ABSTRACT

This Thesis examines the environmental crisis’s sources, consequences, and antidotes through the lens of Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics. The teachings of the individuals from these three wisdom traditions, while distinct in many ways, describe the nature of the universe and the source of human suffering in a remarkably consistent manner. They say that while we perceive of everything in this world as independent, fixed, and knowable, it is in fact deeply interrelated, impermanent, and unknowable. The environmental crisis – the aggregate of detrimental ecological changes resulting in suffering and loss of life – is a symptom of this pervasive disconnect. It pits environmentalists against non-environmentalists, people against nature, and self against all “others”. It leads to a worldview in which we relate to everything and everyone based on utility, worth, and appeal, rather than the intrinsic value that the contemplatives avow is common to all of existence. They say that the antidote is intimacy with all things. Wonder, humility, trust, and perseverance prepare and encourage us along the journey to discovering who we really are and how to act compassionately in the world, such that divisions are healed rather than perpetuated. This Thesis explores the teachings of Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics in four parts: (I) their understanding of the nature of the universe and humanity as interrelated, impermanent, and mysterious; (II) their diagnosis of the environmental crisis and barriers to addressing it; (III) their insights into living well, together on this planet; and (IV) the mindsets and states of being to cultivate on the journey to healing human and environmental suffering.
DEDICATION

To all sentient and insentient beings of the past, present, and future
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PERSONAL STATEMENT

Throughout my time working on this Thesis, I have danced between despair and hope, fear and courage, exhaustion and aliveness, paralysis and wonder. I imagined that engaging with the topic of the environmental crisis would yield no major new revelations, but rather a synthesis of concepts and facts with which I was already familiar, seen through the lens of three wisdom traditions as a source of fresh perspective. Instead, I found myself deeply moved as I re-encountered the stories, facts, and figures of human and environmental suffering on this planet. I went through periods of being overwhelmed by the extent and depth of pain, desecration, and violence exerted by human beings on other human beings and the ecosystems we inhabit. However, whereas previous encounters with this pain had led to feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness, this time, as I engaged with it, a shift began to take place in my perception of these realities.

Midway through this Thesis project, I attended a Global Forum hosted by the Presencing Institute during which we had a session on Social Presencing Theater – an activity that explores system change and emerging possibilities through embodied movement (Presencing Institute). After a preparatory conversation about the system at hand (my group’s system was “consumption”), we selected ten key stakeholders (“the consumer,” “the marginalized person,” “the earth,” “the unborn child,” “the mother,” etc.) and created a human sculpture depicting the relationships between these stakeholders through our postures and relative positions. From that place of embodying the existing system, we silently began interacting with the other stakeholders in a way that we felt would lead to a system for greater wellbeing. I was embodying the “unborn
child,” and I wrote about my experience shortly after the activity. In the midst of this foreign way of interacting with strangers, I was struck by the intensity and honesty of the emotions that arose:

As I took my place in the human sculpture, I tried to wholeheartedly step into what it might feel like to be an unborn child (admittedly, a stretch of the imagination). My eyes fell on the person embodying the earth and I walked towards it, stopping a few yards away and crouching close to the ground, my right arm extended in its direction. We were meant to speak a single phrase that gave voice to the essence of our position and feeling. I heard myself say, “Look! Please!” I felt a desperate pain and fear, seeing the earth in trouble and so little care being directed towards its wellbeing – and therefore, so little care being directed towards my future wellbeing. The rest of the sculpture formed around us, until all ten entities were in place. We held our positions silently for a moment and then a chime was struck, signaling that we should begin to explore possibilities for a better system to emerge from the current one, all the while trying to stay in our bodies and “felt understanding” of the system, rather than our thoughts about what would intellectually make sense.

I rose from my crouched position until I was standing tall, rooted, and strong. I extended my hand to rest gently on the earth, and felt the beat of a heart. Beat. Beat. Beat. A surge of tenderness and compassion flowed through me. And a fierceness. Like a mother standing fiercely in front of her young, a deep rippling growl emanating from her throat in warning. DO NOT harm my child. A fierceness that comes not from fear, but from love without bounds or conditions... that all-encompassing love that dissolves the sense of separation from another and releases any fear of loss or danger to oneself. It
was not an aggressive fierceness, but the presence of love that will not shift, will not step aside.

It was a shift from fear to love, child to mother, and despair to courage. I recalled Wendell Berry’s response to a question about whether he thought we would succeed in addressing the issues threatening our world. He said, “We don’t have a right to ask whether we’re going to succeed or not. The only question we have a right to ask is ‘What is the right thing to do?’ ‘What does the earth require of us if we want to continue to live on it?’” (Berry, *Wendell Berry, Poet & Prophet*). From this subtly but powerfully different view of the environmental crisis and my role in addressing it, I understood the wisdom of Berry’s words. Does a mother, in an instant of great danger to her child, fill her mind with the question of whether she will succeed? No, that would distract her from responding with all of her faculties to the situation at hand. We need to have a long-term view of environmental issues and their potential solutions, and yet, in order to discover those, we begin with “What is the right thing to do” now and here? I realized how much the fear of failure, on a personal and global level, was limiting my ability to see and respond to the issues of human and environmental wellbeing about which I care so deeply. This recent realization reconnected me to the sense of wonder that filled me as a child.

My memories of growing up are full of time spent outdoors, marveling at the beautiful complexity and infinite unknowable worlds present just outside our walls and doors. Standing on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Augrabies Falls, feeling my heart pounding as I snow-shoed up a mountain in a blizzard, or swimming across a wild and frigid river, I always felt most alive and most myself when I was in intimate contact with
landscapes that pulled me into the immediacy of life in that moment.

I remember the shock, pain, and fear I felt when I first learned of the harm people were causing other species and ecosystems. *We are creating a hole in our ozone layer?! We are responsible for thousands of animals’ extinctions?! We are poisoning our rivers, soil, and ourselves?!* My young mind grappled with these facts and concluded that something was terribly wrong. I deeply wanted to protect the health and beauty of this planet and its people.

One summer in high school, I found a grassroots Peruvian organization that accepted volunteers to work in communities developing sustainable livelihoods and action around environmental protection. Living in Boca Amigo, a community of ten families in the Amazon rainforest, a full day’s boat ride away from the nearest town, I began to see the extent to which the wellbeing of people and the ecosystems they inhabit are intimately connected. If it did not rain for a while, our water came from the muddy river rather than the rain barrels. If the vegetable gardens failed, our produce came from the nearest town ten hours away by motorized canoe, which meant that a lot of it was spoiled when it arrived. If we produced non-biodegradable trash, we had to burn it and suffer with dense smoke blowing through the community for days. The degrees of separation between our lives and the environment in Boca Amigo were vastly fewer than at home in the U.S., where our faucets never ran out of water and our trash disappeared from the end of the driveway. And yet, though these two ways of life had many tangible differences, the experience of being a human and living with other people shared an essential sameness.

In my experience both of life in this Peruvian community and of life in the U.S.,
there were moments of joy – sharing stories and laughter by candlelight with nighttime rainforest noises in the background in Peru and sharing stories and laughter under electrical light with music in the background in the U.S.; there were moments of great sadness – experiencing the death of a gentleman in Boca Amigo by boat accident and the death of a peer in the U.S. by car accident; and there were moments of stress and worry – working with the adults of Boca Amigo to develop new livelihoods following the exhaustion of hardwoods to harvest and sell and worrying with my high school peers about whether we would get into college and find good jobs. I was beginning to see the simultaneous truth of two apparently paradoxical facts: circumstances and resources have a significant impact on one’s life AND lives with or without an abundance of resources and favorable circumstances include both suffering and happiness.

The wellbeing of people and the wellbeing of the environment became my two passions, and I searched for ways to have an impact in both areas. But even as I began to find my stride working in concrete ways on these issues, there were questions that sat in the corner of my mind, demanding my attention: Why do we cause each other, ourselves, and the earth harm? What is true happiness and how does it come into being?

As I have engaged with these questions, I have realized that there are many different modes and types of understanding. It seems to me that our world increasingly favors intellectual knowledge and discounts other forms of knowledge. Through my nascent journey to better understand myself and the remarkable world I inhabit, I have noticed that direct understanding, which may not present itself intellectually or rationally, is of great importance to me. The shift I experienced from seeing and responding from a place of fear to seeing and responding from a place of love and wonder was not an
intellectual one at all, and yet, I felt the profound way in which it transformed my view of the world.

The words of the men and women in this Thesis have opened up new ways of answering my questions about human and environmental suffering and wellbeing, and I hope that this written exploration offers others similar moments of reflection and inspiration.
INTRODUCTION

In the midst of our hurried world, where moments of pause and silence seem increasingly rare, Pablo Neruda’s poem “Keeping Quiet” strips the human condition bare. He writes,

Now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,
let’s not speak in any language;
let’s stop for a second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines;
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness. (Neruda)

Men and women who have taken up contemplative practices throughout history speak of the strangeness that first emerges in stillness and silence. Naked and exposed, human consciousness seems to enter into a dance with life that invites such descriptions as mysterious, intimate, and boundless.

As Neruda says later in his poem, being still and quiet “should not be confused with total inactivity. Life is what it is about” (Neruda). The numerous and complex threats to local and global ecosystems today are fundamentally about “Life” – its different forms and their interrelationships. In a time in which looking at the state of life on this planet often invites anxiety, uncertainty, and confusion about the way forward, these contemplatives offer powerful perspectives.

Thus, this paper turns to contemplatives from Buddhism, Taoism, and Christian mysticism for insights into the sources, consequences, and antidotes to the “environmental crisis,” the term we will use to describe all ways in which life on earth is
being diminished and rendered impossible.

Though the abandonment of language and all other intermediaries is a necessary precursor to contemplatives’ direct experience of life, “these persons let something of their experience overflow in figures, comparisons and similitudes” (St. John 469). Exploring their experiences and insights through language is therefore challenging but not impossible, and it invites us to look more closely at the nature and purpose of language in our lives.

As human beings, we are constantly creating stories in our minds and reacting to them in the world. Stories are “the way we make sense of the events happening,” and they acknowledge that we experience events as temporal, contextual, and meaningful (Johnstone and Macy 14). They shape and are shaped by our views, values, and assumptions. We are storytellers because we are not simply conscious, but self-conscious (Underhill 209).

The Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics in this work come from different times, places, cultures, and traditions, but they all concur that the divisions resulting from this self-consciousness are at the root of the disharmony, conflict, and suffering in the world. The very capacity that has led human beings to populate and transform this entire world, to create things that are not only useful but also beautiful, and to reflect upon all of these accomplishments is also the source of the atrocities inflicted by one person on another, the mental anguish of knowing that someday we will die, and the rampant destruction of the ecosystems upon which we depend for survival.

Self-consciousness inherently creates a separation between subject and object, me and you, and people and environment, and this perception of separateness leads to
suffering and disharmony because it is in conflict with the true nature of the world. The teachings of the individuals from these three wisdom traditions, while certainly distinct in many ways, describe the nature of the universe and the source of human suffering in a remarkably consistent manner. They say that while we perceive of everything in this world as independent, fixed, and knowable, it is in fact deeply interrelated, impermanent, and unknowable. Just as bending your knee in a direction that opposes its nature causes physical pain, living in conflict with the nature of the world causes suffering.

The environmental crisis is a symptom of this pervasive disconnect. We need look no further than the stories that attempt to make sense of the environmental issues today. Chris Johnstone and Joanna Macy describe two dominant narratives about the current state of the world: Business as Usual and the Great Unraveling (14).

Business as Usual is embodied in the following exchange between a journalist and Ari Fleischer, President Bush’s press secretary:

Journalist: Does the President believe that, given the amount of energy Americans consume per capita, how much it exceeds any other citizen in any other country in the world, does the President believe we need to correct our lifestyles to address the energy problem?

Fleischer: That’s a big no. The President believes that it’s an American way of life, and that it should be the goal of policy makers to protect the American way of life. (Johnstone and Macy 15)

Fleischer’s emphatic response demonstrates his unyielding support for the set of values that defines current patterns of consumption and production. Peter Senge, Senior Lecturer in Leadership and Sustainability at MIT, describes this reaction to environmental and social issues as “muddling through,” which “embraces a combination of working to preserve the status quo combined with an almost hypnotic fascination with wondrous new technologies that, so the belief goes, will solve our problems” (Scharmer xii). The biologist Edward O. Wilson describes the persona championing Business as Usual as the
“economist” who asserts “Ease up. In spite of two centuries of doomsaying, humanity is enjoying unprecedented prosperity. There are environmental problems, certainly, but they can be solved. Think of them as the detritus of progress, to be cleared away” (Wilson 24).

On the other side of the fence, in the worldview of the Great Unraveling, Wilson gives voice to the “ecologist” persona. The ecologist replies, “Yes, it’s true that the human condition has improved dramatically in many ways. But you’ve painted only half the picture… We can no longer afford to ignore the dependency of the economy and social progress on the environmental resource base… Earth has lost its ability to regenerate” (Wilson 26). Although the ecologist acknowledges the economist’s evaluation of the human condition to a certain extent, the ecologist points to the environmental resource base as the necessary first and last measure of sustainable economic or social progress, while the economist dismisses these as side effects which will be solved by continuing down the current path. Senge describes the strategy of those dwelling in the Great Unraveling as “fighting back,” which “combines a longing for an earlier social and moral order with anger at having lost control over our future” (Scharmer xii). Whereas Business as Usual seeks to protect the American way of life, the Great Unraveling accuses it as destining our society and global ecosystem for collapse.

These two stories of our times are in direct opposition to one another on the surface; however, they share the commonalities of being aggressively defensive about their views, rejecting full responsibility, and viewing people and nature as separate.

Author Zadie Smith describes the absurd lengths to which people go in defending their side of the argument, whether they subscribe more to the Business as Usual view or the Great Unraveling:
During Superstorm Sandy, I climbed down fifteen floors, several months pregnant, in the darkness, just so I could get a Wi-Fi signal and e-mail a climate-change-denying acquaintance with this fresh evidence of his idiocy. And it only takes a polar vortex—a pocket of cold air that may lower temperatures—for one’s inbox to fill up with gleeful counternarratives from right-leaning relatives—as if this were all a game, and the only thing hanging in the balance is whether or not you or your crazy uncle in Florida are “alarmists” or “realists”. (Z. Smith)

Zadie Smith’s anecdote illuminates the relationship between people’s views on climate change and their personal identities. What a person believes has become synonymous with who they are. She aptly points to the strange juxtaposition of what hangs in the balance in these exchanges; on the one hand it is an issue of “whether or not you or your crazy uncle in Florida are ‘alarmists’ or ‘realists’,” and on the other hand it is an issue of whether or not the climate will change to the extent that the earth is no longer conducive to human life.

With this defensiveness comes a rejection of responsibility for the degradation of ecosystems. Business as Usual claims environmental issues are unintended consequences of technological advances that will be resolved by future innovations. The Great Unraveling attributes them to the irresponsible actions of the other side (i.e. Business as Usual) or to inherent flaws of human nature. Senge agrees with a friend and leader in the environmental movement who says, “I am becoming convinced that many of the most aggressive environmentalists believe that the human species is deeply flawed and does not deserve to survive” (Scharmer xii). In other words, the great majority of responsibility for environmental issues is appropriated to other people, technology, or human nature.

A third similarity beneath the surface of these two stories is the view of people and nature as separate. Business as Usual views nature as “a commodity to be used for human purposes,” and the Great Unraveling deems people dangerous to the wellbeing of
nature (Johnstone and Macy 15). In both cases, human beings and the environment are separate entities and differently valued.

Upon closer examination of these three similarities, it becomes clear that they are all views originating in division: alarmists versus realists, technology versus people, me versus my flawed human nature, people versus the environment. While it may seem ordinary to frame issues as competing interests, the Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics assert that all of our troubles begin with the self-consciousness that separates our perceived self (or ego) from all other parts of our self, from other people, and from all of existence. In this way, the narratives of Business and Usual and the Great Unraveling are alike. They pit people against the environment and against one another. Farmer, poet, and conservationist Wendell Berry, amongst others, is reframing the influence of the Judeo-Christian tradition on Western culture’s relationship to the natural world (Davis). He reflects upon the effect of distance and division between people and the environment:

A minor problem, perhaps, is the tendency of materialism to objectify the world, dividing it from the "objective observer" who studies it. The world thus becomes "the environment," a word… which means "surroundings," a place that one is in but not of. The question raised by this objectifying procedure and its vocabulary is whether the problems of conservation can be accurately defined by an objective observer who observes at an intellectual remove, forgetting that he eats, drinks, and breathes the so-called environment. (Berry, Life is a Miracle 215)

The wisdom traditions respond with a resounding “no” to Berry’s question of whether “the problems of conservation can be accurately defined by an objective observer who observes at an intellectual remove.” Through direct experience, individuals throughout the ages who have deeply studied their minds have realized the extent to which observation is subjective. The intellect is incredibly powerful and yet solely relying on it confines the ways in which we can know the world.

Practitioners within each of the three wisdom traditions have found that what we
Evelyn Underhill, a scholar of mysticism from early 20th century England, describes how the gymnastics of the mind are quite amazing in their efficacy of processing sense-data and asserting that this composite picture “is the external world”:

From the messages received through those senses… she constructs that ‘sense-world’. … As the impressions come in – or rather those interpretations of the original impressions which her nervous system supplies – she pounces on them… She sorts, accepts, rejects, combines: and then triumphantly produces from them a “concept” which is, she says, the external world. (Underhill 6)

Without a closer examination of the patterns of sorting, accepting, rejecting, and combining, we are blind to the ways in which “we behold at any specific moment not ‘that which is,’ but ‘that which we are’” (Underhill 12). The contemplatives intimate that our perception of the external world mirrors our internal world, much like art is a window into the artist in the moment of its creation.

The Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics describe the pervasive sense amongst human beings of lacking, incompleteness, and dissatisfaction, which leads to desires, appetites, and passions. These arise from feeling and seeing the world as divided and are reflected everywhere; i.e., living through this lens, we see ourselves, other people, and the environment as lacking. In this framework of existence, it makes complete sense that we reach elsewhere to fulfill the sense of lacking. Ari Fleischer’s equation of unbounded consumption and the American way of life is just one example of how entrenched this pattern is and how deeply our sense of human incompleteness relates to environmental impact. This mode of thinking is being perpetuated in many proposed solutions to the environmental crisis by simply modifying how these desires are met rather than questioning the desires themselves. Furthermore, creating a separation between people and the environment allows us to use parts of the so-called environment
in order to satisfy these desires. As we will see, these wisdom traditions claim such behavior is as nonsensical as cutting off the right leg to replace a broken left leg.

Thus, the fundamental problem is our perception of the world as divided. The individuals whose voices are contained in this work talk about their direct realization that this perception is simply an illusion, and that every person and this entire universe is not lacking but complete, and that there are no absolute divisions. The universe, in their descriptions, is whole and unified, interrelated beyond any conception communicable by language. Living from this place of understanding is entirely different to living from an understanding of the world as divided. Knowing that the universe is whole and interrelated, pain and discomfort of physical and mental forms still exist, but there is no struggle – no extra suffering from wishing it were another way.

The path from viewing the world as divided to viewing the world as whole is indeed a path or journey. These contemplatives emphasize experiencing and living fully as the means of discovering new ways of being. Intellectual or rational thinking, while helpful in many ways, are insufficient on this journey. This insight extends to understanding and addressing the environmental crisis and asserts that technical fixes will not be enough. Changing our technologies and policies is critical, especially as a way of buying time, but ultimately, a change is consciousness will be necessary to address the root causes of the environmental crisis. Chapter I and Chapter II discuss this fundamental shift by looking at the world as it is now, through the lens of the contemplatives: unified in an absolute sense (I) and full of conflict and suffering in a relative sense (II).

While fully exploring and communicating the teachings of these individuals through this paper is impossible, as it is necessarily an intellectual and textual work,
introducing the ways of thinking and being embodied in their words and lives can serve as a touchstone for asking questions, reflecting, and trying different approaches in our individual and collective work towards creating a healthier, more just, and more fulfilling world. Chapter III and Chapter IV address the embodiments of this fundamental shift by exploring the contemplatives’ perspectives on how to live well on this planet (III) and how to embody this wisdom in addressing the environmental crisis (IV).

Ultimately, shining the light of these Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics on the complex issues we collectively refer to as the environmental crisis reveals that we will move towards our fullest potential if our motivations arise from a sense of intimacy with the world, trust in humanity, humble perseverance through creativity, and wonder for the universe we inhabit. Cultivating these mindsets and ways of being instead of the fear, forfeit, distrust, and despair that currently pervade our responses to existing and predicted challenges will allow for a joyful, expansive, collaborative, and optimistic effort to transform our world.
CHAPTER I: THE UNIFIED UNIVERSE

Though each wisdom tradition frames the fundamental problem they are addressing somewhat differently – sin in Christian mysticism; disharmony with the Tao in Taoism; and suffering in Buddhism – all three are remarkably aligned in their articulation of the antidote: the realization of the unity, interrelatedness, and intimacy of all things. This chapter describes the fundamental problem and its antidote in the words of men and women from these three traditions.

Christianity, Daoism, and Buddhism describe the path towards the realization of this unity each with their own distinct language, but the core means described are alike. They assert that people cannot fully understand themselves and the world through logic, language, or intellectually transferable knowledge. They say that it is not through observing the world, people, and oneself from a distance and looking for patterns that ultimately alleviates the sense of incompleteness, disharmony, and suffering that instigated their searches, but rather through becoming more intimate with everything.

