

In Search of the Sacred

Buddhist reflections on the secular

By David Loy

SPRING 2017



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 civilization 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 civilizations 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.

The idea of a secular world was originally one half of a duality—and it remains haunted by the loss of its other half. Modernity developed out of the separation

that ensued when that other half gradually disappeared into the clouds.

The term *secular* (from Latin *saeculum*, “generation, age”) initially referred to the temporal world of earthly travails where we are born, suffer, and die, in contrast to the eternity of one’s heavenly or hellish afterlife. The focus of the contrast eventually shifted to a division between God’s transcendence and a despiritualized material world. God was believed to be the source of meaning, value, and goodness; the world he created came to be understood as a material machine.

At the beginning of the Renaissance, Europeans still understood the earth and its creatures according to a hierarchical paradigm: everything, including human society, has its ordained place within a tiered cosmos not only created but also sustained by God. In the 16th and 17th centuries this medieval worldview collapsed. The main characteristics of the modern world—including the nation-state, capitalism, and mechanistic science—developed and converged during the religious chaos of those centuries.

This crisis was initiated largely by the Protestant Reformation, beginning in the 16th century with the ideas and writings of Luther and spread by means of the printing press Gutenberg had developed in the 1440s. Luther’s translation of the entire Bible from Latin into German in 1534 meant that the common people could read the Bible themselves, and Luther and Calvin eliminated the intricate web of mediation (sacraments, priests, icons, holy days, monasticism, pilgrimages, and so forth) between God and this world—a network that had constituted, in effect, its sacred dimension. For Protestant believers, mystery and miracle became deemphasized in ways that opened the door for the materialistic explanations of science and the materialistic concerns of capitalism. In *The Sacred Canopy*, the American sociologist Peter Berger describes this emerging worldview as one in which “reality is polarized between a radically transcendent divinity and a radically ‘fallen’ humanity that . . . is devoid of sacred qualities. Between them lies an altogether ‘natural’ universe, God’s creation to be sure, but in itself bereft of

numinosity.”

The result of this hugely complex historical process (which I of course have had to greatly simplify here) is that religion became privatized. God was booted upstairs, far above the sordid affairs of this world, even as the principle of a direct and personal relationship with God became sanctified. “Every man is his own priest,” declared Luther. Desacralization occurred because God came to be understood as dwelling far above this corrupted world and also deep inside the human heart. But where God all but ceased to dwell was in the everyday world of our social lives. As the American theologian Dan Maguire put it in *Ethics for a Small Planet*: “To project the experience of the sacred onto an immaterial God is to shortchange sacredness as a dimension of material life and turn it into an object of worship that is beyond our world and thus alien to life.” We today are still struggling to cope with the consequences of that split.

These changes opened up the way for innovative scientific perspectives. It’s important to remember that the early scientists most responsible for the new worldview—Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton—were also deeply religious, and understood this world only in relationship to a higher one. They all still believed in a Creator, albeit an increasingly distant one. They developed a new paradigm: God rules the universe not through a hierarchy of spiritual subordinates but with a rational system of “hidden laws.” We use the same word for *laws* passed by a legislature and the *laws* of nature because the architects of the modern view believed that natural laws were also ordained, namely by God. According to René Descartes, “God sets up mathematical laws in nature as a king sets up laws in his kingdom.”

Galileo expressed this revolutionary perspective when he wrote that “the Book of Nature is written in mathematical symbols” by “the great Geometer.” The key to its hidden meanings was therefore to be found by discovering the mathematical laws that determine how things interact with each other. Whereas the medieval

worldview saw the influence of God filtering through a hierarchy of agents, of varying degrees of blessedness and power according to their station and role, the great Geometer was not to be identified with the fallen world he ruled impersonally from afar. As the astronomer Johannes Kepler wrote: “My aim is to show that the celestial machine is to be likened not to a divine organism but to a clockwork.”

Since God was the ultimate source of all goodness, this was also the basis of an increasingly sharp split between fact and value. For both believers and nonbelievers, religion became more literalist. In place of the traditional symbols and practices that conveyed meaning in different ways, religion’s core was now assumed to be a set of propositions about the world and its Creator. As the Deity gradually disappeared into the heavens, the world he left behind slowly but surely became devalued. This opened up exciting new possibilities. Those who comprehended God’s hidden laws could use them to manipulate nature for their own purposes. But as the environmental philosopher Carolyn Merchant points out, this came at a considerable price: “The process of mechanizing the world picture removed the controls over environmental exploitation that were an inherent part of the organic view that nature was alive, sensitive, and responsive to human action.”

For the Protestant reformers, secular life was a preparation for our ultimate destiny: this world is a *means* to a higher *end*. However, as the sacred pole—God, the guarantor that life is meaningful and salvation possible—faded away, the original religious reason for that distinction (eternal life in heaven) was lost. The evaporation of the sacred left us with only the secular pole. As the mode of life became increasingly separated from any religious perspective or moral supervision, modern consciousness grew bereft of the spiritual orientation the Reformation had originally promoted.

