness is reflected in a quality of life that seeks harmony with nature, both inner and outer, rather than domination over it. For such people there is no question of their connection with, and responsibility for, the larger whole with which they feel intimately linked. Fewer egocentric desires mean less consumerism, greater voluntary simplicity, less wish to impose one's will on others, and more interest in harmonizing with nature in an ecological, Taoistic manner.

Some of the motives powering these changes are identified by Stanislav and Christina Grof in their paper "Transpersonal Experience and the Global Crisis." They point out that many people who have plumbed their inner depths and had powerful transpersonal experiences find that their values shift automatically toward service and a greater reverence for all life.

The task of forging a psychological understanding and response adequate to the enormity of our global crises is clearly the most urgent challenge facing our generation. Peter Russell suggests that we need no less than "An Inner Manhattan Project," devoting our best human and technical resources to the task.

Clearly, we are in a race between consciousness and catastrophe. There may be no more urgent task for each of us than to apply our transpersonal understanding to the preservation of our planet and nature. The aim is to illuminate the destructive psychological and social forces that have brought us to this turning point in history and transform them into constructive forces for our collective survival, well-being, and awakening.

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3. Porritt, J. *Save the earth*. Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1991.
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6. Walsh, R. *Staying alive: The psychology of human survival*. Boston: New Science Library/Shambhala, 1984.
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