These teachings offer important insights into addressing the environmental crisis. Though empirical data and scientific investigation of environmental distress and destruction is critical, the wisdom traditions teach that it is not enough. As Wendell Berry says, “things cannot survive as categories but only as individual creatures living uniquely where they live” (Berry, *Life is a Miracle* 367). Berry is encouraging a shift in mindset from seeing the world as a very complex machine with components, inputs, outputs, and clearly delineated relationships between them to loving the world as a whole and being deeply familiar with one’s place in it. The practitioners of these wisdom traditions
Similarly find the root causes of the environmental crisis in people’s views of themselves and the world. Interestingly, the seeds of renewal and healing are also found in these views – through investigating them deeply, rather than dismissing them as faulty.

Evelyn Underhill shines a light on some of the essentials of this journey – for it is a journey and not an instantaneous transformation of perspective:

[Mysticism] implies, indeed, the abolition of individuality; of that hard separateness, that “I, Me, Mine” which makes of man a finite isolated thing. It is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy no transcendental curiosity, to obtain no otherworldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love. (Underhill 85)

Underhill describes several core characteristics of the mystic’s, which is another word for contemplative’s, journey and experience. There is a sense that the individual standpoint is limited and that there is something organic in the human being that seeks to transcend this sense of being finite and isolated. Furthermore, there is a realization through instinct or trial and error that this journey involves surrender and cannot be driven by desire for personal gain of any sort. This does not mean that the instinct is one of self-sacrifice or martyrdom, for those are just different forms of seeking personal gain. It has more to do with surrendering to a deep acceptance and a relinquishment of the certainty that everything is as it was thought to be. When Underhill says that it is essentially a “movement of the heart,” she clarifies that “By the word heart, of course we here mean not merely ‘the seat of the affections,’ but rather the inmost sanctuary of personal being, the synthesis of its love and will, the very source of its energy and life” (Underhill 85).

Similarly, love, which is often used by the Christian mystics but less so in the Taoist and Buddhist traditions, refers not to lust but to an instinct to be closer and more intimate with what appears to be “other” – to loosen the binds of individualism and peer “around
the next corner, into the darkness” (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 192).

Evelyn Underhill also provides a framing that helps in understanding the language and emphases of different contemplatives and wisdom traditions. Through her study of many different mystics and their teachings, she found that “the full spiritual consciousness of the true mystic is developed not in one, but in two apparently opposite but really complementary directions” and that they tend to develop in one direction first, which shapes the language and experienced unfolding of this expansion of consciousness (Underhill 43). These two directions or modes of reacting to reality can be described in many ways: “Immanence and Transcendence, Being and Becoming, Eternity and Time… ‘Tranquility according to His essence, activity according to His nature: perfect stillness, perfect fecundity’ says Ruysbroeck” (Underhill 44).

The mystics that tend towards Transcendence are first awakened by the “impersonal glory of a transfigured universe” where they perceive “in every manifestation of life a sacramental meaning; a loveliness, a wonder, a heightened significance…” (Underhill 237, 43). Their language is often “expressive of great and boundless spaces”: a “still desert,” a “vast sea,” an “unplumbed abyss,” “emptiness,” the “nothing,” the “Dark,” “the Unconditioned, for whom (which) we have no words, and whom (which) all our poor symbols insult”1 (Underhill 403). The mystics describe their “final attainment as a transfusion of their selves… an entrance upon a new order of life, so high and so harmonious with Reality that it can only be called divine” (Underhill 503). Though some of Underhill’s language connects more with the Christian mystics, there is

1 Although Underhill describes the experience of “ultimate Reality” through the lens of Transcendence as one better understood as a “state” rather than a “person,” she still uses personal pronouns for that Reality. I have added “which” as a possible means of alleviating that discrepancy.
resonance with Buddhism and Daoism as well, especially the emphasis on not-knowing, emptiness, nothing, and dark, as discussed in subsequent sections.

The mystics that tend towards Immanence begin their journeys with an experience of the “personal touch of love transfiguring the soul” where “the reaction of the self takes the form of intimate affection” (Underhill 237). They are “governed by a predominating sense of the nearness, intimacy, and sweetness” with “Reality [which] is more a Person” than a state (Underhill 408). A Christian mystic who describes his experiences in this way often “speaks of the consummation of his communion, its perfect and permanent form, as the Spiritual Marriage of his soul with God” (Underhill 496). This aspect of the expansion in consciousness describes the experience of discovering and becoming intimately familiar with our inner world. Buddhism points to the utmost importance of “studying the self to forget the self,” and Taoism speaks of the spontaneity that arises from being intimately in tune with one’s nature (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 27).

In exploring the teachings of Christian mystics, Buddhists, and Taoists it is fascinating to see the extent to which the journeys towards becoming fully awake and alive in the world share key elements. In all three of these wisdom traditions, there are aspects of the journeys and culminating experiential realizations of the world free from conditioned perspectives that describe the Transcendent and Immanent, as well as the perfect unity of these two movements. Eihei Dogen, a 13th century Zen Buddhist Master, writes in his “Mountains and Rivers Sutra” about the effect of looking at reality from particular views:

If we regard it as only flowing, the word *flowing* is an insult to water; for it is (the same as) imposing *nonflowing*. Water is nothing but the real form of water just as it is. Water is the water virtue; it is not the flowing. (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 232)
While from one perspective water can be said to be flowing and from another nonflowing, both of these perceptions are based on relative views of water but fail to encompass water “just as it is.” The mystics go beyond language to describe their experiences of reality by using combinations of words that have paradoxical meanings, such as “nothing” and “everything.” Therefore, we will look closely at the relationship between descriptions that appear at odds with one another, within and across traditions.

For each of the three wisdom traditions, we will explore the contemplatives’ understanding of the impetus for a spiritual journey, the elements and unfolding of the journey, the culmination in experiential understanding, and the bearing all of this has on the environmental crisis.

**Christian Mystics**

What is it that moves men and women such as St. Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, and others to seek “Eternal Truth, True Love, and Loved Eternity,” which they also call God (Underhill 111)? St. Teresa says, “Nothing can Satiate a reasonable soul, but only thou: and having of thee, who art indeed all, nothing could be said to be wanting to her… because once to have seen thee is to have learnt all things” (Underhill 106). It is this inability to satiate through other means – this “divine unrest” and sense of “human incompleteness,” which the Christian mystics so passionately speak of as compelling them to journey towards a “fully conscious, fully living soul” (Underhill 111). They affirm that every human being experiences this hunger, longing to be complete, and that we mistakenly look for completeness in worldly things, such as money, fame, power, and pleasure, but even if these prizes satiate for a
moment, the hunger will return again and again until we look to the source of those desires.

Teresa of Avila describes the way in which appetites fill a person’s entire view of the world, so that they cannot see beyond them:

They resemble a person entering a chamber full of, with eyes clogged and half closed with dust. Though the room itself is light, he cannot see because of his self-imposed impediment. In the same way, these fierce and wild beasts blind the eyes of the beginner, so that he sees nothing but them. (Avila 25)

These “fierce and wild beasts” are the primal desires that emerge from our drive to survive. Though necessary in assuring we continue to live, when they become the sole focus, they “clog our eyes with dust.”

For these reasons, the Christian mystic’s journey includes what is called mortification, which involves a dissolving of the appetites and attachments to worldly things, including, at its most profound level, to the individual self. As Evelyn Underhill explains, “This mortifying process is rendered necessary, not because the legitimate exercise of the senses is opposed to Divine Reality, but because those senses have usurped a place beyond their station; become the focus of energy, steadily drained the vitality of the self” (Underhill 265). Therefore, mortification is not a denial of basic human needs or a demand for ascetic practices, but rather a realization that the capacity for human experience of this world goes far beyond the fulfillment of those basic needs. Making the senses the focus of energy can lead to overindulgence, greed, pride, and other states of mind and being that are not conducive to true human happiness.

Is it not this seeking to satisfy through acquiring more – above and beyond our basic needs for wellbeing – that has fueled our overconsumption and depleted the world’s natural resources at an accelerating rate? These mystics report from deep within their
personal journeys that we not only will never be satisfied by the pursuit of worldly goods, but also cannot imagine how profoundly fulfilled we could be if we set our hearts and minds on a different course. Meister Eckhart says, “I am sure that if a soul knew the very least of all that Being means, it would never turn away from it” (Underhill 111). Though their language may at times sound otherworldly, the Christian mystics assert that what they call the journey towards union with God is nothing other than the journey of “healing our human incompleteness” – it is “seen as the ‘one way out’ for the awakened spirit of man” (Underhill 111).

Evelyn Underhill describes this full awakening as a “definite psychological experience,” which is the process of bringing the whole self into consciousness:

> It shows itself not merely as an attitude of mind and heart, but as a form of organic life. It is not a theory of the intellect or a hunger, however passionate, of the heart: but a definite and peculiar development of the whole self, conscious and unconscious, under the spur of such a hunger: a remaking of the whole character on high levels in the interests of the transcendental life. (Underhill 107)

In this way, the mystics understand the development of their spiritual consciousness to not be separate from the organic and human development of their whole person. It involves bringing the “aggregate of those powers, parts, or qualities of the whole self which at any given moment are not conscious, or that the Ego is not conscious of… the best and the worst, the most savage and most spiritual parts of the character, [which] are bottled up ‘below the threshold’” into consciousness (Underhill 63). Since the Christian mystics believe that human beings are created in the image of God, and God is “all in all – complete and boundariless,” people must have the potential to be complete as well. The Christian mystics’ journey is to confirm this belief through their own experience.

The sense of being incomplete and yet feeling that there is a more complete way
of being available to humans sparks the desire to journey in that direction, no matter what the challenges. St. Teresa speaks about the depth of love for God necessary on this journey:

  Nothing can bring us to this sight but love. But what love must it be? Not a sensible love only, a childish love, a love which seeketh itself more than the beloved. No, no, but it must be an ardent love, a pure love, a courageous love, a love of charity, an humble love, and a constant love, not worn out with labours, not daunted with any difficulties. (Underhill 106)

It is this kind of love that the Christian mystics speak so fervently about as the motivation, the path, and the end of their journey towards union with God. This love moves a person to let go of the ego, of the rigid perspectives regarding the self and the world, and of attachment to comforts, pleasures, and worldly goods, in order to seek greater intimacy with all things – with God.

According to the Christian mystics, the path towards union with God follows three stages, which are experienced and communicated in each individual’s particular language: the Purgative Way, the Illuminative Way, and the Unitive Life. For Eckhart, this journey involves becoming thoroughly “detached” from the “passions and appetites,” which leads to “the birth of God in the soul” (Eckhart xxvii). Teresa of Avila describes with beautiful imagery and metaphor a journey through the mansions of a castle, making one’s way to the innermost chamber, which is God’s “dwelling place in the soul,” (Avila 152). St. John describes the series of Dark Nights in which the soul is prepared through “true mortification” – “dies to itself and all things” – in order to reach “divine union of the soul with God” (St. John 361).

The Purgative Way seems to begin in earnest only after a “long period of restlessness, uncertainty, and mental stress” (Underhill 216). Unfortunately, the Christian mystics do not write as much about these periods of time and their lives before the
“conversion” experience that launches them onto this path. One example, though, is captured in the history of St. Francis, who was “a high-spirited boy, full of vitality: a natural artist,” attracted to both war and pleasure, but with an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with these pastimes (Underhill 218).

It was only after “the struggle between the life of the world and the persistent call of the spirit… attained its term” that he began seeking a different way of living in earnest (Ibid). According to Underhill, “The deeper mind stirs uneasily in its prison, and its emergence is but the last of many efforts to escape” (Underhill 216). This emergence of a felt sense that there is another way – a way that, unlike war and pleasure, can fully satiate that “restlessness, uncertainty, and mental stress” that seems to characterize human existence. This begins with a period of stripping away attachments and passions, often called the Purgative Way. This is necessary, according to the Christian mystics, to “clarify and achieve freedom from the fetters of the senses, the ‘remora of desire,’ from the results of environment and worldly education, from pride and prejudice, preferences and distaste: from selfhood in every form” (Underhill 270). At the root of these efforts is the understanding that desires imprison the individual and hinder growth towards one’s full potential:

> It is not love but lust--the possessive case, the very food of selfhood--which poisons the relation between the self and the external world and "immediately fatigues" the soul. Divide the world into "mine" and "not mine," and unreal standards are set up, claims and cravings begin to fret the mind. We are the slaves of our own property. We drag with us not a treasure, but a chain. (Underhill 249)

The Christian mystics, experiencing how desires fatigue the soul, frame all habits stemming from possessive relationships with the external world as vices, in that they “fret the mind” and prevent the development of a conscious relationship with God. St. Teresa
comments that this process of identifying and freeing oneself from desires can cause individuals to “suffer a great deal more, for those in an earlier stage are like deaf-mutes and are not so distressed at being unable to speak, while the others, who can hear but cannot talk, find it much harder” (Avila 31). Upon seeing how all types of “claims and cravings begin to fret the mind,” and yet still struggling to be free of them, an individual will suffer more than before seeing how dividing the world into “mine” and “not mine” hinders and enslaves.

Eckhart speaks about shedding this “attachment to worldly things” as not only “moral liberation,” but also “a liberation of the mind” (Eckhart xxix). He points to this “detachment” as a “cognitive freedom” or a “liberation from the images of physical things which serve to restrict the mind and alienate it from its own transcendental possibilities” (Eckhart xxix). As we will see, Buddhism also points to the mind as central in attachment and liberation. Christian mystics place attention on not only loosening their desires for worldly things, but also engaging with their aversions. St. Francis of Assisi again provides a clear example:

It is told of St. Francis of Assisi, in whom the love of lovely things was always paramount, how he forced himself to visit the lepers whose sight and smell disgusted him: how he served them and even kissed them. "Then as he departed, in very truth that which had aforetime been bitter unto him, to wit, the sight and touch of lepers, now changed into sweetness." (Underhill 269)

The potential for lust and for aversion to turn into love through engaging with these possessive (“mine” and “not mine”) relationships with the people and things of the world is the central thread in this phase of the Christian mystics’ journey.

There are a few connections to the environmental crisis worth pointing out here. The first is the mutually detrimental effect of lust, claiming, and craving for a human being and the objects of their possessiveness. As St. Francis says, “My little sisters the
birds, Brother Sun, Sister Water, Mother Earth. Not my servants, but my kindred and fellow-citizens; who may safely be loved so long as they are not desired” (Underhill 251). The difference between desire and love is paramount, as the former “divides the world” and “frets the mind” while causing harm to that which is claimed as “mine” because it becomes a thing defined by its usefulness or desirability in relationship to “me” rather than its own intrinsic value. This mode of encountering the world can easily be carried into spiritual practice, warns St. John of the Cross, and there is an interesting parallel to the way in which the mindsets that caused environmental problems are being carried into the responses to those problems.

St. John describes the ways in which beginners on the spiritual path fall into the same vices they are so fervently trying to avoid. St. John says that these habits continue to arise, although in different form, because there is still attachment and confusion in the beginner’s mind, as in the example of self-righteous anger below:

Among these spiritual persons there are also those who fall into another kind of spiritual anger. Through a certain indiscreet zeal they become angry over the sins of others, reprove these others, and sometimes even feel the impulse to do so angrily, which in fact they occasionally do, setting themselves up as lords of virtue. Others, in becoming aware of their own imperfections, grow angry with themselves in an unhumble impatience… Many of these beginners make numerous plans and great resolutions, but since they are not humble and have no distrust of themselves, the more resolves they make the more they break, and the greater becomes their anger. (St. John 370)

St. John describes these as vices because they are increasing the attachments, in the form of desire and aversion, that prevent development towards union with God and intimacy with all people and things. He points to a deep acceptance and humility, rather than reacting to the faults of oneself and others with anger. The latter increases the sense of separation between self and other and between parts of the self we like and accept and parts of the self we do not like or accept. “Distrust” of oneself does not mean belittling or criticizing oneself – that is what St. John is warning against. It means patience,
acceptance, and humility.

People engaged in or leading efforts to address environmental issues may find themselves falling into similar patterns as these “beginners on the spiritual path” in becoming angry about the transgressions, failures, or idiocy of those who continue to create pollution, deplete resources, and consume unreservedly. It might seem counterintuitive that accepting the ways in which we cause environmental and human suffering is a necessary entry into solving them – a fear that acceptance will lead to complacency. In order to address the environmental crisis, we have to become genuinely curious and open to seeing everything with new eyes. Anger, fear, and self-righteousness build up a wall so that we cannot venture closer to the parts of ourselves, others, and society that we wish were not there. The anger and animosity between “climate change deniers” and “ecodoomer alarmists” is a clear example of how non-acceptance increases separation and prevents reconciliation (Ahmed).

The mystics have discovered through their own journeys that it is necessary to cast off not only “material wealth,” but also “immaterial wealth,” “a complete detachment from all finite things,” including the finite self (Underhill 247). Teresa of Avila describes the nature of this “self-stripping”:

> These interior operations being sweet and peaceful, any painful effort does us more harm than good. By painful effort I mean any forcible restraint we place on ourselves, such as holding our breath. We should rather abandon our souls into the hands of God, leaving Him to do as He chooses with us, as far as possible forgetting all self-interest and resigning ourselves entirely to His will… The very effort to think of nothing excites our imagination the more. (Avila 61).

Here, Teresa speaks of the gentleness with which this detachment best occurs. Though her words describing this abandonment of one’s soul and will might be read as a passivity or loss of free will, the context for these instructions suggests otherwise. These practices
of spiritual “poverty” – the “complete detachment from all finite things” – serve to prepare the spirit for union with God, which includes a union of Will. Through this self-abandonment, “At once the Cosmos belongs to you, and you to it. You escape the heresy of separateness, are ‘made one,’ and merged in ‘the greater life of the All.’ Then, a free spirit in a free world, the self moves upon its true orbit; undistracted by the largely self-imposed needs and demands of ordinary earthly existence” (Underhill 250). Rather than a relinquishment of free will, this process liberates the self from “self-imposed needs” that obscure, hinder, and diminish its potential and connectedness with the rest of the world.

As St. John says, “In this nakedness the spirit finds its quietude and rest. For in coveting nothing, nothing tires it by pulling it up and nothing oppresses it by pushing it down, because it is in the center of its humility. When it covets something, by this very fact it tires itself” (St. John 151). The Christian mystics describe how through this process of detachment from all finite things, which necessitates incredible patience and perseverance, an individual begins to form a conscious relationship with God. St. John describes in vivid poetic detail the phases of thorough detachment, which he calls the Dark Night. The first stanza to his poem “The Dark Night” follows:

One dark night,
fired with love’s urgent longings
– ah, the sheer grace! –
I went out unseen,
my house being now all stilled. (St. John 358)

Once the house of the soul is stilled from all agitation resulting from desires and appetites, the soul is free to leave in search of “the sweet and delightful life of love with God” (St. John of the Cross 360). This is the transition point from the Purgative Way, which we have been describing, to the Illuminative Way.
The Illuminative Way and the Unitive Life describe this journey towards, and attainment of, Union with God, respectively. The Christian mystics rely upon language that is poetic and disruptive to the intellect to describe their drawing closer to God, as it cannot be communicated or understood through ordinary means, but only through direct experience. Nonetheless, their reports from this part of the journey reveal some of its essence, which may benefit individuals seeking to bring humanity into greater harmony with itself and the rest of the world. Eckhart describes the mysterious quality of the experience of absolute unity and harmony with God:

> It is a strange land, a wilderness, being more nameless than with name, more unknown that known. If you could do away with yourself for a moment, even for less than a moment, then you would possess all that this possesses in itself. But as long as you have any regard for yourself in any way or for anything, then you will not know what God is. As my mouth knows what color is and my eye what taste is: that is how little you will know what God is. (Eckhart 122)

Without the self-forgetfulness developed through the previous stages, the apprehension of this great mystery would not be possible. Eckhart weaves together the Transcendent and Immanent aspects of reality discussed earlier, neither landing on God as space nor God as person, but pointing his attention to a unity that transcends these. Underhill describes this unfathomable greatness with a metaphor: “To say that God is Infinite is to say that He may be apprehended and described in an infinity of ways. That Circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, may be approached from every angle with a certainty of being found” (Underhill 286). Although the mystics often describe “the transformation of the self in God” as a “Nothing, a Dark, a Self-loss,” they are clear that this is by no means annihilation or the “suppression of life” but rather “its intensification, a change in its form” (Underhill 208). Teresa of Avila describes this transformation with a vivid simile:
Die! Die as the silkworm does when it has fulfilled the office of its creation, and you will see God and be immersed in His greatness, as the little silkworm is enveloped in its cocoon… As soon as, by means of this prayer, the soul has become entirely dead to the world, it comes forth like a lovely little white butterfly!… Truly, the spirit does not recognize itself, being as different from what it was as is the white butterfly from the repulsive caterpillar. (Avila 75)

In the transition from silkworm to butterfly, one can say that the silkworm has ceased to be or that the silkworm has transformed the expression of its aliveness. It is this meaning, rather than the cessation of life, that Avila and others refer to when they say that the self dies in order to find unity with God.