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 desacralized 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 secularization continues to remold 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 rationalize 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*?

In fact, there is a fundamental problem with the mechanistic model. A machine presupposes a machine *maker*: someone who designs and constructs it. A machinelike cosmos made sense as long as the universe was understood as having been created by God according to his own plan and purposes. As mentioned above, this was how the founders of modern science—Galileo, Kepler, Descartes, Newton, and others—understood the laws of nature. Without a Creator, however, the mechanistic model breaks down.

This does not, however, mean that we need to return to the idea of a transcendent Mechanic. Rather, the world can be understood as an organism, which constantly reorganizes itself and evolves new and more complex structures. As the philosopher Ervin Laszlo writes in *Science and the Reenchantment of the Cosmos*, this emerging scientific paradigm shares much in common with traditional, premodern understandings:

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 civilization: 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 “symbolizes 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-organizing*.

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

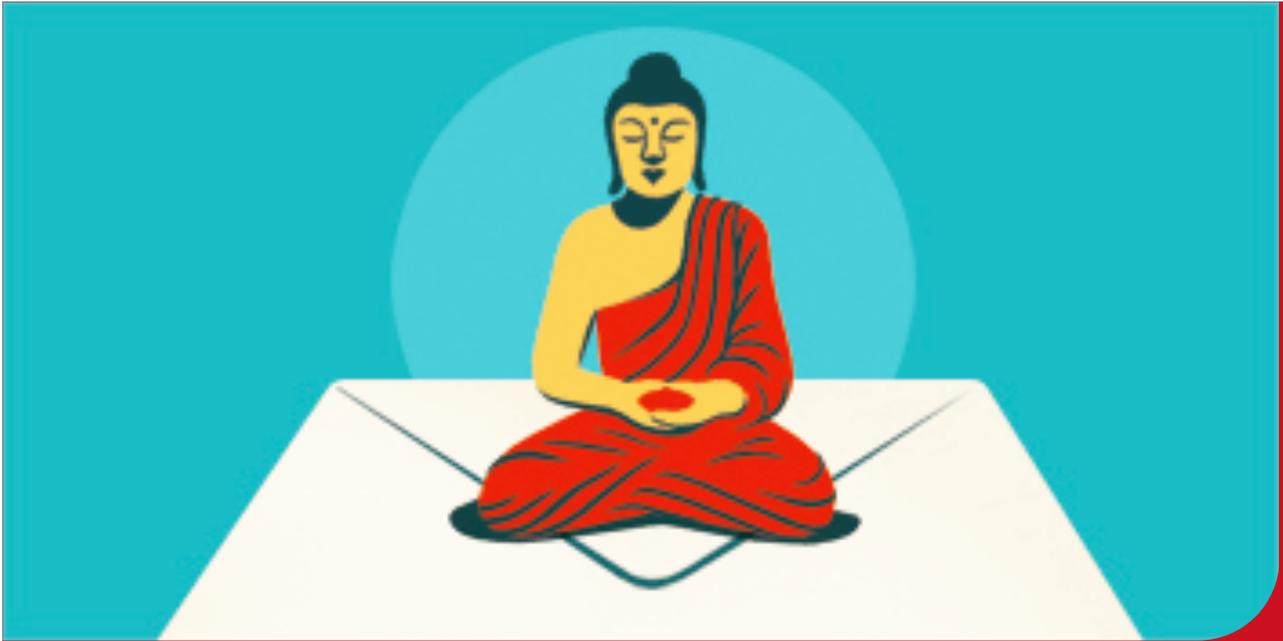
play. If the cosmos is a great organism, it is something more than the place where we happen to reside. Human beings are an organ of that far greater coherent whole.

In *The First Three Minutes*, the American physicist and Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg famously claimed that “the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.” But to examine the universe objectively and conclude that it is pointless misses, well, the point. Who is observing the universe? Who is comprehending that it is pointless? Someone separate from it, or someone who is an inextricable part of it? If cosmologists themselves are a manifestation of the same universe that they study, then with them the universe is comprehending itself. When we come to see the universe in a new way, the universe is itself coming to see itself in a new way. Our ability to understand the universe is another product of the same laws we have been discovering.

Weinberg’s bleak conclusion is very different from the traditional mythologies of ancient civilizations. For all of them, 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, emphasized 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 nonattachment developed in meditation can allow us to dis-identify with either side of any dualism and realize ourselves in and as the whole. As the great 13th-century Zen master Eihei Dogen wrote, “I came to realize 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 recognize 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. Recognizing 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 realization. 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-organizing cosmos wakes up.



Dharma to your inbox

Sign up for Tricycle's newsletters

Your email here

SIGN UP

David Loy is a professor, writer, and Zen teacher in the Sanbo Kyodan tradition of Japanese Zen Buddhism.



VIEW COMMENTS