From this new perspective on life, the mystic sees that there is no conflict between the simultaneous multiplicity and oneness of the universe. Eckhart describes this reconciliation of ordinary and absolute reality:

The prophet says: “God spoke one thing, but I heard two.” That is true: God has only ever uttered one thing. His speech is single. In this one utterance, he speaks his Son forth, the Holy Spirit and all creatures, and yet there is only one utterance in God. But the prophet says: “I heard two things”, which means God and creatures. There where God speaks creatures, creatures are God, but here on earth they are creatures. (Eckhart 124)

Here on earth, we perceive separate, self-contained entities: people and environment, self and other, humans and creatures. At the same time, and in no conflict, these are all one – all of one utterance. Not separate or self-contained. So, Eckhart says, “we must apprehend Him equally in all things, no more in one than another, for he is in all things alike… in tribulation as in prosperity, in tears as in joy” (Eckhart 190). Experiencing God – wholeness and completeness – in every emotion, creature, and thing, the mystics claim that regardless of the situation “peace is not lost by them… Though the whole body is in pain, yet the head, if it be sound, does not suffer with it” (Avila 159). The world is the same and yet the mystic’s relationship to it is transformed.

The Christian mystics offer several promising windows into the environmental crisis. They report that living in separation from God – from any parts of ourselves, any
other person, any other creature, any other aspect of this world – results in dissatisfaction and suffering. They point to unconditional and boundless love as the necessary motivation, aspiration, and culmination of an individual’s search for wholeness. They say that everyone and everything is equal and that living in intimacy with all things, there is no suffering; though there is still tribulation, tears, and pain, there is no struggling against these and so no mental suffering which so defines ordinary human existence. Ultimately, they point to a way of living that satiates in a way no worldly goods can, and they affirm that human beings, as they are created in the image of God, have the capacity to realize their completeness. Rather than seeking satisfaction through acquiring and protecting worldly goods, fueled by desire and lust, we will find peace in dis-identification from these and love. Rather than growing angry and fighting or turning away from our enemies, both internal and external, we will find reconciliation through acceptance and looking closer.

_Taoists_

Taoism begins with the observation of a pervasive and unnecessary disharmony amongst people and between human beings and the rest of the world. Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the two best-known Taoist writers, describe the natural order of things, which people fail to follow and in so doing cause chaos, violence, and discontent. They call this natural order “Tao,” which translates to “the Way” or “the One” (Lao Tzu, xv). It is characterized as “shadowy, indistinct,” “dim and dark,” “born before heaven and earth,” and “silent and void” (Lao Tzu 49, 56). These “negative terms” are used for the same reason negative or lower terms are used by Meister Eckhart to describe God – they
are less limiting than positive terms and emphasize the impossibility of fully articulating using language or fully knowing using intellectual knowledge.

The Tao as the One describes the whole that is the source and sustenance of everything in the universe. Lao Tzu says, “It is the One that makes these what they are” (Lao Tzu 46). Chuang Tzu describes this natural order and the sage’s (Taoist master’s) stance towards it as follows:

Be aligned along a myriad years, in oneness, wholeness, simplicity.
All the myriad things are as they are,
And as what they are make up totality. (Chuang Tzu 59)

The Taoists point to dualism\(^2\) as the fundamental source of human disharmony with the universe, which is intrinsically non-dual; i.e. not composed of pairs of opposites. In other words, it is because our systems of thought and language are based on duality when actually we live in a non-dual world that we perceive of and cause conflict in every corner.

Upon close observation, Taoism maintains, it becomes clear that dualism is an inaccurate and problematic view of reality. For one, each element necessitates its opposite in order to be defined: “There can be Nothing only when there is Something, a void only when there are objects with intervals between them” (Chuang Tzu 56). Furthermore, there is often a movement or tendency from one element towards its opposite. As soon as the day begins, it moves towards night. As soon as life begins, it moves towards death. The Taoist sage acknowledges that flux and transformation are the only constants in nature, and by fully accepting this truth on a visceral level, he can dwell in this illogical and uncontrollable world with tranquility, without being governed by

\(^2\) The perception that reality consists of pairs of “irreducible, mutually heterogeneous principles” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary online: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dualism).
externally fluctuating circumstances. These ideas are expressed poetically by Lao Tzu:

The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, yet this is only the ugly; the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is only the bad.
Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
The difficult and the easy complement each other;
The long and the short offset each other;
The high and the low incline towards each other;
Note and sound harmonize with each other;
Before and after follow each other.
Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words. (Lao Tzu 6)

Whereas our language and ordinary way of seeing the world depend on boundaries and divisions, the Tao does not divide or discriminate. To say that something is beautiful or that something is short only describes that thing from one point of view; it does not convey the entirety or essence of the thing. Chuang Tzu says, “The Way has never had borders, saying has never had norms” (Chuang Tzu 57). In other words, the natural laws of the universe do not operate on the basis of borders; i.e. gravity does not choose to act on some but not all people. Our language does not operate based on rigid meanings; i.e. long and short are only meaningful in a relative sense. Chuang Tzu continues,

It is by a ‘That’s it’ which deems that a boundary is marked… To ‘divide’ is to leave something undivided: to ‘discriminate between alternatives’ is to leave something which is neither alternative… Hence I say: ‘To “discriminate between alternatives” is to fail to see something.’ (Chuang Tzu 57)

To divide and discriminate between alternatives is like “lighting up little areas of life and leaving the rest in darkness” (Chuang Tzu 53). Though saying “That’s it” and “That’s not it” reveals something about two things, it is from just a single point of view. It is so easy to see two things as absolutely unalike when such a division is created, but Chuang Tzu asserts that this is “to fail to see something” – the “something which is neither alternative.” It is division and discriminating between alternatives – assigning value and preference – that gives rise to competition, violence, and discontent, according to the
Taoists. This does not mean that they believe the universe is undifferentiated or that things as we perceive of them do not exist. As A.C. Graham explains, to follow this teaching all the way through and “To refuse to distinguish alternatives is to refuse to affirm even ‘Everything is one’ against ‘Things are many’” (Chuang Tzu 56). The Tao effortlessly includes and transcends all of this, and the Taoist sage lives in alignment with this natural order.

The “deed that consists in taking no action” refers to a way of actively living that is not in conflict. The Taoists call this *wu-wei*, literally “without action,” which does not mean passive or inactive, but rather an effortless kind of action, just as nature brings into being one season after another and one life after another. Transformation, movement, and growth are central to nature’s way of being, but these happen and emerge naturally rather than being the product of a forceful action. This is why the Tao is called submissive and weak, as explained in the following stanzas:

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In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it. This is because there is nothing that can take its place.
That the weak overcomes the strong,
And the submissive overcomes the hard,
Everyone in the world knows yet no one can put this knowledge into practice. (Lao Tzu 85)
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Again, “weak” and “submissive” have particular connotations and associations in English, but as we will see in the example of Cook Ting, these qualities in a Taoist sense are full of vitality, energy, and strength. They act with elegance and efficiency just as water by following its path erodes stone in a way that a jackhammer could not. Lao Tzu says that, “The way never acts yet nothing is left undone” (Lao Tzu 42). By “never acts,” Lao Tzu means that it is never forceful – that it is simply a continuous source for the continuous processes that naturally flow at the pace and in the way they are meant to. The
Taoists insist that people can live in this manner as well.

Wu, as in wu-wei, can be translated as “nothing,” which, if understood as it is used to describe the Tao would refer to limitlessness and indescribable greatness rather than absence (Lao Tzu xxix). This understanding makes sense in the context of living in harmony with the One, as it points to actions that are wholly action, without the obscuring and limiting qualities of rules and thoughts. Seeing and engaging with the world as it is, without discrimination or imposition of meaning, allows for a freedom of action that manifests as spontaneous and dynamically responsive to the circumstances as they present themselves.

Lao Tzu further elaborates upon the interrelationship between the Tao and all things in the following poem:

I hold firmly to stillness.
The myriad creatures all rise together
And I watch their return.
The teeming creatures
All return to their separate roots.
Returning to one’s roots is known as stillness.
This is what is meant by returning to one’s destiny.
Returning to one’s destiny is known as the constant.
Knowledge of the constant is known as discernment.
Woe to him who willfully innovates
While ignorant of the constant,
But should one act from knowledge of the constant
One’s action will lead to impartiality,
Impartiality to kinglyness,
Kinglyness to heaven,
Heaven to the way,
The way to perpetuity,
And to the end of one’s days one will meet with no danger. (Lao Tzu 20)

The Taoists believe that all creatures and things arise from and return to the constant, which is Tao, and that living from a knowledge of the constant will result in a life free from danger, which means free from conflict, violence, and discontent. Such a life is intuitive and spontaneous, much as the whole universe is intuitive and spontaneous. For
this reason, and because the natural world is in accord with the Tao, Taoist literature often includes allusions to imagery and examples from nature. Furthermore, the texts encourage people to look to nature as a model for how to live intuitively and spontaneously. Lao Tzu says,

Man models himself on earth,
Earth on heaven,
Heaven on the way,
And the way on that which is naturally so. (Lao Tzu 30)

Everything can be traced back to “that which is naturally so,” and therefore people and nature arise from and are subject to the same principles. From this perspective, calling everything that is not human-made “the environment” creates the sort of division and discrimination against which Taoism cautions. The more in tune with the earth and therefore the Tao, the less conflict humans will experience with the natural order of things – which includes human nature.

Like the Christian mystics, Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu speak of the trouble in chasing after worldly goods to seek lasting contentment. Lao Tzu says of the individual seeking true contentment and harmony, “Goods hard to come by serve to hinder his progress” (16). On the other hand, they extend their insights regarding dualism to the issue of desires as well. Lao Tzu explains in the following lines:

The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.
Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its manifestations.
These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery –
The gateway of the manifold secrets. (Lao Tzu 5)

Note the echoes of Eckhart’s explanation of the unity of earthly and divine realities: ‘God
spoke one thing, but I heard two’… which means God and creatures (Eckhart 124). Here, Lao Tzu speaks of the unity of the nameless and the named. The secrets and the manifestations of the Tao, resulting from ridding yourself from and allowing yourself to have desires, respectively, “are the same.” They both issue from the Tao and are therefore both gateways into more deeply understanding the world. In other words, Lao Tzu is saying that observing everything, even our desires, with a non-dualistic mind has the potential to reveal more. Consider how listening to the “other side,” whomever they may be, with a mind that is not saying “that’s it” and “that’s not” might reveal more than a mind constantly forming opinions and evaluating in relation to our beliefs. In the latter case, there is no new learning, we see the other person as a collection of characteristics that please or displease us, and the conflict continues. In the former, there is the possibility of seeing the other person more holistically, honoring the differences as well as the profound similarities, and moving towards reconciliation.

Buddhists

The Buddha was very explicit about the point of entry for his own spiritual journey and what he understood to be the fundamental question for humanity: What is suffering? Having observed through his own experience that “suffering is inherent in life,” the Buddha set out to uncover why people suffer, whether there is a remedy to that suffering, and how an individual can realize that remedy (Loori, The Eight Gates of Zen 27). All of the Buddha’s teachings grew from this first all-encompassing teaching, which is known as the teaching of the Four Noble Truths:

- Suffering is inherent in life.
- Suffering is caused by craving.
- Craving and hence suffering can be destroyed.
The Holy Eightfold Path is the course leading to this. (Rahula 2)

The cause of suffering, according to Buddhism, is intricately tied to how we understand ourselves and the world. Suffering, the closest translation for the Pali word dukkha, does not only include what we ordinarily consider as suffering (“pain, sorrow, misery”) but also “impermanence, emptiness, insubstantiality” (Rahula 17). These are usually spoken about as three different kinds of dukkha: ordinary suffering, suffering produced by change, and conditioned states (Rahula 18). The first category is most familiar to everyone, and it is this sort of suffering from which people so vehemently try to protect themselves. Generally speaking, people seek pleasurable experiences, material wealth, and the company of pleasant people, and avoid uncomfortable experiences, poverty, and the company of unpleasant people. The Buddha realized and taught that even in pleasant situations and states there is suffering because everything eventually changes, and “when it changes, it produces pain, suffering, unhappiness” (Rahula 20).

The third category of dukkha is more difficult to grasp, as it includes “the combination of ever-changing physical and mental forces or energies, which may be divided into five groups or aggregates” and which we call a “being,” or an “individual,” or “I” (Rahula 20). These groups, called skandhas, which refers to the trunk of a tree, are “not only equivalent to what we normally think of as ourselves; they are equivalent to the entire universe, as we experience it” (Pine 59). The five trunks or pillars are “separate in name only, and each of which exhausts everything of which we are aware of from a different point of view” (Pine 59). The skandhas are dukkha because they are ultimately empty of self-existence, they are insubstantial, they are impermanent. Red Pine, a scholar of Buddhism, illuminates this teaching as follows:
Thus, the skandha of form is often compared to foam, because it cannot be grasped; the skandha of sensation to a bubble, because it lasts but an instant; the skandha of perception to a mirage, because it only appears to exist; the skandha of memory to a banana tree, because it has no core; and the skandha of consciousness to an illusion, because it is a well-concealed deception. And yet the skandhas are not separate from what is real. (Pine 66)

How can it be that the skandhas— which “exhaust everything of which we are aware”— are simultaneously shunya, a Sanskrit word that means “hollow,” “void,” or “zero,” and “not separate from what is real” (Pine 69)?

All three wisdom traditions use these sorts of negating words to hint at the vast, limitless, mysterious quality of our world. In categorizing, abstracting, naming, and delineating our world, we create systems of thinking, acting, and being that are at odds with nature— including human nature. The description of the skandhas as ungraspable, fleeting, illusory, hollow, and deceptive explains why craving for or attachment to anything (ideas, money, people, body, self, etc.) causes dis-ease and misery because we are stuck in a false reality and will therefore never be satisfied.

Buddhism holds that the two greatest delusions are the beliefs in “self-existence” and “non-existence” (Pine 69). Saying that the skandhas are shunya, or empty, does not mean that nothing exists: “It simply means the absence of the erroneous distinctions that divide one entity from another, one being from another being, one thought from another thought. Emptiness is not nothing, it’s everything, everything at once” (Pine 69). It makes sense that our consciousness constantly reinforces a self-awareness that creates sharp divisions between “me” and “you,” “us” and “them,” “human” and “non-human.” John Daido Loori explains the usefulness and danger of the human ego:

In a sense, that strong ego, that strong sense of self and separateness that has been part of the process of evolution, is how we have survived as a species. We are not as fast as the other animals, nor as agile. We can’t fly. We’re not as strong as they are. All we have is our intellect, our wit. And Big Ego. Our intellect has now developed to the point where it threatens to extinguish the species itself. (Loori, Teachings of the Insentient 26)
It is incredibly ironic that humanity’s talent for survival against all odds is now threatening its own survival. Our consciousness and ability to articulate and pass on complex ideas is responsible for incredible collaboration between human beings, monumental accomplishments in transforming the surface of this earth, and truly beautiful expressions of all dimensions of human awareness. However, our consciousness is also responsible for unimaginable death and destruction across the planet. The skandha of consciousness is called vijnana, which means “to divide.” Consciousness itself is “knowledge that results from separation, separation of subject from object and one object from another” (Pine 64).

Buddhists agree with the Taoists and Christian mystics that separation is at the heart of our troubles. Geoffrey Shugen Arnold says,

‘An unexamined mind is a dangerous thing.’ It’s the unsurprising, yet unpredictable result of being lost within one’s own mind, being tethered to the three poisons: greed, anger, and ignorance. It’s a direct result of intense separation. The Buddha realized that all suffering comes from such distance – the greater the distance, the greater the danger. (Arnold, Great Uncaused Compassion 11)

Not only does separation cause suffering in the individual who perceives of and acts from that separation, it is also dangerous in that it causes suffering for others. An unexamined mind means a mind in which there is separation, and this separation is carried into everything a person sees and does in the world.

Operating in this world based on the assumption of separation, we convince ourselves that we can throw things “away,” that we can assign responsibility for figuring out what to do with the gaseous waste products of living our lives to environmentalists, and that we can ensure our personal wellbeing by solely focusing on our individual needs. The world is sending countless messages that these base assumptions upon which
most people in the world live their lives do not match with the way things work. Gathering more data will help us understand the extent of the environmental issues and the most efficient ways to counter them, but it will not help heal the root causes of the environmental crisis. Loori says, “Nature is not logical. It’s not predictable. It’s not really understandable. We can categorize and analyze it, but that is not what nature is really about. A description of nature is no more the thing itself than descriptions of ourselves are what the self really is” (Loori, Teachings of the Insentient 21). The way in which a tree grows – the pattern of its roots and branches – does not follow a set of rigid rules, but instead grows in dynamic responsiveness to everything it encounters. In ways in which we can intellectually understand and viscerally intuit, living things become their surroundings, and surroundings become living things. The Buddhists concur with the Taoists and Christian mystics that the extent to which everything is interconnected defies intellectual knowledge, goes beyond thoughts and language, and yet is not in conflict with any of these.

The Buddha taught his followers that the path towards the cessation of suffering and the realization of this profound interrelatedness is the Middle Way. In his first sermon to a group of monks, or Bhikkhus, he described this profound insight:

Bhikkhus, these two extremes ought not to be practiced by one who has gone forth from the household life. What are the two? There is devotion to the indulgence of sense-pleasures, which is low, common, the way of ordinary people, unworthy and unprofitable; and there is devotion to self-mortification, which is painful, unworthy and unprofitable. Avoiding both these extremes, the Tathagata has realized the Middle Path: it gives vision, it gives knowledge, and it leads to calm, to insight, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. (Rahula 93)

Buddhists hear this teaching as profoundly good news, for it supports and outlines a path forward. Furthermore, just as the Christian mystics cautioned against spiritual practice energized by the desire for gains of any kind, the Middle Way in Buddhism includes the
worldly and spiritual. Dogen says, “So that pure practice and the way coincide, how should we proceed? Proceed with the mind which neither grasps nor rejects, the mind unconcerned with name or gain” (Dogen 34). Grasping and rejecting both result from and lead to separation, which Buddhists trace back to the belief in a separate self. This faulty but very convincing notion of an independent self, Buddhists say, gives rise to our dualistic view of the world and the suffering, violence, and conflict in the world. The Eight Fold Path and all of the forms of practice and training developed through different schools of Buddhism are called *upaya*, or “skillful means,” and aim to “get us to see that the truth we seek is already present” (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 17).

Buddha means “the Awakened One,” and emphasizes the understanding that the Middle Way is simply a path to awakening to the world as it is: completely interrelated. Like the two other wisdom traditions, Buddhism teaches that this truth cannot be “reached by words and letters” and so “reading, understanding, or believing that the truth is this very life itself is very different from realizing that the truth is this very life itself—very different indeed” (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 17). In order to realize it – really make real to the whole mind and body – Buddhism begins with a study of the self. Dogen said, “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self, and to forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things.” Daido Roshi explains, “To be enlightened by the ten thousand things is to recognize the unity of the self and the ten thousand things – the whole phenomenal universe” (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 27). Again, in astounding agreement with the mystics from the other traditions, Buddhism teaches the same apparently paradoxical truth about what is meant by “unity” with the “whole phenomenal universe.” This unity is “neither absolute nor
relative” and “transcends all dualities” (Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 47).

Uniquely emphasized in Buddhism is the fact that whether or not a person has realized this truth, everyone is already amidst it. Dogen writes in the *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*, “Although the way of water is unknown to water, water actually functions (as water); and although the way of water is not unknown to water, water actually functions (as water)” (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 228). Just as water does not need to consciously know its nature in order to fully express its nature, human beings fully express their nature even if they are not fully conscious of it. However, in not being “awake” to the natural order of things, including human nature, we suffer and cause suffering. Buddhist practice leads to the cessation of suffering through the illumination of this natural order – the inherent wholeness of everything:

> What you realize through practice is that the whole universe is one reality, that you and I are the same thing. But then we need to go further and take the next step; that is, I am *not* you and you are *not* me. Both of these facts, oneness and differentiation, exist simultaneously and interpenetrate perfectly. (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 21)

The realization that the whole universe exists in simultaneous oneness and differentiation is beautifully described in *The Flower Garland Sutra*. The Diamond Net of Indra is a metaphor for all of existence and depicts “a vast net of gems that extends throughout the universe” in three-dimensional space and the fourth dimension of time. At each point of the net, there is “a multi-faceted diamond which reflects every other diamond, and as such, essentially “contains” every other diamond in the net (Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 34). The universe is understood as utterly interrelating and interpenetrating, at once differentiated and unified. Geoffrey Shugen Arnold describes the essence of this relationship, saying, “When you go all the way into one thing, what you encounter is everything. Said another way: When we let go of everything, what remains? Everything”
it is from this realization that true compassion and wisdom emerge. Arnold describes the sense of responsibility that arises from intimacy with all things, rather than separation from all things:

When we realize that our nature is the nature of all things, we realize our mutual identity; the mutually interpenetrating truth which has no name or form. How could we not be obligated to one another? No one stands alone. No one arrives at this place solely by his or her own power. Life is a gift that is a result of mutual causes and conditions. Everything that we accomplish is a result of the gifts of others. The myth of the “self-made person” is a very powerful and romantic story in our country. But it’s also dangerous. From that place of independence—of isolation—we can come to the great illusion that we don’t owe anything to anyone. That’s an inherently painful and unsustainable place. In cutting ourselves off from others, we cut ourselves off from everything. (Arnold, “The Gift of Life”)

Cutting ourselves off from everything includes what we call the environment, and also connects with the great illusion of not being obligated towards the environment’s wellbeing. Buddhism talks about the interdependence of compassion and wisdom because each is necessary to fully realize and embody the other. It is “only by coming to understand the nature of the universe as a whole that there is any possibility of doing something about the problems we face” (Loori, Teachings of the Insentient 37). And “When we realize the interdependent universe, there’s no way to avoid responsibility for it; it becomes unavoidably clear that what we do and what happens to us are the same thing” (Ibid). In other words, not caring for all sentient and insentient beings is not caring for oneself. It may take some time before the results of that neglect, abuse, or indifference manifest in tangible forms, but they will.
CHAPTER II: LIVING IN CONFLICT WITH THE UNIFIED UNIVERSE

The last chapter explored the experientially realized understanding that the universe is unified, impermanent, and unknowable, according to the Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics. In this chapter, we look more closely at the environmental crisis and attempts to address it. The teachings of these contemplatives reveal that living from a divided worldview is at the root of the pervasive destruction and diminishment of life on this planet, as well as the barriers to responding to it in wholly effective ways.

Without examining the mind – its habits of perceiving, thinking, and reacting – there is no way to fully understand the sources of the environmental crisis and therefore no way to illuminate best responses. These habits and their results are evident in the following categories of problems: the misidentification of root problems, the failure to measure what is most important, the misplaced faith in future technological fixes, the approach to environmental policy as a special interest, and the lack of vision. We will investigate each one individually with relevant perspectives from the wisdom traditions and discover the deep interrelatedness of these issues.

Misidentification of Root Problems

The identified causes of the environmental crisis have strongly shaped the efforts to address it. These tend to be narrowly defined and symptomatically focused, which has resulted in treating components of complex systems in an isolated way that yields solutions with unintended side effects. The wisdom traditions shed light on how approaching an issue in a fragmented manner leads to this sort of fragmentation. As Chuang Tzu says, to divide and discriminate is like “lighting up little areas of life and
leaving the rest in darkness” (53). It is impossible to solve the whole problem when most of it is left in darkness, but that is exactly what is happening with many environmental initiatives.

The issue of global warming, for example, is predominantly described as the result of “too much carbon in the atmosphere” (Nordaus and Shellenberger 14). The 350.org organization, headed by environmental activist Bill McKibben, is building a global climate movement around this problem statement, which they word as follows: “The number 350 means climate safety: to preserve a livable planet, scientists tell us we must reduce the amount of CO\textsubscript{2} in the atmosphere from its current level of 400 parts per million to below 350 ppm” (350.org). Hearing the problem framed in this way, the mind immediately rushes to answering the question “How do we reduce the amount of CO\textsubscript{2} in the atmosphere?” Without any criteria for determining which means of reduction should be pursued, a risky but minimally disruptive technical fix may be desirable. Clive Hamilton, a professor of public ethics describes such a scenario:

For example, if you spray sulfur particles high into the stratosphere, scientists are confident that will cool the planet. It will doubtless have other unanticipated effects as well — and those could cause political conflict and ecological harm... The politics of it are, for conservatives, extremely attractive. You don't have to put taxes on gas or electricity. You don't have to ask consumers to change their lifestyles. You don't have to take on fossil-fuel corporations. And, on the other hand, it's a kind of vindication of man's technological supremacy. (Harris)

There are many benefits to framing issues simply through their most concrete symptoms, but as McKibben and 350.org clearly understand and have successfully modeled in their multifaceted campaigns, this cannot be the sole criterion if the goal is ecological wellbeing.

Symptomatically-focused problem solving has been repeated over and over again throughout our history. The automobile arrived just in time to rescue cities from being
overridden by horse manure. Substituting cars for horse-drawn carriages seemed like a miraculous improvement at the time (Diamond 506). The streets were cleaner and quieter, and no major systemic changes were necessary to make the switch. This is not to trivialize the technical complexity of inventing and manufacturing a car, but rather to emphasize that there were no perceived inconveniences with the dawn of the automobile, until much later. Now, of course, the major inconveniences of the automobile and other fossil fuel based technologies are climate change, pollution, and resource depletion.

Some efforts are aimed at solving climate change from one step back, framing the root cause as excessive use of fossil fuels. This framing has resulted in innovations such as renewable energy technologies and energy efficiency improvements. While both of these avenues have proven environmentally beneficial, they have also resulted in unintended side effects. Renewable energy technologies convert renewable energy into usable energy, but the conversion process itself requires materials and an investment of energy. Photovoltaic (PV) panels consume energy and materials, including heavy metals, during material processing and manufacturing. These processes also result in the production of greenhouse gases and pollutants (Fthenakis). Needless to say, they are not free of environmental impact, and the solar industry is now facing the issue of what to do with PV panels once their 25-30 year lifetime is over (Varun, Bhat and Prakash). As with so many other consumer goods, responsibility for their end-of-life was not considered in their design, so methods of collection and recycling are being investigated only now that PV waste is becoming a critical issue. Estimates predict 100,000 tons of PV waste per year by 2017 (Montgomery). The habits of treating products and technologies as isolated from the larger systems in which they exist have been passed on to so-called
“sustainable,” “green,” or “clean” technologies.

Efforts to reduce fossil fuel consumption by improving the efficiency of fuel use have resulted in similar unintended side effects. As Scharmer explains, “In spite of significant improvements in eco-efficient production methods, all advances in increased resource efficiency have been overshadowed by the so-called rebound effect: that is, by higher levels of total output (GDP) that lead to higher absolute numbers of resource use” (Scharmer 37). Several conclusions could be drawn from the problematic outcomes of efforts to curb climate change based on framing the root problem as “too much carbon in the atmosphere” or “excessive use of fossil fuels.”

One is that these technologies were simply poorly designed or designed with incomplete knowledge about people and the world. This reasoning follows the philosophy of deterministic materialism that developed during the Enlightenment period and has had a strong influence on the path of science and technology since then. Its major assumption is that everything about the universe can be known and therefore controlled, or “As Francis Bacon and others proclaimed, we modern humans with our vast intelligence [have] only to determine the laws governing matter for us to gain control over the entire affair” (Swimme and Tucker 105). Consider this view of the world in contrast to the humility, wonder, and reverence with respect to life espoused by the voices of the wisdom traditions. Buddhist teacher Loori says, “Nature is not… really understandable. We can categorize and analyze it, but that is not what nature is really about. A description of nature is no more the thing itself than descriptions of ourselves are what the self really is” (Loori, Teachings of the Insentient 21). These individuals describe from their own experience that the more we try to control ourselves – our
emotions, desires, and habits – the stronger and more unpredictable these become. They see this pattern mirrored in humanity’s relationship with the natural world because the essence of the universe is not knowable and predictable, but rather infinitely creative and mysterious. When we approach ourselves, our lives, and our communities with the intention to understand in order to control, we paradoxically create more suffering. An approach filled with affection and wonder is the antidote, as we will further discuss in Chapter IV. While the former suppresses life, the latter promotes it. This is the subtle but profound pivot described by St. Francis’s words about Mother Earth: “Not my servants, by my kindred and fellow-citizens; who may safely be loved so long as they are not desired” (Underhill 251).

Other thinkers have examined the ongoing pattern of creating new problems as the unintended side effects of solving existing ones and come to similar conclusions as these contemplatives. System dynamics expert John Ehrenfeld describes the way in which addressing the symptom of a root problem temporarily, but not permanently or fully, alleviates the problem, causing side effects and a positive feedback loop that reinforces the underlying issue (Ehrenfeld 47).

Another way to explore root versus symptomatic problems is to ask the question “why?” iteratively. One progression of questions and answers might proceed as follows: Why is the global climate changing? Because there is too high of a concentration of CO2 and other Green House Gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere (IPCC 1). Why is there too high a concentration of GHGs in the atmosphere? Because human beings are burning fossil fuels (too much, too quickly). Why are human beings burning fossil fuels? Because we have technologies that consume them. Why do we have technologies that consume
them? *Because we believe that these technologies improve our lives.* This is a basic assumption so infrequently questioned: that the technologies employed in our current systems improve our lives. The wisdom traditions might ask one more question: Why do we believe that these technologies improve our lives? We could imagine other chains of answers leading to different base assumptions, such as *There is no better alternative* or *It is too hard to change all of our infrastructure,* but the wisdom traditions see these too as symptoms of the real issue.

As previously introduced, the wisdom traditions point to a fundamental problem that originates in our minds: a misunderstanding of ourselves and the world that assumes it is divided, permanent, and knowable, when it is actually interrelated, impermanent, and unknowable. St. Teresa of Avila says, “As a rule, all our anxieties and troubles come from misunderstanding our own nature” (Avila 52). It may sound like a stretch to claim that climate change is the result of “misunderstanding our own nature,” but the wisdom traditions see how we understand the self and how we understand the world as inseparable. American Zen teacher John Daido Loori describes this connection in more detail:

> Our way of perceiving ourselves and the universe has remained dualistic and virtually static throughout the development of human history. It is a perspective that assumes separation of self and other. As a result of that assumption of duality, we’ve created forms of philosophy, art, science, medicine, ecology, theology, psychology, politics, sociology, ethics, and morality that are basically permutations derived from that initial premise of separation. The emerging consequences create the kind of world we now live in… How we understand the self is how we understand the universe, and how we understand the universe determines how we relate to it, what we do about it, and how we combust our lives within it. (Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 33)

We perceive a separation between self and other, and in doing so, our happiness is dependent on their presence or absence, and we rely on acquiring or shunning them from our lives. Buddhism refers to these as desires, and Christian mystics like Meister Eckhart
refer to them as appetites, which bind the will and mind, limiting “its own transcendental possibilities” (Eckhart xxix).

Our desires and appetites are readily visible in another dominant framing of the environmental crisis, which paints a picture of the problem as arising from simply consuming the wrong kinds of products and energy sources. This leads to a focus on “informed, decentralized, apolitical, [and] individualized… consumer choice” (Maniates 55). Rather than questioning the origins and habits of the desires themselves, we simply switch from “conventional” to “eco-friendly” products, reinforcing our identities as consumers while neglecting our possible impact as citizens.

In our struggle to bridge the gap between our morals and our practices, we stay busy – but by doing what we are most familiar and comfortable with: consuming our way (we hope) to a better America and a better world. When confronted by environmental ills – ills many confess to caring deeply about – Americans seem capable of understanding themselves almost solely as consumers who must buy ‘environmentally sound’ products (and then recycle them), rather than as citizens who might come together and develop political clout sufficient to alter institutional arrangements that drive a pervasive consumerism. The relentless ability of contemporary capitalism to commodify dissent and sell it back to dissenters is surely an explanation for the elevation of consumer over citizen. (Maniates 51)

It is not difficult to understand how our pathways to addressing the environmental crisis look very much like the pathways that led us here. Even though one of the basic causes of the environmental crisis is the overconsumption of resources, we seem to have convinced ourselves as a society that it is not overconsumption itself but the overconsumption of the wrong kinds of things that is the problem. In this way, our systems constantly reinforce the thinking that created them. Evelyn Underhill eloquently describes the connection between misplaced desires and viewing the world as a collective of independent, separate entities:

By false desires and false thoughts man has built up for himself a false universe: as a mollusk, by the deliberate and persistent absorption of lime and rejection of all else, can build up for itself a hard shell which shuts it from the external world, and only represents in a distorted and unrecognizable form the ocean from which it was obtained. This hard and wholly unnutritious
shell, this one-sided secretion of the surface-consciousness, makes as it were a little cave of illusion for each separate soul. (Underhill 240)

Indulging in desires through acquiring or avoiding reinforces our distance from the parts of ourselves we most abhor, the people and things that cause us displeasure, and the situations and places that cause us unease. Rather than offering any lasting peace or happiness, our desires return as soon as the conditions change.

The most predominant framings of the causes of the environmental crisis are poorly designed technologies, misplaced values, or insufficient knowledge. These diagnoses lead to focus on the symptoms, such as the high concentration of atmospheric GHGs, rather than looking back at the chain of causality to the underlying cause – the appetites of human beings for material pleasures and the belief that more control yields greater wellbeing. The wisdom traditions understand that our thirst for worldly pleasures is a misplaced response to a deep longing for intimacy with all parts of ourselves, others, and the universe. The fundamental issue is not that we are consuming the wrong things (though there are versions of things that have more or less environmental impact), but rather that much of our consumption is the result of searching for something that cannot be found through consumption of any kind.

_Failure to Measure What Is Most Important_

The issue of misidentifying root causes is perpetuated by the way in which we measure progress and define wellbeing. In the United States, the pursuit of wellbeing – of a good life – is tightly linked to the pursuit of increased income (and, by proximity, power and fame). Our economic model is based on this deeply rooted belief. We measure progress in terms of monetary gain – that is, revenue minus the cost of labor, goods, etc.
In this sort of equation, work becomes a necessary evil, and both the employer and the employee would like to decrease the amount of work necessary while maximizing profits. This view of economics is in direct opposition to a Buddhist view in two main ways. First, it sees work as a means to the end goal of income, and second, it sees income as a means to wellbeing. E.F. Schumacher discusses these differences eloquently in his 1973 book *Small is Beautiful*:

[The modern economist] is used to measuring the “standard of living” by the amount of annual consumption, assuming all the time that a man who consumes more is “better off” than a man who consumes less. A Buddhist economist would consider this approach excessively irrational: since consumption is merely a means to human wellbeing, the aim should be to obtain the maximum of wellbeing with the minimum of consumption. (Schumacher 61)

It is no surprise that measuring wellbeing and standard of living using monetary gain leads to the elevation of technology that increases the income to work ratio. Technology in and of itself may not be detrimental to wellbeing, but employing “technological capability as the reference point and standard of our economic life” rather than “the health of the ecosystems and human communities where we do our work” has proved very problematic according to Wendell Berry (Berry, *Life is a Miracle* 501-505). He elaborates as follows:

A civilization that is destroying all of its sources in nature has raised starkly the issue of propriety, whether or not it wishes to have done so. Propriety is the antithesis of individualism. To raise the issue of propriety is to deny that any individual's wish is the ultimate measure of the world. (Berry, *Life Is a Miracle* 115-119)

Berry points to the profound interdependence of all living things, and the essential role of context in evaluating the health of our communities and systems. It is foolish to deny that we live on a finite planet with finite resources, and yet our economy functions on the basis of infinite resources. Furthermore, evaluating anything without local context fails to acknowledge the intricate web of relationships within ecosystems. It would not make
sense to replace a plant that absorbs x parts per million of CO₂ per day with a tree from the opposite side of the world because living things exist within a local ecosystem, in addition to the global and cosmic systems.

Even if we had infinite resources available to us, insights from these contemplatives assert that measuring wellbeing via possessions is limited. Recall St. Teresa’s passionate assertion that “Nothing can Satisfy a reasonable soul, but only [God]” and Dogen’s advice to “Proceed with the mind which neither grasps nor rejects, the mind unconcerned with name or gain” (Dogen 34). These teachings are not a denial of satisfying basic human needs but rather an insight into the inability for material goods to fully satiate. They see inexhaustible consumption and possessiveness as symptoms of the human being seeking to close a perceived gap that is in fact an illusion.

This divided view enters into our conception of the relationship between ecological and human health. As discussed earlier, both the ecologist and economist personas (in E.O. Wilson’s definitions) view a separation between people and the environment, thereby framing human desires and happiness in direct conflict with environmental sustainability. This framing leads to technologies and initiatives that protect that division, for the benefit of either people or nature.

_Misplaced Faith in Future Technological Fixes_

Although these wisdom traditions came into being during an earlier era of human history when most of our modern day technology would not have been fathomable, their teachings still offer relevant perspectives. Namely, they speak to the danger and ineffectiveness of trying to control nature, believing anything is inherently good or evil,
and doing something simply because we have the power or ability to do it.

Swimme and Tucker describe the dawn of humanity’s love affair with technology:

Modern industrial humans broke with the past. They did not seek to commune with nature, or to revere it as divine gift. They sought to transform the world. For they had a dream. Using these new technological powers, they would create a better world, one with greater quantities of food, more efficient transportation, and faster communication. Using their new machines, they would eliminate poverty, hunger, and sickness. (Swimme and Tucker 99)

No one can fault these intentions, and yet they arise from a desire to shape the world with the power of intellect in order to eliminate circumstances and conditions that people deem disagreeable. The Buddha left his life as a prince with every imaginable comfort and pleasure available to him because he realized that no worldly good could protect a human being from sickness, old age, and death (Rahula 5). Living as a human being means that we will experience pain and discomfort, just as we will experience joy, pleasure, and happiness. However, the Buddha also realized through his own enlightenment experience that human beings could liberate themselves from suffering. This does not mean that they escape pain, sickness, and death, but rather that within these experiences, there is no suffering – no mental anguish that results from evaluating a situation as inherently bad and wishing that it were not so. This is difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of intellectually, which is why the Buddha and all other mystics emphasized direct experience as the only way to fully comprehend these truths.

Technology does not address the root cause of our suffering or protect us from life’s challenges, according to the wisdom traditions; only a deep investigation of our own minds and transformation of how we relate to ourselves and the world can lead to liberation from suffering. Furthermore, relying on technology to solve the current
environmental issues assumes that there exists a technical solution. As Thomas Hardin describes in his essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” this is not always the case:

At the end of a thoughtful article on the future of nuclear war, Wiesner and York concluded that: ‘Both sides in the arms race are… confronted by the dilemma of steadily increasing military power and steadily decreasing national security. It is our considered professional judgment that this dilemma has no technical solution. If the great powers continue to look for solutions in the area of science and technology only, the result will be to worsen the situation. (Hardin 1243)

Hardin defines a technical solution as “one that requires a change only in the techniques of the natural sciences, demanding little or nothing in the way of change in human values or ideas of morality” (Hardin 1243). Continuing to innovate technologies with known and unresolved negative environmental or human health side effects, trusting that a future technological innovation will remedy them, is irresponsible and unsustainable. So much innovation is propelled by the questions “Will people buy it?” and “Can we do it?” rather than “Will this be of true benefit to people?” and “Should we do it?” As Wendell Berry explains, “Originality and innovation in science may be a danger to the community, because newness is not inherently good, and because the scientific disciplines use only professional standards in judging their work” (Berry, Life is a Miracle 650). Using professional standards without the context of human and environmental wellbeing is bound to result in products, systems, and services that do not directly serve these needs.

Just as innovation is not inherently good, technology is not inherently bad. The wisdom traditions look instead to the relationships between human beings and the rest of the world, which would include the artifacts and machines we use. Taoist sage Chuang Tzu describes a butcher, and other masters of their respective arts, who work in accordance with the Tao: “They spread attention over the whole situation, let its focus roam freely, forget themselves in their total absorption in the object, and then the trained
hand reacts spontaneously with a confidence and precision impossible to anyone who is applying rules and thinking out moves” (Chuang Tzu 6). Neither ecosystems nor humans are governed by hard and fast rules, and so it is unsurprising that technologies that operate under such rigid frameworks produce side effects and waste materials. A masterful butcher wielding a knife is the epitome of effortless effort – or *wu wei* – and accomplishes the task using “just enough” material, force, movement, etc. Nothing is wasted in the subject’s action or the object’s transformation, in the butcher’s movement or in the butchered animal. Perhaps even more importantly, Chuang Tzu asserts that it is through living and working in this spontaneous, intimate way that a human being realizes his or her full potential and is most deeply content.

While technologies of many different kinds – from a butcher’s knife to a surgeon’s robotic operating arm – can serve human beings beneficially, they will not address the root causes of suffering. Constant innovation of technologies with the belief that they will address the root cause of suffering has led and will continue to lead to more suffering for people and the ecosystems in which we live.

*Policy for Environmental Issues as “Special Interest”*

In addition to technological solutions, the mainstream American environmental movement has focused on lobbying for the environment as a “special interest.” Framing environmentalism as a special interest illuminates the deeply internalized divisions between groups of people and between people and the environment, and has proven largely ineffective in impacting widespread change.

Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger conducted a large number of interviews
with veterans and leaders of the environmental movement and discovered that the separation between people and the environment – i.e. thinking of the environment as a ‘thing’ that is apart from human affairs and communities – defines the way in which environmentalists engage with politics. They describe the “three-part strategic framework for environmental policy-making” used without much change for the past 40 years:

First, define a problem (e.g. global warming) as “environmental.” Second, craft a technical remedy (e.g., cap-and-trade). Third, sell the technical proposal to legislators through a variety of tactics, such as lobbying, third-party allies, research reports, advertising, and public relations. When we asked environmental leaders how we could accelerate our efforts against global warming, most pointed to this or that tactic – more analysis, more grassroots organizing, more PR. (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 9)

This technical remedy and pattern of responding to imperfect results with more of the same shares close parallels with the cycle of technological innovation described earlier. Nordhaus and Shellenberger claim, “the environmental community’s belief that their power derives from defining themselves as defenders of ‘the environment’ has prevented us from winning major legislation on global warming at the national level” (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 8). In their narrow definition of the causes and solutions to environmental issues, environmentalists further entrench the split between themselves and non-environmentalists and therefore create opposition between environmentally beneficial policies and everything else. As they astutely point out, “Environmentalists are learning all the wrong lessons from Europe. We closely scrutinize the policies without giving much thought to the politics that made the policies possible” (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 7). Politics include not only the technical policies put into law, but also the values and identities, relationships, and viewpoints of the society. By framing the environment as a special interest, it automatically communicates that some people but not everyone is or ought to be interested in it.
Dan Becker, the Sierra Club’s Global Warming Director from 1989-2007, says, “We need to remember that we’re the environmental movement and that our job is to protect the environment. If we stray from that, we risk losing our focus, and there’s no one else to protect the environment if we don’t do it” (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 12).

Messages both explicit and implicit in the way environmentalists conduct policy-making reinforce the collective belief that the health of our ecosystems is not everyone’s responsibility, but only the responsibility of a select few. This also creates the foundation for conflict between environmentally sound practices and human wellbeing.

This conflict was present from the beginning of the modern environmental movement, which traces its origins to the early 19th century. From the beginning of mainstream environmental protection efforts, two different approaches dominated. These were Conservation and Preservation, with their respective figureheads, Gifford Pinchot and John Muir. Muir upheld wilderness as the ideal form of nature, yet unspoiled by human use (Muir 453). Pinchot believed that “there are just two things on this material earth – people and natural resources. From all of which I hope you have gathered, if you did not realize it before, that a constant and sufficient supply of natural resources is the basic human problem” (Pinchot 325). Whereas Muir recognized nature’s intrinsic beauty and value, Pinchot understood it as a set of valuable resources that must be carefully and efficiently used to benefit humans. Common between Conservation and Preservation is the separation between human and natural realms of existence; i.e. people do not live in nature; they visit it.

A grassroots environmental movement began concurrently, as communities in cities and rural areas struggled against local pollution and environmental degradation.
The stark difference in demographics and goals of the Conservation and Preservation advocates compared to the grassroots activists has played a critical role in shaping the environmental movement. In their critique of the elitist tendencies of American Environmentalism, Matthew Klingle and Joseph Taylor assert that “The relationship between inequality and environmentalism is vexing. It inheres in some of North America’s most troublesome conflicts: efficiency versus equity, individual liberty versus the common good, abundance versus scarcity” (Klingle and Taylor 1). This rift created between the upper middle-class mainstream environmentalists and the predominantly working-class grassroots environmentalists destined the American environmental movement, which is primarily guided by the former group, to a limited area of influence.

Whereas our political system in the United States is based on tension and factions as a basis for equality, checks, and balances, the wisdom traditions have always seen divisions and barriers as ultimately detrimental to individual and societal happiness. Jesus grew up in a society that was “riven with barriers” due to the literal interpretation of the Jewish “holiness code” (the Ten Commandments) (H. Smith 322). There were the “clean and unclean, pure and defiled, sacred and profane, righteous and sinner,” and these divisions were used to the benefit of some and the oppression of others, the elevation of some and the diminishment of others.

The divisive language within the Great Unraveling versus Business as Usual narrative is a contemporary version of such a conflict. Even the fact that environmentalists call themselves “protectors of the environment” presumes that their opposition is the “enemies of the environment,” which creates a binary separation that fails to accurately represent the multifaceted relationships of people to their ecosystems.
or what we call “the environment.”

Jesus was deeply convinced that God’s central attribute was compassion and that people were misinterpreting the Commandments, which were meant to encourage harmony and connectedness rather than disharmony and classifications (H. Smith 322).

The Buddha also taught that conflict is a self-perpetuating cycle central to the violence, disharmony, and suffering we observe in the world. Shugen Arnold describes this cycle:

The Buddha realized that the calling and repelling is an eternal state of conflict, a constant state of siege. Pushing back the enemy, gathering in the allies, building up and tearing down. Is it any wonder that human interactions are so frequently characterized by conflict? The Buddha realized that ‘peace in the family’ is not found through attachment or rejection. That’s an endless cycle. We can’t predict how it’s going to turn out, but its result is never a surprise. (Arnold, Great Uncaused Compassion 12)

What would it mean to stop “pushing back the enemy” and “gathering in the allies”? If we ceased framing environmentalism as a special interest in opposition to anything that is not literally named environmental, we would find a wealth of connections and ways of communicating that create bridges rather than moats. Might Dan Becker’s fear of losing focus if environmentalists stray from defining themselves as “protectors of the environment” have roots in wanting control of the process – assuring the environment is protected on the terms of a few rather than the terms of all?

These questions lead to another central one: What do mainstream environmentalists envision as the ultimate goal of their efforts?

Lack of Vision

One of the most detrimental deficiencies in the current set of efforts addressing the environmental crisis is the lack of a cohesive, inspiring, and bold vision. Nordhaus and Shellenberger evaluate the effect this challenge has had on environmental efforts:
In the absence of a bold vision and a reconsideration of the problem, environmental leaders are effectively giving the “I have a nightmare” speech, not just in our press interviews but also in the way that we make our proposals. The world’s most effective leaders are not issue-identified but rather vision and value-identified. These leaders distinguish themselves by inspiring hope against fear, love against injustice, and power against powerlessness. (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 31)

It is unsurprising that the general public tends to respond to the “I have a nightmare” speech with denial (Business as Usual) or despair (Great Unraveling). The wisdom traditions understand fear as a powerful and fragmenting force. It prevents people from attending to the situation with all of their faculties, leading to paralysis, flight, or fight.

When the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published their latest report on climate change, the media picked up on its “gloomy tone,” especially in light of one of the report’s authors removing his name at the last minute. Richard Tol, a climate economist at the University of Sussex, thinks that the report’s general message is “Climate change is dangerous, and we’re all going to die, and we’re all going to starve,” and he worries that “there is a real risk of this draft further polarizing the climate debate” (Brumfiel). Presenting forecasted damages and disasters without any vision for possible helpful responses will not inspire collective action to decrease the harm and suffering as much as possible. Furthermore, the further fragmentation of people around this issue fosters the “us vs. them” mentality previously alluded to. If the role of environmentalists is, or is perceived as, raising the alarm and blaming continued environmental degradation on an unresponsive public, cynicism will grow on both sides. Teresa of Avila cautioned against such self-righteousness and externally-directed criticism in the context of her community of nuns:

Another nun is very zealous about religious perfection; this is very right, but may cause her to think every small fault she sees in her sisters a serious crime, and to watch constantly whether they do anything wrong, that she may run to the Prioress to accuse them of it. At the same time, maybe she never notices her own shortcomings because of her great zeal about other people’s religious observance, while perhaps her sisters, not seeing her intention but only knowing of the watch she
Certainly, the community of researchers and experts on climate change contribute invaluably by illuminating these issues and their consequences. However, if their focus is solely on pointing out problems and faults in people’s observance of environmental sustainability, they, like the nun with “great zeal about other people’s religious observance,” will find those they accuse to be unsympathetic and further distanced. Instead, Teresa’s advice that “each one look to herself” might serve the community of environmentalists well. Wendell Berry concurs, asserting, “what we’re looking for in this [movement] is good examples” (Berry, *Wendell Berry, Poet & Prophet*). If America’s environmental leaders are not “articulating a vision of the future commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis” and instead promote “proposals that provide neither the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem,” how can they expect the general public to respond with the urgency and unanimity they perceive necessary (Nordaus and Shellenberger 6)?

If the lack of vision for a future in which people thrive as part of flourishing ecosystems results from the belief that “the human species is deeply flawed and does not deserve to survive” (Scharmer xii), the wisdom traditions have a hopeful response. These Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics assert that people, like all other creatures and parts of this universe, are innately complete and lack nothing. Rather, it is the obscuration or fragmentation of that fundamental perfection that causes the suffering and ills we observe in the world. Teresa describes her experience of this reality with metaphor and simile:
Notice that it is not the fountain and the brilliant sun which lose their splendor and beauty, for they are placed in the very center of the soul and cannot be deprived of their luster. The soul is like a crystal in the sunshine over which a thick black cloth has been thrown, so that however brightly the sun may shine the crystal can never reflect it. (Avila 21-22)

The brilliant sun, which is both at the very center of the soul and shines onto the crystal “over which a thick black cloth has been thrown,” is the radiance of God, which excludes nothing and lacks nothing. According to Teresa, if people do not see the innate perfection of themselves, other people, or the universe, it is because they cannot see past the “thick black cloth.” This thick black cloth is the wall that separates our ego from everything else and manifests this division in human and environmental suffering. We cut ourselves off from parts of ourselves, from other people, and from all of life, elevating some aspects of our humanity and suppressing or rejecting other aspects of our humanity:

We tend to think of the wild, the free, as being somehow far removed… But in actual fact, we’re surrounded and interpenetrated by wildness… The body itself is wild; certain aspects of us, our reflex actions, are manifestations of no mind, no effort. They just respond according to circumstances. The mind is also free and wild. [It has a side] that is very still, quiet, open and receptive. It is not reflective, analyzing, or judging each thing. It simply sees with the whole body and mind, hearing with the whole body and mind. (Loori, Teachings of the Insentient 80)

By elevating the parts of our minds that are “reflective, analyzing, or judging,” we have pursued our dream to “gain control over the entire affair” (Swimme and Tucker 105), but also estranged parts of our humanity that are vital to true wellbeing, namely the “still, quiet, open and receptive” capacities we all naturally possess. What might living with the “whole body and mind” look like? How might this way of being transform our relationship and responses to the environmental crisis? The next two chapters address these questions through the lens of Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics.
Klinge and Taylor say, “The relationship between inequality and environmentalism is vexing” (1). Not only is it vexing, but also, as we have explored through Chapters I and II, it is the heart of the matter according to the contemplatives. Living in the world from a perspective of complete independence and difference from everything else is the foundation upon which inequality is built. It allows us to value some people more than others, human desires more than environmental needs, and certain aspects of ourselves over other aspects. All of these divisions mirror one another and arise from the same origin – a divided mind. These three wisdom traditions speak of a unified and interrelated universe beyond imagination and rational thought, which can only be fully realized through direct experience. This realization of the nature of reality includes, without any conflict, the immanent and transcendent, the relative and the absolute, differentiation and oneness. Therefore, there is perfect harmony between living these truths and living life in this world. This chapter delves into these wisdom traditions’ very practical advice for living well and living together on this planet.

On the first Earth Day in 1970, Edward Muskie spoke about the interrelatedness of human and environmental wellbeing. He said,

> The whole society that we seek is one in which all men live in brotherhood with each other and with their environment. It is a society where each member of it knows that he has an opportunity to fulfill his greatest potential. It is a society that will not tolerate slums for some and decent houses for others, rats for some and playgrounds for others, clean air for some and filth for others. It is the only kind of society that has a chance. It is the only kind of society that has a future. (Muskie 92)

The population density in the United States has grown from less than 2 people per square mile in 1870 to 88 people per square mile just 140 years later (United States Census...
More than ever it is clear that we need to learn to live together, with the human beings and everything else on this planet. Not only is it unavoidable, but also desirable to practice living well together. Studies on human happiness and wellbeing\(^3\) invariably point to the importance of connectedness with community and “something larger than yourself” (McKibbon 37). The evidence extends beyond emotional wellbeing to physical health effects as well. For example, studies have shown that “middle-aged women with large social circles had a 23 percent lower incidence of coronary artery disease” and “people above the age of eighty with ‘poor social networks’ had a 60 percent higher than average chance of dementia” (McKibbon 37).

We cannot escape living together, and we all basically want to live well. These three wisdom traditions suggest that living well and living together are mutually interdependent – one cannot exist without the other. And that living together includes living with ourselves, with other people, and with the world at large. Instead of the distance and separation we see in many areas of the world and the environmental movement today, each of these wisdom traditions emphasizes relationships that embody intimacy as central to living well, together. Some of this wisdom is embodied in the ethical codes of societies, beginning five millennia ago (Swimme and Tucker 96). Though there are certainly examples of laws purportedly created for the benefit of all that instead oppress or segregate, the best intentions of these codes have been to preserve harmony and act as a reminder of how to live well together. Within these codes is the acknowledgment that individuals reacting to a situation in the moment do not always have the ability to see the larger effects their actions will incur. Thomas Hardin wrote his

\(^3\) See [http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com](http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com) and [http://www.gallup.com/poll/wellbeing.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/wellbeing.aspx) as examples
“Tragedy of the Commons” from this point of view:

It is the newly proposed infringements that we vigorously oppose; cries of “rights” and “freedom” fill the air. But what does “freedom” mean? When men mutually agreed to pass laws against robbing, mankind became more free, not less so. Individuals locked into the logic of the commons are free only to bring on universal ruin; once they see the necessity of mutual coercion, they become free to pursue other goals. (Hardin 1248)

In this 1979 essay, Hardin is arguing for increased regulation of the commons, which includes all of the material goods necessary for human life: space, resources, clean air and water, etc. By freedom, he means the freedom to live without the anxiety and constant striving necessary in a society in which every individual is only concerned with his or her personal wellbeing.

The wisdom traditions appreciate the power of our instincts towards self-preservation and articulate guidelines for harmonious living, such as the Commandments in the Old and New Testament and the Buddhist Precepts in the Buddha’s discourses. However, they are also clear that these laws are but manifestations of the fundamental understanding that we are in fact not as separate and independent as we believe. The contemplatives report from their experiences of the fundamental truths that formed the moral and ethical teachings carried forward in their traditions. They speak of the intimacy of all things as the fundamental reality of this universe and practicing that intimacy as the path towards ultimate freedom.

*Christian Mystics*

The Christian mystics point to one essential foundation for living life well: love for God and for others. It is through this love, which is not self-seeking but self-forgetting, that a person finds “peace, joy, happiness, delight, and wisdom” (St. John 111). Moved by love rather than “the appetites,” a person is able to live peacefully and
with a sense of wonder for everything encountered.

St. Teresa says that a genuine love for others is both the path and sign that an individual has developed a genuine love for God. She says,

Our Lord asks but two things of us: love, for Him and for our neighbor: these are what we must strive to obtain... I think the most certain sign that we keep these two commandments is that we have a genuine love for others... sham virtues springing from [thinking ourselves better than we are] are always accompanied by a vainglory never found in those of divine origin, which are free from pride. (Avila 81)

Avila clarifies that the distinction between doing good from a place of genuine love for others and doing good from a place of self-aggrandizement is of utmost importance. If an individual thinks his or her actions emerge from a love for others, but those actions actually come from a place of self-interest, the results will not truly benefit either party.

Underhill says, “The obstacle in their path is not consciousness in general, but self-consciousness, the consciousness of the Ego. The Ego is the limitation, that which opposes itself to the Infinite: the states of consciousness free from self” (Underhill 209).

It is through recognizing and releasing the ego’s station of command that a vaster consciousness is uncovered. Genuine love for another is not possible when the ego obscures one’s clear vision of another. Without fully seeing ourselves, we cannot fully see the person in front of us.

As discussed in previous sections, it is the appetites emerging from the ego that blind people. St. John says, “For this is a characteristic of those who are blinded by their appetites; when they are in the midst of the truth and of what is suitable for them, they no more see it than if they were in the dark” (St. John of the Cross 137). Truth, beauty, and what is suitable to human beings is all around us, but we are blinded by “inordinate appetites” that emerge from that powerful self-consciousness that creates separation from
everyone and everything else. Genuine love is inseparable from this self-forgetfulness because it emerges from experiencing and living in deep relationship with all things, as a commentary on Meister Eckhart’s work explains:

Since the metaphysical keynote of the spiritual and divine realities in which the human person now participates is oneness, the moral manifestation of this state is the practice of altruism, that is treating other people as if they were oneself. (Eckhart xxx)

The Christian mystics suggest that morality, in its most developed form, is an emergent way of living and relating with others grounded in this realization of oneness. It seems that the all-encompassing love described by especially St. Teresa and St. John serves also as the guide in what is certainly a leap of faith.

In his Ascent of Mount Carmel, which describes the journey of an individual soul towards union with God, St. John describes the paradox of finding all the things previously desired only through practicing detachment from these desires. He writes, “The more I desired to possess [the goods of heaven and earth], the less I had” and “Now that I no longer desire them, I have them all without desire: peace, joy, happiness, delight, wisdom, justice, fortitude, charity, and piety” (St. John 111). The intellect does not function in this way; it cannot grasp that the only way to truly find what one is ultimately seeking is to not seek it. This is because the very nature of framing the journey as seeking something creates a separation between seeker and that which he or she seeks. Love, on the other hand, invites everything closer without expectation. As St. Teresa says, “to make rapid progress and to reach the mansions we wish to enter, it is not so essential to think much as to love much” (Avila 52). This is the way that the Christian mystics follow to realize their full potential and find ultimate rest. St. John writes,

In this nakedness the spirit
Finds its quietude and rest, for in
Coveting nothing, nothing tires it
By pulling it up, and nothing oppresses it
By pushing it down, because it is in
The center of its humility. (St. John 111)

With no need to protect the ego, the spirit is free to live in “quietude and rest” and is no longer pulled up or pushed down by desires or appetites. It seems important that St. John includes “desire for the goods of heaven” as well as “desire for the goods of earth” as faulty paths. The humility he speaks of is then not a self-critical or self-belittling attitude but rather a surrender to the world and the way things are – a genuine trust in God that does not abdicate responsibility but does surrender absolute control of one’s life circumstances. In other words, it is an acknowledgment that we do not have ultimate control over anything – from our emotions to tomorrow’s weather – although the way we live has a profound influence.

It is through the development of this love, humility, and self-forgetfulness that living well with all others takes it form. Eckhart further clarifies the way in which love for others is genuinely manifest:

All the commandments of God proceed from love and from the goodness of his nature for, if they did not come from love, then they could not be the commandment of God… Now whoever dwells in the goodness of his nature, dwells in God’s love, but love has no Why. If I had a friend and loved him because of the benefits which this brought me and because of getting my own way, then it would not be my friend that I love but myself. I should love my friend on account of his own goodness and virtues and on account of all that he is in himself. (Eckhart 119)

Love with no Why invites openness towards other people and the entirety of existence. It leads to a wonder for rather than a fear of the unknown.

The evidence for the trouble caused by a fear of the unknown is visible all around us and within us. The future is always unknown, and perhaps even more unknown now than ever before, with changes to the very way the earth functions on an unimaginable scale. The conflict between those on the “Business as Usual” side and the “Great
Unraveling” side seems to arise from a deep fear of the unknown – an unwillingness to deeply enquire into the other side’s perspective and instead throwing accusations back and forth. Furthermore, both worldviews are based on fear. Those who adhere to “Business as Usual” are afraid of changing lifestyles and systems, while those who claim we are amidst a “Great Unraveling” are afraid of a loss of control over their future. The journeys and visions of the world described by the mystics, on the other hand, are full of wonder and love. There is an openness to not knowing exactly what comes next, but a willingness to engage with the current reality and move forward with open eyes. St. Teresa says,

> God, Who is so great, so wise, has doubtless hidden secrets in all things He created, which we should greatly benefit by knowing, as those say who understand such matters. Indeed, I believe that in each smallest creature He has made, though it be but a tiny ant, there are more wonders than can be comprehended. (Avila 55)

Encountering everything with a sense of wonder yields surprising discoveries. It seems obvious that the only way to discover something genuinely new is to fully admit that we do not know, and yet so many of our endeavors towards discovery are shaped by a desire to verify what we think we know. It is through this attitude of humility in not-knowing and wonder for what is hidden that St. Teresa and the other mystics bring more and more into their field of consciousness. She exclaims, “I discover secrets within us which often fill me with astonishment: how many more must there be unknown to me!” (Avila 56). This attitude seems so important to discovering what it is to be fully alive and fully human, and to live harmoniously with ourselves, with other human beings, and with nature. Evelyn Underhill describes the capacity to know that is only available through the gate of intimacy with the whole:
More, Nature herself reveals little of her secret to those who only look and listen with the outward ear and eye. The condition of all valid seeing and hearing upon every plane of consciousness lies not in the sharpening of the senses, but in a peculiar attitude of the whole personality: in a self-forgetting attentiveness, a profound concentration, a self-merging, which operates a real communion between the seer and the seen. (Underhill 360)

The majority of our efforts regarding the environmental crisis seem to be emerging from fear and guided by observations with “the outward ear and eye.” If Underhill and the Christian mystics are right in saying that “little of Nature’s secrets” are revealed through this mode of enquiry, we are doing ourselves a great disservice as we are acting upon very limited information. Furthermore, as is made clear through the parallel use of language, it is the same “attitude of the whole personality” which reveals the hidden secrets within ourselves and other people, as well as in nature. In forgetting the power of love and wonder for the whole world, our world is made much smaller. This seems to be the Christian mystics’ important message regarding living well together.

_Taoists_

Taoism also emphasizes an intimacy with all things beyond the intellectual as the path and aim for living life well, and it focuses on suppleness and softness as the most important qualities to cultivate. Taoism asserts that harmony with nature is the foundation for the ideal life and that the sage will achieve this through following the Way – Tao – and cultivating _wu-wei_.

Taoism emphasizes reverence for and harmony with nature. This foundation is important both in process and outcome; i.e. in following the principles of nature, one realizes intimately one’s relation to nature and the universe, and in living harmoniously with nature, the sage reveals a mastery of this understanding. Taoist texts are colored by imagery and metaphors steeped in nature, and the following passage from Lao Tzu’s _Tao_
The Ching embodies this theme:

A man is supple and weak when living, but hard and stiff when dead. Grass and trees are pliant and fragile when living, but dried and shriveled when dead. Thus the hard and the strong are the comrades of death; the supple and the weak are the comrades of life. (Lao Tzu 83)

Even just taking this passage at face value, it is hard to disagree with the connections between suppleness and life and between hardness and death as illustrated by these examples. Part of living in harmony with nature is recognizing that certain conventional assumptions which human society tacitly follows are not only untrue but detrimental to being deeply happy. Being “hard and stiff” opposes the natural way of things; the sage follows the wisdom of nature and endeavors to be “supple and pliant” like other living things that flourish.

It is through this mode of being that a person moves into alignment with the natural order of things. Just as the Tao is absolutely inseparable from all of existence, as it gives rise to and supports all of existence, a master of the Tao enters completely into anything he or she does, embodying the effortless action of *wu-wei*. The story of Cook Ting, in Chuang Tzu’s writings, offers a tangible manifestation of *wu-wei*:

Cook Ting was carving an ox for Lord Wen-hui. As his hand slapped, shoulder lunged, foot stamped, knee crooked, with a hiss! With a thud! The brandished blade as it sliced never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance, now with an orchestra playing the Ching-shou.

“Oh, excellent!” said Lord Wen-hui. “That skill should attain such heights!”

“What your servant cares about is the Way, I have left skill behind me.”

(Chuang Tzu 63)

Through becoming “completely absorbed in the object” – relieving the separation experienced when rational thought or language mediate the interaction – Cook Ting acts spontaneously and fluidly such that the knife seems to find its own path through the animal’s body, like water finds the easiest – most natural – path down a mountain.
The fluidity, effortless, and absorption that Chuang Tzu describes is readily visible in any individual who has mastered their craft and gone “beyond skills,” so to speak. Pablo Piccaso said, “Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist” (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 78). The Taoists do not conceptualize of the natural order of things as a set of rigid rules; therefore, living in accord with the Tao is an art.

Trying to impose rules or structure onto something that is inherently free from rules results in difficulty. Lao Tzu describes the cause and effect of such an attitude towards the world as follows:

> Whoever takes the empire and wishes to do anything to it I see will have no respite. The empire is a sacred vessel and nothing should be done to it. Whoever does anything to it will ruin it; whoever lays hold of it will lose it.

Hence some things lead and some follow;
Some breathe gently and some breathe hard;
Some are strong and some are weak;
Some destroy and some are destroyed.

Therefore the sage avoids excess, extravagance, and arrogance. (Lao Tzu 34)

Based on the progression of these verses, it seems that Lao Tzu is not just talking about “the empire” as a state or country but rather as anything of this world. Everything has its own natural rhythms and characteristics. Trying to change those will lead to “no respite,” “ruin,” and loss. Replacing “the empire” with “the environment” reveals a first verse that accurately describes the efforts and results of people with respect to the environment. To “do something to it” suggests action that opposes its nature, and indeed when people have tried to shape nature in a way that opposes its cycles, dynamics, and interrelationships, there has always been a reaction to it. One of these examples is the Three Gorges Dam on China’s Yangtze River. Hailed as both an engineering marvel and an “environmental catastrophe,” the dam has resulted in the displacement of 1.2 million people and changes to the local climate (Hvistendahl). George Davis, a tropical medicine specialist from
George Washington University, says, “There’s been a lot less rain, a lot more drought, and the potential for increased disease” (Ibid). It seems that the impetus for the project was both energy production and to prove “to the whole world the Chinese people’s capability of building the world’s first-rate hydroelectric project,” in the words of Premier Li Peng. Though the project resulted in 18,000 megawatts of non-fossil fuel power, it was created with the intention of demonstrating power and has resulted in fundamentally changing the dynamics of the ecosystem with numerous unintended side effects (Ibid).

By trying to control nature, we are losing it. The respect for each thing’s natural way of being is connected to the Taoist appreciation for the intrinsic value of each thing. D.C. Lau explains,

*Te* means ‘virtue’, and seems to be related to its homophone meaning ‘to get’. In its Taoist usage, *te* refers to the virtue of a thing (which is what it ‘gets’ from the *Tao*). In other words, *te* is the nature of a thing, because it is in virtue of its *te* that a thing is what it is. (Lao Tzu xxxvii)

It is in relating to everything as it is, without trying to change it or make it other, that harmony is achieved. Furthermore, it is the recognition that everything emerges from the *Tao* – the boundless source of all of existence – that Taoism finds its basis of non-discrimination or non-duality.

This extends to people as well. Chuang Tzu says that people should be at one with their humanness, which also means at one with the Tao. Therefore, he says, “Someone in whom neither Heaven nor man is victor over the other, this is what is meant by the True Man” (Chuang Tzu 85). Again, this suggests the non-duality between what we think of as divine or spiritual and what we consider to be of this world and humanity. The Taoists’ emphasis on spontaneity does not mean that they condone fulfilling every whim
generated by desires. As previously mentioned, they too caution against living with excessive desires and covetousness. Lao Tzu stresses that “In being content, one will always have enough” (Lao Tzu 53), and describes the disharmony that emerges when an individual or society seeks “goods hard to come by” (Lao Tau 7). Chuang Tzu relates the importance of training to reduce the passions and traces their origin to the establishment of dualities, saying, “Without an Other there is no Self, without Self no choosing one thing rather than another” (Chuang Tzu 51). Not choosing one thing rather than another means not attaching value or judging one thing absolutely better than another.

In one of Chuang Tzu’s iconic passages, he describes the freedom that comes from “escaping the fixed routes to worldly success and fame” (Chuang Tzu 43). By ceasing to relate to the world in terms of what is useful and what is not useful, “the journey of life becomes an effortless ramble” (Ibid). Chuang Tzu tells the story of a conversation with philosopher Hui Shih that centers on the metaphor of a tree that is too “knobbly and bumpy” to be useful to a carpenter (47). Chuang Tzu replies to Hui Shih’s accusation that his teachings are big but useless with the following answer:

Said Chuang Tzu to Hui Shih: “Now if you have a great tree and think it’s a pity it’s so useless, why not plant it in the realm of Nothingwhatever, in the wilds which spread out into nowhere, and go roaming away to do nothing at its side, ramble around and fall asleep in its shade?

Spared by the axe
No thing will harm it.
If you’re no use at all,
Who’ll come to bother you?” (Chuang Tzu 47)

The Taoist teachings point to the danger and disharmony that emerge from seeking contentment in goods or deeds; i.e. in basing the value of a person or thing on their usefulness. It is blatantly clear that relating to people or the environment in terms of their usefulness results in abuse, manipulation, and destruction. We throw away what is no
longer valuable, and if everything in the world is evaluated based on usefulness to the individual, the whole world is eventually thrown away. And yet, we depend upon and are inextricably a part of the whole world. This is what leads to the pervasive disharmony we experience, through the lens of the Taoists.

The alternative they suggest is to live life as though “going rambling without a destination,” freely and spontaneously, in accord with the natural order of things (Chuang Tzu 43). Living in this way means not dividing, or judging based on usefulness, but rather living intimately with everything. In living intimately with everything, one finds alignment with the natural order of things and dissolves the conflict that only emerges from a dualistic mind. Living intimately is the embodiment of *wu-wei*, where there is nothing extra because the subject has become “completely absorbed in the object” (Chuang Tzu 6).

*Buddhists*

The Buddha said, “I do not perceive even one other thing, O monks, that when undeveloped and uncultivated entails such great suffering as the mind” (Bodhi 267). It is the human mind that creates the most ethereal music and the most violent weapons, that saves lives and takes them, that contributes to the flourishing of ecosystems and to their destruction. How can we reconcile these divergent human activities?

Buddhism claims the mind is the key to “great suffering” and “great harm” as well as to “great happiness” and “great benefit” (Ibid). Whether we live with great suffering or great happiness does not depend upon external circumstances; it all depends upon how we develop and cultivate the mind. Shugen Arnold develops these ideas
further:

How do we affect – for better and for worse – each other and this planet? What we do depends on how we use our minds. How we use our minds influences how we understand and respond to different situations. In other words, how we live is a direct expression of how we understand ourselves and the world. (Arnold, *Great Uncaused Compassion* 10)

Buddhism’s understanding of ourselves and the world discussed in the previous sections is therefore the foundation for living well and positively affecting ourselves, each other, and the planet. This understanding, held in the heart and mind, is embodied and lived through the Buddhist teachings around ethical conduct, called Sila.

They are based on the Buddha’s teaching of “universal love and compassion” and aim at “promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society” (Rahula 47). The Buddha’s following words clarify the connection between wisdom gained through experiential insight and practicing Sila:

> It would be even more fruitful if, with a trusting mind, one would… undertake the five precepts; abstaining from the destruction of life, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from the use of intoxicants. As great as all this might be, it would be even more fruitful if one would develop a mind of loving-kindness even for the time it takes to pull a cow’s udder. And as great as all this might be, it would be even more fruitful still if one would develop the perception of impermanence just for the time it takes to snap one’s fingers. (179)

This passage follows several other examples including offering food to enlightened beings and building a monastery to support the community of Buddhist practitioners. The Buddha says that even more fruitful than these actions is developing the compassion and wisdom from which they emerge. It is not through following the precepts as rules, but through the direct realization of the interrelatedness of all things and a deeply internalized knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, that one cultivates compassion and wisdom, and harmony with oneself and all others. In other words, ethical conduct in Buddhism is an expression of the true relationship between everything, just as the Christian mystics understand the Commandments to originate in love of God and the Taoists understand
living in accord with the Tao to originate in seeing that everything arises from the Tao.

Daido Loori points to the importance of seeing the ethical teachings of Buddhism as “talking about the whole universe,” and he says, “We need to see them from that perspective if we are to benefit from what they have to offer and begin healing the rift between ourselves and the universe” (Loori, *Teachings of the Earth* 80). He discusses the Buddhist precepts in the context of humanity’s relationship with the environment. They include the following:

- Affirm life – do not kill (nature)
- Be giving – do not steal (from nature)
- Honor the body (of nature) – do not misuse sexuality
- Manifest truth – do not lie (about nature)
- Proceed clearly – do not cloud the mind (with greed or denial)
- See the perfection – do not speak of others’ (or nature’s) errors and faults
- Realize self and other as one – do not elevate the self and put down others (or nature)
- Give generously – do not be withholding (from nature)
- Actualize harmony – do not be angry (with nature)
- Experience the intimacy of things (and nature) – do not defile the Three Treasures

(Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 90-102)

There are examples of ways in which each one of these precepts is overlooked, as well as embodied. There are many layers of understanding with respect to the precepts, from literal to beyond language, obvious to subtle. Here is a story from Daido Loori that illuminates the ninth precept: “Actualize harmony – do not be angry”:

The fellow who owned the house that is now the monastery abbacy had beavers on his property. They were eating up his trees, so he decided to exterminate them. A neighbor told him that they were protected, so he called the Department of Environmental Conservation. The authorities trapped and removed the animals. When we moved into the house, however, a pair of beavers showed up and immediately started taking down the trees again. In fact, they chomped down a beautiful weeping willow that my students presented to me as a gift. I was supposed to sit under it in my old age, but now it was stuck in a beaver dam, blocking up the stream. With the stream dammed, the water rose and the pond filled with fish. With the abundance of fish, ducks arrived. That brought in the fox and the osprey. Suddenly the whole environment came alive because of those two beavers. Of course, they didn’t stay too long because we didn’t have that much wood, so after two seasons they moved on. Nobody was taking care of the dam. The water leaked out and the pond disappeared. It will be like that until the trees grow back and the next pair of beavers arrive. If we can just keep our fingers out of it and let things unfold, nature knows how to maintain itself. It creates itself and defines itself, as does the universe. And, by the way, the weeping willow came back, sprouted again right from the stump. It leans over the pond watching me go through my cycles these days. (Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 100)
Being angry with the environment and acting based on that anger usually leads to violence and disharmony, an ongoing war that never leads to any rest or final solution. In addition, as evidenced by the arc of this story, there is so much that is potentially missed by being angry that things are not as we think they should be. Without humility and a sense of wonder for all that is invisible, desire and attachment take over and blindly cause unintended side effects. According to Buddhism, it is through realizing that no independent self exists that we can freely and fully be who we really are. Shugen Arnold describes this relationship as follows:

The experience of no shell, no personal self, no attachment to the idea of “I am” is the beginning of the emergence of compassion. Why? Because when the self has been forgotten, who we really are is now free, a being that inherently possesses wisdom, whose life purpose is to serve, to be generous. Zen Master Hakuin described that emergence from self-clinging towards selfless compassion, “From the sea of effortlessness, let your great uncaused compassion shine forth.” (Arnold, Great Uncaused Compassion 13)

Hakuin describes this compassion as “uncaused” because it is not contrived, not initiated by the ego. It emerges effortlessly to help alleviate suffering, as the left hand would do everything in its power to free the right hand from a fire. It is through the deep experience of no separation that wisdom and compassion shine forth. No longer separate from our true nature, we find that “all things are perfect and complete, just as they are. Nothing is lacking” (Loori, Zen of Creativity 166).

In contrast to this understanding of human nature and the nature of all things, our society constantly reaffirms the sense that there is something lacking and that we need to protect ourselves. As Loori says, “In a society that assures us that more is better, it’s not always easy to trust that we have enough, that we are enough. We have to cut through the illusion that abundance is security, and trust that we don’t have to buffer ourselves
against reality” (Ibid). In the face of countless offers for self-improvement that fuels a large portion of our consumerist society, Buddhism’s message is revolutionary. Not only is attaching to anything fruitless and ultimately unsatisfying, but also unnecessary: “We don’t know that we already are what we are trying to become” (Ibid). Along with this teaching of inherent completeness is the acknowledgment that because of our self-consciousness – our minds that judge, grasp, and reject – living well with ourselves and others requires a close examination of our minds and world and diligent practice to unravel the layers of conditioning. The Buddha spoke of the four divine abodes or immeasurable states, which are “the antidotes to ill will, harmfulness, discontent, and partiality” (Bodhi 260):

So above, below, around, and everywhere, and to all as to himself, he dwells pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility, and without ill will. When the liberation of mind by loving-kindness is developed in this way, no limiting action remains there, none persists there. (Bodhi 178)

He then repeats this passage for “compassion,” “altruistic joy” (joy in the happiness of others), and “equanimity,” in the same way as “loving-kindness” (Ibid). Note the boundlessness of these four abodes: “above, below, around, and everywhere,” “to all as to himself,” and “pervading the all-encompassing world.” Clearly these are utterly unconditional and boundless in their full embodiments. Whereas ill will, harmfulness, discontent, and partiality emerge from and perpetuate judgment, separation, and conflict; loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity heal that judging and conflict-creating mind. They enter deeply into relationship with the parts of one’s self that are least acknowledged and liked, with the other people who most offend and injure, and with the elements of this world that seem most foreign and frightening. Thus, as in Christianity and Taoism, living well and living together are inseparable in Buddhism.
CHAPTER IV: THE JOURNEY TOWARDS REGENERATION

The Taoists, Buddhists, and Christian mystics are unanimous in their view that our understanding of the world is inseparable from the way we live our lives. The way we live our lives is mirrored in our relationships with ourselves, others, and the whole of existence, so our very own wellbeing is inextricably intertwined with the wellbeing of the world. Therefore, the journey towards healing the root causes of the environmental crisis is a journey that involves looking deeply into our own hearts and minds. This chapter explores how the contemplatives’ understanding of the world might help those of us working to address human and environmental wellbeing from wherever we stand.

Rachel Carson, often called the patron saint of the modern American environmental movement, collected stories of people who wrote to her about their love for the world and deep felt responsibility to care for it. The son of a distinguished Swedish oceanographer sent one of these stories. “‘He was an incurable romantic,’ the son wrote, ‘intensely in love with life and with the mysteries of the cosmos.’ When he realized he had not much longer to enjoy the earthly scene, Otto Pettersson said to his son: ‘What will sustain me in my last moments is an infinite curiosity as to what is to follow’” (Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* 101). With the possibility for changes to our planet beyond our capacity to accurately predict or imagine, it is easy to slip into fear, paralysis, denial, and anger. There is plenty of evidence for where those reactions will lead. Energy is spent blaming the “other side,” burying our heads in our distraction of choice, and feeling overwhelmed with a sense of hopelessness and anxiety. Or we can fill ourselves with an infinite curiosity as to what is to follow. This journey begins by
engaging with the current reality with our whole bodies and minds.

The Chinese characters for “crisis” translate to “danger” and “opportunity” (Nordhaus and Shellenberger 1). This definition of crisis suggests that we can view the current state of our planet as an opportunity to wake up to the danger we are responsible for creating. Swimme and Tucker describe this twofold reality:

We have only just awakened to this larger responsibility, and at the same time we are discovering the massive destruction taking place. With our machines and our numbers we have become a geological force. Because of us, the ice caps are melting. Because of us, coral reefs the size of mountains are dying. We thought we were making a better and more prosperous world. But from the perspective of life, we have done the opposite. The paradox of unintended consequences is now becoming evident. (Swimme and Tucker 102)

The wisdom traditions embrace the cycles of life and death – both literal and figurative – as natural and necessary to development. In the spiritual journey, there are times of “death” as one view or sense of who we are and how the world works falls away in order for another to come forth. But much of the destruction and death we have caused on this planet is not necessary or helpful. In recognizing our responsibility for the collapse of ecosystems and pervasive disharmony in the world, we have a choice in whether to move forward with the same basic approaches, with perhaps a feel-good tweak here or there, or to encourage the life-giving death of old ways of relating and being that perpetuate the problems.

The wisdom traditions suggest that rather than prescribing a set of rules to remedy humanity’s troubled relationship with one another and this planet, we ought to cultivate the ways of being that give birth to authentic and resilient solutions. Therefore, providing a set of specific recommendations is not in line with the contemplatives’ insistence that their insights defy intellectual understanding and linguistic communication and must be personally realized by each individual. At the same time, their teachings and reports from
deep within their own experiences have served as guideposts for thousands of men and women on their own journeys. Taking inspiration from this example, I have coalesced the insights explored throughout this paper into six ways of being that might serve as touchstones at any time and in any context as we seek to address the environmental crisis. Furthermore, they fall loosely into three pairs that represent the arc of a journey towards shifting from life-diminishing to life-affirming practices and communities. These include the journey’s preparation through cultivating attitudes of wonder and humility, trust and perseverance; the journey’s development into intimacy with all things and compassion; and the journey’s fruits of boundless creativity and responsive adaptability. These are all interrelated and mutually reinforcing.

Wonder Born of Humility

The contemplatives, each in their own way, emphasize the importance of wonder and humility in order to discover authentically new ways of living and creating in the world. These attitudes aid in responding to the environmental crisis with fresh eyes and preventing the aforementioned issues of misidentifying root causes and overinvesting in future technological fixes.

There is a famous short story in the Zen Buddhist tradition about an encounter between a university professor and a Zen master. The master welcomes his guest warmly and offers him some tea, while the professor enumerates his extensive studies and knowledge of Zen texts. When the tea is ready, the master begins pouring it into the guest’s cup and fills it to the brim. The professor looks on, with increasing incredulity and agitation, as the tea overflows and eventually can no longer help himself. “‘What are
you doing?’ he cries. ‘Can’t you see the cup is full?’ The master nods and smiles. ‘How am I to teach you anything when your cup is so full?’” (Loori, The Zen of Creativity 116). Wonder and humility are the antidotes to perpetuating the mentalities and habits responsible for causing the environmental crisis.

Our society elevates the acquisition and mastery of knowledge, and in many ways, this has served us well. Rachel Carson’s intensive studies on synthetic pesticides and their impacts on human and environmental health led to a public movement to ban DDT (Carson, Silent Spring 23). The need for more particular, accurate, and comprehensive information about the environment is clear, but in this rush to know more, we seem to have forgotten why it matters. Rachel Carson writes in her essays on The Sense of Wonder:

I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused – a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love – then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate. (Carson, The Sense of Wonder 56)

The importance of feeling as well as knowing continues throughout life. To extend her metaphor, if we cease to cultivate a “sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown” and to connect with “our emotional response” to what we encounter in the world, the soil of our minds will become infertile and the seeds of knowledge and wisdom will fail to flourish. The wisdom traditions agree that without a sense of wonder, our “cups” of understanding are full and we cannot learn anything authentically new about the world; we simply repeat old patterns and solidify existing opinions. We resort to comments such as “This is the way it is” and “There’s nothing we can do about it” in
the face of challenges and conditions that do not favor a flourishing existence. We renounce our ability and responsibility to see the world as it is and respond to what we see.

When our cups are full, life becomes ordinary, and we risk missing what is right in front of us. Master Dogen taught that “In the mundane, nothing is sacred. In sacredness, nothing is mundane” (Loori, The Zen of Creativity 80). When we see the world as mundane, it is much easier to relate to everything in terms of its value according to our individual needs and desires, and we fail to even consider its intrinsic value that the wisdom traditions so lovingly describe. Wonder is a powerful antidote to the blindness resulting in unnecessary damage of our world, and can serve as a source of strength and purpose for those fearful or overwhelmed by the environmental crisis.

Wonder captures a range of attitudes and ways of being that the wisdom traditions emphasize in the journey to discovering who we really are and how to live well in this world. The mystics speak of the importance of being open and receptive to everything, being curious, and allowing these to arise from humility and vulnerability.

Wonder, say Swimme and Tucker, “is not just another emotion; it is rather an opening into the heart of the universe” (114). Our early ancestors developed the capacity to be self-aware. Not only were they living, they were conscious of living, which enabled a “relative freedom from instinctual behavior” and the ability to “become profoundly captivated by so many things – by fire, sunrise, ocean waves, erotic intensities, the death of a friend, the birth of a child” (Swimme 87). Human beings did not simply react to a given situation, they reflected upon the past, anticipated the future, and paused in the present to consider and choose how to respond. Arthur Koestler has said that this capacity
is at the heart of our most inspired endeavors: “This oceanic feeling of wonder is the common source of religious mysticism, of pure science and art for art’s sake” (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 15). Swimme and Tucker concur that wonder has been the entryway to discovering through all of these avenues the interconnectedness of our universe:

By dwelling in a world of wonder, humans were led to realize that they were children of the stars—something intuited in early myths and uncovered by modern science. They came to understand that everything in the universe then forms a huge interconnected family that we can call “all my relations.” (Swimme and Tucker 114)

If “dwelling in a world of wonder” has led many men and women to perceive the interconnectedness of the universe, the wisdom traditions say, cultivating this attitude towards the world can offer the same visceral understanding for any human being. Daido Loori puts it very simply when he says of living life: “The best we can do is be always open and receptive” (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 226). Openness is the essence of being in the world with a sense of wonder towards everything we encounter. Being completely open and receptive enables us to experience the world with all of our faculties without judgment, which the wisdom traditions assert obscures and confines our vision.

The hubris of human beings has led to many innovations that alter the established web of relationships in a given ecosystem. The cycle of recognizing an apparent conflict between the patterns of nature and the desires of human beings, planning and implementing an intervention, and then discovering that the changes yield unintended consequences is a familiar one. Consider the following example of modifying the course of a river:

We have concluded that the river is wrong. It erodes the banks and floods the lowlands. It needs to be controlled. So we take all the curves out of it, line the banks with stone, and turn it into a pipeline. This effectively removes all the protective space that the water birds use to reproduce in, and the places where the fish go to find shelter when the water rises. Then the first time there is a spring storm the ducks’ eggs and the fish wash downstream… and the river is left barren. (Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 95)
How many times and in how many ways have people concluded that nature is wrong? If we really consider the statement, “the river is wrong,” most people would acknowledge that it cannot be wrong in an absolute sense. The Buddhists and Taoists would add that it cannot be “wrong” in a relative sense either because it is in accord with its nature. What might a sense of wonder offer to this sort of situation? The Dujiangyan Irrigation Project in China’s Sichuan Province provides a compelling example, especially in contrast to the aforementioned Three Gorges Dam.

The Dujiangyan Irrigation Project is an ancient hydraulic project and UNESCO World Heritage site that has been operating for more than 2,000 years with minimal maintenance and no disturbance to the surrounding ecosystems (UNESCO). Located about 50 km from the city of Chengdu, the Dujiangyan project was first completed between 270 BCE and 256 BCE (China Heritage Project). Since then, it has served the dual purpose of mitigating floods produced by spring-thaw waters and continuously irrigating the Chengdu Plain for agricultural use.

The flow of water was directed by the construction of an artificial island in the middle of the river downstream from a major bend. The island has an end like a fish mouth, with softly sloping angles so that, again, there is no obstruction but rather gentle guidance of the water into two separate flows, one to either side of the island. The inner channel, which is in the concave area of the river bend, directs water towards irrigation of the Plain, and the outer channel, which is in the convex area, directs water towards the Yangtze River. Regularly, about 60% of the river’s flow goes to irrigation, but in rainy seasons, 60% goes to the outer channel, thereby mitigating flooding (Ibid). The natural bend in the river was used ingeniously to filter sediment and rocks away from the
irrigation channels, as the clear surface water follows the concave side of the river, and
the sedimeted deep water follows the convex side into the outer channel.

This project demonstrates a clear appreciation for the river’s patterns and natural
tendencies. Rather than imposing an idea of how the river should flow for the benefit of
nearby human communities, the creators of the Dujiangyan Project must have spent time
studying the river, wondering at how water flowed down it, changed with the seasons,
and moved sediment. They must have approached the project with openness and
receptivity on the way to discovering how to integrate the needs of people with the nature
of the river and ecosystem. The dynamic adaptability yielded from this design embodies
the Taoist emphasis on flexibility over rigidity as the true source of strength. It remains
an organic, responsive system, resilient to seasonal and temporal changes. The island and
channels can be gently modified as needed because they are made by dredging the
riverbed. Rather than trying to overpower the river and its patterns, the people interwove
their needs into the existing balance of relationships. This attitude steeped in wonder
acknowledges that the world is neither fixed nor predictable. Wendell Berry says, “We
should abandon the idea that this world and our human life in it can be brought by
science to some sort of mechanical perfection or predictability” (Berry, *Life is a Miracle*
1225). The wisdom traditions view the source of much of our suffering as resistance to
accepting things as they are and wanting control over them.

This deference to the river’s patterns and characteristics exposes another element
of wonder: humility. Teresa of Avila says of the mystic’s path, “Extreme humility is the
principal point. It is the want of this, I believe, that stops people’s progress” (Avila 45).
As mentioned earlier, even in the quest to help others and do good in the world, the drive
of the ego becomes a hindrance, according to the wisdom traditions. Rather than becoming angry with others for their lack of concern with the environment or seeking “name or gain” for good work, living and acting in the world with a sense of wonder and humility guards against making these mistakes that ultimately lead to more suffering for the individual and others (Dogen 34). Wendell Berry describes the power of working with these attitudes in responding to the environmental crisis:

I say to the young people, don’t get into this with the idea that you’re going to solve all the problems, even in your lifetime. The important thing to do is to learn all you can about where you are and if you’re going to work there it becomes even more important to learn everything you can about that place, to make common cause with that place, and then resigning yourself – becoming patient enough – to work with it, over a long time. And then what you do is you increase the possibility that you’ll make a good example. And what we’re looking for in this is good examples. (Berry, Wendell Berry, Poet & Prophet)

It is difficult to hear about the extent of damage and change to the global and local ecosystems, and consequently the challenges humanity and all living things on this earth will face. At the other end of the spectrum from the previously mentioned attitude of “This is the way it is” and “There’s nothing we can do about it,” is the attitude of “I need to solve all the big problems.” This sets up expectations of heroics that leads to the sort of self-criticism St. John cautioned against – becoming “angry with themselves in an unhumble impatience,” and sets the individual apart from the rest of humanity (St. John 370). Instead, Wendell’s advice to become patient and learn all you can about where you are is deeply seated in humility and wonder for the complexity of places.

Cultivating a sense of wonder and humility extends towards challenging as well as strengthening experiences. The wisdom traditions are clear that to become dispassionate with respect to attachments, appetites, and desires, does not mean that we must not feel. As Shugen Arnold says, “Our practice is not about being unconcerned; it’s not about not feeling. Our practice is to realize that in feeling, there is nothing but feeling;
in grief, there is nothing but grief; in joy, nothing but joy. There is nothing to hold back” (Arnold, *The Gift of Life*). Becoming open and receptive to all dimensions of our experience is the entryway to connecting more deeply with the world. It means letting down the shields of cynicism, denial, defensiveness, numbness, etc. and fully feeling and embracing our pain, sadness, despair, fear – whatever emotions the environmental crisis may stir up. And it also means reconnecting with the sense of awe and wonder that is deeply and uniquely, as far as we know, human. Rachel Carson describes the importance of cultivating these senses for each individual, in addition to the world at large:

What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood or is there something deeper? I am sure there is something much deeper, something lasting and significant. Those who dwell, as scientists or laymen, among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life…Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. (Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* 101)

The contemplatives of the wisdom traditions would add that in the “beauties and mysteries of this earth” are people. We are mysterious to ourselves, and the journeys described by the mystics are in many ways expressive of wonder for the mysteries found within us. Encountering ourselves and others with wonder and humility, openness and receptivity, is the essential and mirrored process necessary to discovering and healing the root causes of the environmental crisis.

*Trust and Perseverance*

In the process of experiencing the world with wonder and humility, we become vulnerable to strong emotions, including fear and uncertainty; thus, the wisdom traditions encourage trust and perseverance as necessary companions throughout the journey. These attitudes help us to encounter the unknown with openness throughout the process of
discovery, rather than defaulting back to old habits.

Swimme and Tucker describe the natural tendency to grasp for control in the face of confusion and the unfamiliar:

Because we know that life is an adventure involving both chaos and order we sometimes want desperately to control things. And whenever our fear grows too strong we become vulnerable to simplistic promises concerning the future. But no one knows what the future holds – all of that is hidden in the darkest night. The future is being created by all of us, and it is a messy and confusing process. What is needed is courage to live in the midst of the ambiguities of this moment without drawing back into fear and a compulsion to control. (Swimme and Tucker 117)

The desire for control is one that is recognized by all three wisdom traditions. Being conscious of our lives and eventual demise leads to unnecessary suffering if we struggle against this reality. Similarly, struggling against – not accepting – the reality of chaos and unpredictability in the world breeds fear and turns us away from responding to what is right in front of us with all of our faculties. To have the “courage to live in the midst of the ambiguities” encourages the openness and acceptance that the wisdom traditions attest are the antidotes to suffering, discontent, and anxiety.

All of the ways of being discussed thus far are based on cultivating the ability to hold our experience – whatever it is – without turning away or being overwhelmed by it. During times of uncertainty and tangible threats to our wellbeing, pausing and becoming open to our experiences may feel counterintuitive or even impossible. The wisdom traditions assure us that it is these moments that can yield the most profound shifts in perspective, uncovering insights that were previously unimaginable. John O’Donohue describes this journey from the Christian mystic’s point of view:

It is the paradox of spiritual growth that through such bleak winter journeys we eventually come through a hidden door into a bright field of springtime that we could never have discovered otherwise. This is the heart of the mystical. It is not about building protectionist armor of prayer and religion; it is, rather, the courage for absolute divestment. In the sheer vulnerability of Nothingness everything becomes possible in a new way, but there is an immense temptation to flee back to the shelter of old complacency. Now could be the most important moment in life to steal our courage and enter the risk of change. Meister Eckhart says: ‘Stand still and do not waver
from your emptiness; for at this time you can turn away, never to turn back again.’ (O’Donohue 173)

Increasingly, scientific research on climate change suggests that the alternative to not intentionally entering the “risk of change” is to risk inadvertently causing climate change on a scale that will cause unpredictable, but certainly detrimental effects on the planet’s existing ecosystems. Being at the threshold between old and new, the “immense temptation to flee back to the shelter of old complacency” is undeniable. Instead of fleeing back, what if we were to stay in the “midst of ambiguities” and embrace the “messy and confusing process” of uncovering new ways of seeing, being, and acting in the world? Meister Eckhart encourages those seeking the genuinely new and unknown to “not waver from your emptiness” – from the place of not-knowing how to proceed. Instead of jumping prematurely to a solution, staying with the undiluted feelings and observations of the moment sometimes yield insights that would have remained obscured otherwise.

Trust is a powerful antidote to fear along the journey of discovery and transformation. Trust in this sense is not a trust that everything will be all right – an expectation for what “all right” will look like – but a trust in the process of becoming open and receptive, seeing things as they are, and responding to the needs at hand. We can spend our time asking “Are we going to succeed?” (in solving the environmental crisis) or we can put our energy towards asking “‘What is the right thing to do?’ ‘What does the earth require of us if we want to continue to live on it?’” (Berry, Wendell Berry, Poet & Prophet). The former is driven by fear; the latter is driven by a trust that there is something we can do, regardless of the outcome. As we cultivate trust, the way that we approach challenges begins to shift: “Instead of gimmicks, there is our immediate
presence; instead of quick-fix mentality, there is thoroughness of commitment; instead of 
external buffers, there is uncompromising honesty” (Loori, *The Eight Gates* xvii).

For both the Christian mystics and Buddhists, trust – or faith – is emphasized as a 
necessary attitude towards ourselves and the world. Though there are certainly instances 
of blind faith in the world’s religions, the mystics speak about faith as an entryway into 
the unknown, both within ourselves and in the world. St. John says that, “Faith, the 
thegologians say, is a certain and obscure habit of soul. It is an obscure habit because it 
brings us to believe divinely revealed truths that transcend every natural light and 
ininitely exceed all human understanding” (St. John 157). In Buddhism, too, faith in the 
teachings expounded by those who have experientially realized them is the entryway into 
realizing these truths for oneself. Sylvia Boorstein, a contemporary Buddhist teacher, 
describes an instance of her faith in the teaching of interconnectedness opening into a 
direct experience of it:

I was walking through the airport terminal when my eyes met those of a baby approaching me, 
strapped into a carrier on his mother’s chest, and I knew that baby was me. A thrill went through 
me. I knew in that moment that it did not matter that I was aging, because that baby – me, in a 
newer, fresher guise – was on his way up in life… I felt happy and said to myself, “Thinking about 
interconnection is one thing, but these moments of direct understanding are great.” I sat in the 
boarding lounge feeling tremendous affection for my fellow travelers. (Miller 32)

The understanding that interconnectedness is the nature of the universe, as all three of 
these wisdom traditions teach, may seem like a nice idea, but one that does not fit our 
experience. Even if we never directly experience this interconnectedness in the way that 
Boorstein describes, trusting that it is true changes the way that we live our lives. 
Interpretations of the “One Commandment” into mainstream as the “Golden Rule” 
reminds us, especially during times when our experience challenges it, that “treating 
others as ourselves” cultivates harmony. Sometimes we place our trust in places that do
not ultimately serve us well. As described earlier, all three wisdom traditions understand
that trusting worldly goods as sources of security is based on an illusion. Wendell Berry
asks that we “give up the frontier and its boomer ‘ethics’ of greed, cunning, and violence,
and, so near too late, accept settlement as our goal” (Berry, Life is a Miracle 1226). Loori
further develops the idea that we live in a society that encourages the equation of
abundance and security.

In a society that assures us that more is better, it’s not always easy to trust that we have enough,
that we are enough. We have to cut through the illusion that abundance is security, and trust that
we don’t have to buffer ourselves against reality. If we have learned to trust abundance, we can
learn to trust simplicity. We can practice simplicity. (Loori, The Zen of Creativity 166)

Valuing abundance over simplicity has entered into our society as a core value that
defines individual and national success. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is still the
dominant mode of measuring the “health” of the country, where more is always better.
The wisdom traditions recognize that abundance does not ensure happiness, protection
from sickness, old age, and death, or a life that we deeply love. Buffering ourselves
against reality, they tell us, reduces our capacity to fully experience life. It is the constant
flux, the absolute impermanence of everything in this world that makes life all the more
poignant.

It is the fear of the unknown, the uncontrollable, and the unpredictable that makes
people flee towards complacency and what is familiar. Trust is an orientation towards the
world that helps shake open a space between the emotional experience of fear and our
response to it. Then, we can start to ask questions about our assumptions and values and
experience relationships with others in a new way.
**Intimacy with All Things**

Approaching our lives and the environmental crisis with wonder, humility, trust, and perseverance will begin to open our eyes to practices and choices that are more in line with authentic needs rather than their symptoms. The wisdom traditions assert that the entryway to this shift is the recognition that the root cause of human suffering and ecological destruction is living from a perception of the universe as divided, when it is actually deeply unified. Engaging with all experiences intimately, without distance or judgment, opens the possibility of embracing complexity and taking full responsibility for our lives.

The experience of intimacy and interrelatedness is accessible to everyone, say the practitioners of these wisdom traditions. John O’Donohue describes the way in which we are already unconsciously in tune with the wholeness of the universe:

> In Greek the word for ‘the beautiful’ is *to kalon*. It is related to the word *kalein* which includes the notion of ‘call.’ When we experience beauty, we feel called. The Beautiful stirs passion and urgency in us and calls us forth from aloneness into the warmth and wonder of an eternal embrace. (O’Donohue 13)

O’Donohue describes a universal human experience in the presence of places, people, and objects that are beautiful in our eyes. We feel drawn closer with an openness and attentiveness that arises not from an intellectual decision but rather a felt affection. Becoming immersed in it, we may start to see more and more of it – the intricate details and the harmonious whole. As Hans-Georg Gadamer says, “the experience of the beautiful… is the invocation of a potentially whole and holy order of things, wherever it may be” (O’Donohue 8). We as human beings have the capacity to experience and feel wholeness in a way that cannot be intellectually communicated. According to the wisdom traditions, moving towards greater intimacy with everything will open up our capacity to
see the whole, and this intimacy grows through an open and affectionate eye without judgment or discrimination.

In honor of the first Earth Day, which took place in 1970, George Wiley, an American chemist and civil rights leader, spoke on the topic of “Ecology and the Poor” (Wiley 235). He told the story of a well-meaning community in Colorado that sought out a ban on burning trash. As it was a group of well-off citizens that made the decision, they failed to consider the barrier of cost to families paying for garbage removal, and the poor families in the neighborhood could not afford it. Trash accumulated in the poorer areas, and the neighborhood became more, not less, polluted. Making decisions from afar, without an intimate knowledge of the people, place, and interrelationships within a community, all too often results in decisions with unintended consequences. Viewing trash burning as an absolute evil and banning it without understanding its impact on the whole system reduced the issue to a binary decision and neglected its complexity.

The wisdom traditions, seeing the constant state of internal and external conflict that results from dualistic views, urge us to embrace complexity. This invites us to explore the territory beyond dualities – beyond the attitudes of “Everything is as it is, and there’s not much I can do about it” and “I have to solve these problems and fix everything this instant.” Neither allows us to take a closer look and become not only intellectually knowledgeable about the context within which we are working, but to become holistically immersed in the context. In other words, they invite us to let go of judgment and categorization and to see what there is to see with all of the faculties.

Dogen says:

Seeing form with the whole body and mind,
Hearing sound with the whole body and mind,
One understands It intimately. – Eihei Dogen (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 67)

Seeing and hearing with the whole body and mind is another way to say, “The best we can do is be always open and receptive” (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 226). Proceeding in this way prevents us from falling into habits of reacting, which obscure this moment as it really is now. Embracing the complexity of a situation can lead to an abundance of observations with an unclear path forward. Although our culture views uncertainty and indecisiveness as weaknesses, the wisdom traditions encourage these attitudes towards what we see in ourselves and the world as necessary for skillful discernment. Swimme and Tucker articulate the uncertainty likely felt by many who are looking closely at the environmental crisis:

> We are finding ourselves in the midst of a vast transition. How are we to respond? For we sense we are in a dark night – we dwell in unknowing and yet grope forward. The path is still unclear. With what shall we navigate? (Swimme and Tucker 111)

Into this dark night, the wisdom traditions whisper, *navigate with intimacy* – with love, non-separation, a non-dual mind. Move closer and closer still. As Wendell Berry says, “We know enough of our own history by now to be aware that people exploit what they have merely concluded to be of value, but they defend what they love” (Berry, *Life is a Miracle* 369). Knowing something in terms of its value for human life is useful but incomplete, and therefore prone to being exploited or taken advantage of. The wisdom traditions, through their understanding of the interrelatedness and fundamentally unified natural order of all things, emphasize that everything has its own intrinsic value. The only way to know the world by its intrinsic value is to know it intimately; that is, in a way that acknowledges the mutual identity of all things.

The wisdom traditions do not simply speak about the interrelatedness and intrinsic
value of all things as a means to living harmoniously and ethically; they are reporting from deep within the direct experience of men and women within each tradition. This is the way things are, they say, and our suffering, disharmony, or sinfulness (in the Buddhist, Taoist, and Christian mystic’s terms, respectively) is the result of being blind to this reality. Since the intellect and its products tend to be fragmenting due to their analytical, subject-object mode of relating to the world, they obscure the wholeness of things. Wendell Berry speaks of his quest to know his home intimately:

In all of the thirty-seven years I have worked here, I have been trying to learn a language particular enough to speak of this place as it is and of my being here as I am. My success, as I well know, has been poor enough, and yet I am glad of the effort, for it has helped me to make, and to remember always, the distinction between reduction and the thing reduced. I know the usefulness of reductive language. To know that I am "a white male American human," that a red bird with black wings is "a scarlet tanager," that a tree with white bark is "a sycamore," that this is "a riparian plant community" – all that is helpful to a necessary kind of thought. But when I try to make my language more particular, I see that the life of this place is always emerging beyond expectation or prediction or typicality, that it is unique, given to the world minute by minute, only once, never to be repeated. And then is when I see that this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving. (Berry, Life is a Miracle 406)

The wisdom traditions would concur that “this life is a miracle, absolutely worth having, absolutely worth saving.” Often, communication necessitates reductive language to serve its purpose, but it has its limits. The naming, classifying, and analyzing by components, which is useful in so many ways, creates borders and prevents us from seeing things in their unique wholeness. We impose fixed and uniform characteristics on that which is impermanent and diverse. Ecosystems function as interrelated worlds of very particular sentient and insentient beings. Treating every tree as an equal substitute for every other one neglects this truth, and yet our patterns of usage, valuing, and accounting rely on this sort of equation. Therefore, love and intimacy are at the heart of understanding the world in a way that opens our eyes to its unpredictable and miraculous unfolding, as well as motivating our efforts to care for it.
Love, that is not possessive or conditional, opens the human experience in a very particular way. Zen Master Dogen says in his *Mountains and Rivers Sutra*, “Although we say that mountains belong to the country, actually they belong to those who love them” (Loori, *The Eight Gates of Zen* 231). The use of belong here is not possessive but rather intimate. Those who love the mountains know them in a way that defies intellectual knowing. They know them not only as geological formations that support ecosystems of benefit and value to human beings, but as an expression of life that is beautiful, whole, and intrinsically valuable. John Muir, the father of the Preservation movement, loved the wilderness in this way, though his advocacy for the absolute separation of the two suggests that he did not love humanity in this way (Muir 453). Many will argue that the protection of wilderness areas as places that people visit but do not inhabit has helped preserve them from human greed and exploitation. However, this mode of thinking – believing that humanity is a flawed species and we need to protect the rest of the world from us – has contributed to the forfeit of responsibility for the desecration that occurs in all non-wilderness areas. Living intimately means dissolving the boundaries in one’s view of the world, embracing complexity, and taking full responsibility for our lives.

An example of living intimately in this way is embodied in the attitude towards growth at the Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York. Recognizing that they needed more space to serve their growing community, they decided to build a new building on the property. Ryushin Marchaj, the Abbott of the monastery, describes the questions and mindsets embodied throughout the building project:

*What is the purpose of the growth? What are we creating through taking the materials from the environment? No matter how meticulous we are, we will be using resources to create the things we need. The questions that follow are, “In what spirit are we doing this?” and “What will we give back?” This is not a simple equation. It’s a real challenge. It’s the responsibility of each of us*
involved to take up these questions… We acknowledge [the action of ending some life, of taking from what the world has to give] and its necessity in order that this life, my life may continue. In this, we become responsible or indebted to the world. It’s not that we can replace what was taken, but we can perpetuate that same spirit of harmony and generosity. (Marchaj and Connelly 45)

Becoming more intimate with all things reveals the complexity of relationships and the responsibility we all have to be intentional about what we take and give. This open and receptive, affectionate and curious, way of being makes it possible for us to love our place in the world and therefore to know it profoundly. Teresa of Avila offers the following advice: “Do not try to help the whole world, but principally your companions; this work will be all the better because you are the more bound to it” (170). There is humility and wisdom in her advice, as it acknowledges the power of helping those you know best in the place you know best. To really be of help, intimacy is necessary both as the motivation, the path, and the destination. In this way, the love we feel for the whole world is manifest in the most direct way, rather than in the abstract.

Compassion

This way of being in the world – the openness to see clearly and become intimate with everything – lays the foundation for deeply connected action to emerge, which Buddhists call compassion, Christian mystics call union with God’s will, and Taoists call wu-wei.

Buddhism and Taoism emphasize the necessity of non-judgment in order to free the mind from its dualistic mode of perceiving the world. The Christian mystics speak more directly about freeing oneself from appetites and desires, which the former two view as the product of a divided mind. All three describe the freedom that results from diligent detachment from all material things, and ultimately the sense of an individual
self. From that place of true selflessness and realized intimacy with all things, a new way of acting in the world emerges. Shugen Arnold describes this unfolding as follows:

What is not all right when we’re no longer caught in that prison cell of judgment, of seeing everything in terms of right or wrong? Then having realized that purity – that every single thing has its own virtue – from that place of no concern, we can look and see the highs and lows, the damage, the destruction, the selfishness, the greed, and we can work with it. We can respond to it without fear. (Arnold, *Great Uncaused Compassion* 11)

The “prison cell of judgment” has walls that obscure our perception of the world and make it impossible to act in a deeply connected way. The mind filled with desire and judgment “seeks what is good and shuns what is bad; yet within the self-serving inner workings of the mind, good and bad can be perceived as just about anything” (Arnold, Don’t Betray Others 3). We cannot heal the divisions in the world with a divided mind.

Colloquially, we use the word “compassion,” often interchangeably with empathy or sympathy, to describe a feeling state that can lead to action⁴. In Buddhism, however, compassion has a very particular meaning, cause, and effect:

The precepts are about creating activity in the world in a way that is in harmony with it. It is what we call compassion. The first realization of unity is wisdom, the realization of oneness. The manifestation of that wisdom in the world of separation is compassion, which is the functioning of the precepts. (Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 102)

Compassion, in the Buddhist sense, is pure action born of the realization of non-separation. It is not calculated, but rather “functions freely, with no hesitation, no limitation. It happens with no effort, the way you grow your hair, the way your heart beats, the way you breathe… It does not take any conscious effort. Someone falls, you pick them up. There is no sense of doer, or what is being done. There is no separation” (Loori, *Teachings of the Insentient* 72). The Taoists describe the seamless action of *wu-

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wei in much the same way, as in the story about Cook Ting’s masterful ox carving.

This way of being may seem far away from how most of us see and act in the world. But there are glimpses of it all around us. Many so-called “heroic” actions seem to arise from an unconscious impulse in the face of an urgent situation. Oskar Schindler, for example, when asked why he risked his life to safe hundreds of Jewish people during the Holocaust, replied, “I had to help them. There was no choice” (Bulow). The need is clear, and the response emerges naturally rather than through a rational decision-making process.

In the case of the environmental crisis, the sense of urgency is present and the readiness and desire to work towards solutions is growing. The wisdom traditions point to the critical role that our mindsets play in these moments. Wendell Berry describes the danger of focusing on finding the solution(s):

> We’ve acknowledged now that the problems are big, now where’s the big solution? When you ask the question “What is the big answer?” then you’re implying that we can impose the answer. But that’s the problem we’re in to start with. We’ve tried to impose the answers – the answers will come not from walking up to your farm and saying “This is what I expect from you.” You walk up and you say, “What do you need?” And you commit yourself to say alright I’m not going to do any extensive damage here until I know what it is you’re asking of me. And this can’t be hurried. This is the dreadful situation that young people are in and I think of them and I say, Well, the situation you’re in now is a situation that’s going to call for a lot of patience, and to be patient in an emergency is a terrible trial. (Berry, Wendell Berry, Poet & Prophet)

Shifting from the mindset of “This is what I expect from you” to the mindset of “What do you need?” is radical in a society where certainty, answers, and outcomes are central. Asking of the earth and of people, “What do you need?” and being patient enough to continue asking that question in different ways and listening “until I know what it is you’re asking of me” embodies the ways of being and doing discussed thus far: the wonder and humility, becoming intimate, and acting compassionately. It also describes the process of authentic learning and the multifaceted shifts that will benefit human and
environmental wellbeing. The contemplatives, based on their own experience of the vast and mysterious web of interrelatedness, emphasize the care and humility with which action must be taken. This does not mean waiting to know everything before taking action, but rather acting in direct response to the situation in front of us, inclusive of any limits and unknowns.

**Boundless Creativity within a Bounded System**

The playful and creative nature of human beings holds the potential for “discovering the exuberance of being alive” (Swimme and Tucker 85). Unlike other mammals whose playfulness tapers off as they become adults, people have the capacity to continue developing their relationship with play and creativity throughout life. The spiritual journey discussed through the lenses of Buddhists, Taoists, and Christian mystics is a creative journey at its core. It is “intuitive, non-linear, and experiential. It points us toward our essential nature, which is a reflection of the boundless creativity of the universe” (Loori, The Zen of Creativity 1). Though the universe and the human being are boundlessly creative, this planet and its resources are finite. These wisdom traditions provide insight into how we might embrace both of these facts simultaneously, for the benefit of people and the planet.

Innovation for the sake of innovation, as mentioned in Chapter I, has become a trend in our society and is responsible for unnecessary consumption and ecological damage. If we redirect our playful energy from creations to creativity, we might find an expression of our human nature that is in accord with the larger ecosystem we inhabit. Unbounded growth within a bounded system is not sustainable, and yet we have been
operating under the assumption that more growth, technology, development, etc. is always better. Wendell Berry suggests that a change in this standard is necessary:

I am not of course proposing an end to science and other intellectual disciplines, but rather a change of standards and goals. The standards of our behavior must be derived, not from the capability of technology, but from the nature of places and communities... We must learn to think about propriety in scale and design, as determined by human and ecological health. By such changes we might again make our work an answer to despair. (Berry, *Life is a Miracle* 108-111)

Far from decreasing the opportunities for creativity, becoming more aware and respectful of the boundaries of growth may in fact increase them. Rene Dubos claims, “A steady state can be favorable to creative changes. In fact, change within a closed system will probably offer intellectual possibilities much more challenging than those offered by the kind of rampant growth that prevails at present” (Dubos 226).

A few states in the US are exploring new ways to define progress through what they call the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), which takes into account human and ecological health as essential standards alongside economic health. It accomplishes this by measuring twenty-six factors in economic, social, and environmental categories, “from the cost of crime to the costs of climate change to the value of volunteerism” (Department of Natural Resources). The State of Maryland has led the way in putting the GPI into place, emphasizing that it is an educational tool – not an end in and of itself – to illuminate the “true costs and benefits of resource decisions” (Ibid).

Initiatives like these are beginning to reframe the conversation around values in the United States and directing our creativity towards quality more than quantity, and standards and goals based on the “health of creatures, places, and communities” rather than the “capabilities of technology” (Berry, *Life is a Miracle* 1222). How does one engage with the creative process to foster greatest health and wellbeing in this world?
The contemplatives offer beauty, stillness, and mystery as essential and interwoven qualities.

Beauty, though a word not used frequently by the mystics, describes a quality that emerges from the wholeness and complexity that is the inherent nature of the world. Creativity has the potential to bring things to life and allow their inherent beauty to emerge. O’Donohue writes about the relationship between beauty and creativity:

When we awaken to the call of beauty, we become aware of new ways of being in the world. We were created to be creators. At its deepest heart, creativity is meant to serve and evoke beauty. When this desire and capacity come alive, new wells spring up in parched ground; difficulty becomes invitation and rather than striving against the grain of our nature, we fall into rhythm with its deepest urgency and passion. (O’Donohue 7)

When the desire and capacity to create beauty in the world come alive, says O’Donohue, difficulty becomes invitation – crisis becomes opportunity. In facing the environmental crisis, solutions that embody and evoke beauty – which are elegant, which connect with their context holistically, and which bring people more alive – are incredibly important. Human beings need more than their basic needs met in order to truly flourish. The impact of beauty on our physical and emotional health cannot be underestimated. For example, immunologist Esther Sternberg’s research has found that certain spaces alleviate the stress response and trigger a cascade of biologically healing processes in the body. She cites a study in which Roger Ulrich found that gallbladder surgery patients who had a room with a “view of a grove of trees left hospital on average a day sooner, needed less pain medication, and had fewer negative nurse’s notes than patients who had a view of a brick wall” (Sternberger). The wisdom traditions suggest that the reason we are affected beyond practicality by the beautiful, is that we see in it the whole, complex, interconnected nature of human beings and the universe.
When people create with reverence for a “potentially whole and holy order of things,” their creations speak unmistakably of a rich and loving relationship with their craft, and by extension with the world (O’Donohue 8). In the race to produce and consume more, this attentive way of creating has become undervalued. Wendell Berry asks, “Why, if we are in fact ‘progressing,’ should so much expense and effort have resulted in so much ugliness?” (Berry, *Life is a Miracle* 1222). Perhaps it is because our definition of progress is skewed towards functional and quantitative measures, undervaluing elements such as elegance and inspiration. However, these are the elements that bring people alive through engaging all of their senses.

In addition to the fact that emphasizing factors such as elegance in our creations encourages efficiency, this mode of attending to the whole naturally extends to the way in which we see the world. Awareness of the importance of beauty in the world, in addition to the value of usability, connects people to the inherent value of what we currently call “natural resources.” Then, when we make decisions about transforming natural resources into things, services, and spaces, we are primed to take responsibility for using something that is not only useful but also beautiful and inherently valuable. Furthermore, this mindset encourages turning beauty into beauty, just as a master potter turns earth into a vessel that appeals to both the heart and mind. Where does our sense of the beautiful come from? The wisdom traditions say that it arises from the source of our creativity: being quiet and still, not judging, and being open and receptive.

Teresa of Avila calls us to awaken to the source of our creativity – to remove the “thick black cloth” from the “fountain and the brilliant sun… in the very center of the soul,” expose their “splendor and beauty,” and free this natural brilliance to recreate itself
in the world (Avila 21-22). As Teresa emphasizes becoming aware of and merging with this source (tending towards the Immanent experience of the absolute), Buddhists emphasize the spaciousness and stillness that emerge when surface activity ceases (tending towards the Transcendent experience of the absolute) (Underhill 237). In both cases, the source of our creative nature is common to all human beings, which is interestingly different to the connotation of creativity in the West. As discussed earlier, our society places high value on newness and innovation, often to the detriment of serving human and environmental wellbeing. Daido Loori illuminates the delusion woven into this evaluation system.

Americans are very afraid of looking alike… For us, the idea of originality often becomes its own prison, another way of tying ourselves up. It acts as a self-created tether. Nobody puts it around our neck but us, and we are the only ones who can take it off. When originality becomes a goal, it is no longer original. The artist is merely trying to be different. The word ‘original’ comes from origin, the source. Different just means something that is set apart from everything else. (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 112)

Our desire to self-differentiate has inserted itself into our efforts to solve the environmental crisis as well. As Loori says, when originality becomes the goal, it creates a wall that hinders our true creativity and obscures possible solutions that may not be different or new. We risk innovating for the sake of innovating and forgetting that criteria for appropriate solutions need only be the benefit to people and the ecosystems in which we live, rather than the capabilities of technology. The source of creativity that Avila speaks of can only be accessed fully with the self-renunciation the mystics describe, which yields an effortless, open, and receptive mind. Loori says that “the still point is at the heart of the creative process… The still point is like the eye of a hurricane. Still, calm, even in the midst of chaos” (Loori, *The Zen of Creativity* 52).

If beauty is its result and stillness is its source, then mystery is the nature of the
creative process. The creative process is mysterious, not fully in our control. In fact, trying to control and tame it reduces it. Loori writes in his book *The Zen of Creativity*, “If you walk away from this book thinking you understand Zen or creativity, then I have failed. If everything goes well, you will never understand it. On the other hand, if you can appreciate the process and are willing to engage it, you will have a way to return to your inherent perfection, the intrinsic wisdom of your life” (242). The creative process of uncovering the layers of our humanity and expressing those in the world is an endless journey. Similarly, the process of discovering how to live well on this planet is endless and mysterious. Rather than “imposing the solution,” as Berry cautions against, we must continuously open to the process of becoming receptive, seeing the whole situation as it is, trusting and persevering, allowing for stillness, and inviting the beautiful to emerge. The Taoist description of living spontaneously – going rambling without a destination – connects to this same way of proceeding. Furthermore, St. John, Teresa, and Meister Eckhart speak of the journey that must be undertaken into the dark night or mysterious chambers of the castle in order to discover treasures that could not even be imagined.

The collective message is quite unified then. If we honor our creative nature and return to the source of this process again and again, we will find ways forward that connect with the reality of the world and its needs in that moment. Elevating creations over creativity results in stagnation and division, materialism, and overconsumption. Our world becomes one of people and things, rather than life and the interconnected web of sentient and insentient beings that embody it. Engaging with creativity in this way will lead to more dynamic, adaptable, and resilient communities.
Responsive Adaptability

As we redefine “the ultimate standard of our work to be, not professionalism and profitability, but the health and durability of human and natural communities,” a vision of work that embodies this standard emerges (Berry, Life is a Miracle 1219-1222). Health and durability are not defined by rigid characteristics but rather by the dynamic relationships between properties of a system that is constantly in flux. The wisdom traditions support this observation with their understanding of impermanence and interrelatedness.

In the wake of more frequent and extreme weather events, communities and governments have started engaging with the concept of “resilience.” With a history in diverse disciplines from ecology to psychology, it is now being applied as an umbrella term that recognizes the connections in living communities and is defined as “the capacity of a system, enterprise or a person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances” (Healy and Zolli 5). The wisdom traditions add to this conversation by revealing the deep connection between resilient human beings and the resilience of their lives, communities, and creations.

There are many examples of resilient systems and communities throughout the ages, and in the light of a changing climate, exploring ways of developing resilience is ever more important. One of these examples is a group of small-scale, independent plant breeders who have formed what they call the Open Source Seed Initiative (OSSI). This initiative embodies many of the mindsets discussed in the contemplatives’ words and reveals a beautiful and resilient system in the face of political and environmental challenges. Since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of allowing the patenting of life,
large companies like Monsanto have bred plants to accentuate desirable qualities, such as broccoli with a longer stem for ease of harvesting, which they then patent and protect by suing farmers with seed that impinges on their intellectual-property. After many attempts to fight these practices directly, the OSSI turned to a different approach, with a mission to “reestablish free exchange by creating a reservoir of seed that couldn’t be patented—‘a national park of germplasm’” (Hamilton). By increasing the diversity of the gene pool through free exchange and collaboration across various climates, they have not only freed themselves from the threat of being sued but also increased the resilience of their seed stock.

Rather than striving for products, systems, and services that are only solutions for today’s circumstances, we might consider developing more dynamic solutions, such as this community supporting a genetically diverse line of seeds. All three wisdom traditions emphasize accepting and harmonizing with the inherent characteristics of life, which include being impermanent, always changing, and transforming from life to death and death to life. They recognize that the source of suffering is the disconnect between our desired or imagined view of reality and reality itself. Creating products that bio-persist for millennia, consuming fossil fuels at rates orders of magnitude larger than they are being produced, and disposing of toxic waste in greater quantities than ecosystems can naturally process are similarly symptoms and perpetuators of that disconnect.

One of the values of the term “resilience” is in reminding people that a healthy system is not fixed but always in flux, and that flexibility and adaptability yield greater resilience that rigid strength. This resonates beautifully with the Taoist emphasis on suppleness being stronger than stiffness: “Thus the hard and the strong are the comrades
of death; the supple and the weak are the comrades of life” (Lao Tzu 83).

The contemplatives who directly realize the nature of reality and no longer suffer, though they still experience pain, discomfort, and the full spectrum of human emotions, provide examples for another source of resilience. As Teresa of Avila describes, in any situation “peace is not lost by them… Though the whole body is in pain, yet the head, if it be sound, does not suffer with it” (Avila 159). The resilience of an individual – his or her ability to remain well through all seasons of circumstances and experiences – offers insight into our capacity to thrive without excessive material buffers. While it is critical to build resilience in a physical sense within our economies and infrastructure, cultivating resilience from within communities and individuals allows for an agility and strength that nothing in the material world can replace.
CONCLUSION

We can cling to Business as Usual, dwell in the Great Unraveling, or open our hearts and minds to a new story yet to be told. This moment, like every other moment, is unique and poignant, ready to offer us teachings and possibilities for the future. Swimme and Tucker reflect upon our role in co-creating the earth’s future:

In some remarkable way the universe seems to be similar to the unfolding of a giant red oak, where one stage of development leads to the next, as when the galaxies began to form several hundred million years after the birth of the universe. It was not possible for galaxies to emerge earlier or later… It is the same with our moment. We are in the midst of vast destruction, but it is simultaneously a moment of profound creativity. We are involved with building a new era of Earth’s life. Our human role is to deepen our consciousness in resonance with the dynamics of the fourteen-billion-year creative event in which we find ourselves. (Swimme and Tucker 116)

The Taoists, Buddhists, and Christian mystics have a profound reverence for life, for its patterns and principles, and for its essence. The cycle of death and rebirth is one of those principles, both within an individual’s life, as ways of seeing, thinking, and doing constantly transform, as well as at the threshold of one death and another birth.

A new perspective on humanity’s relationship with all of life on this planet does seem to be emerging. The People’s Climate March, which took place on September 22, 2014, was a momentous demonstration of a shift in consciousness taking root in the general public. The tagline for the event was “To change everything, we need everyone” (Peoples Climate March). This event sent both a literal and embodied message of unity in diversity. It celebrated the unique relationship different coalitions and groups have to climate change, as well as the universal relationship of being a human on this planet. It recognized the need for cohesion and collaboration across differences. In short, it was a living demonstration and acknowledgment of our interconnectedness. Finding ways to decrease human environmental impact and prevent further damage and climate change, as
well as respond to the existing risks necessitates input from every dimension of our humanness. Elevating parts of our intelligence and awareness over other parts will lead to blind spots and hinder our full creativity from being accessible. Looking for technical fixes where the problem is not technical will lead to more, not less, environmental impact. Shifting a culture’s values is no small task, but it starts with individuals questioning the stories they tell themselves and the world.

The good news from the perspective of these wisdom traditions is that if the fundamental problem originates in the way we employ our minds, transformation is possible. The “bad” news is that, according to the contemplatives, there is nothing more difficult than changing the human mind. Recognizing the source of suffering is the first step to addressing it.

In many different ways and with diverse language, the contemplatives state that the source of suffering, which extends to the environmental crisis, is a dualistic or divided mind. It leads to self-preservation at all costs, and facilitates materialism and overconsumption, seeing other people and things as valuable only in relation to their desirability rather than their intrinsic value. It cultivates desire and aversion, lust, possessiveness, fear, self-righteousness, “mine” and “not-mine” – fragmentation and divisions everywhere.

The experience of being touched by poetry, the beauty of nature, and the rhythms and melodies of music illuminates that we know rational thought, knowledge, and language limit human experience. They mediate it in a helpful, but confining way. Describing water is not even close to tasting it. But it seems necessary – easier – to reduce the world into a dualistic set of rational options and categories. What we lose,
though, is the marvelous complexity that defies rational explanation or expression. What we lose is our whole and undivided nature that goes by many different names. In reducing human nature, and Nature nature, we begin to define things by only some of their qualities – often, their usefulness, sameness, differentness, valuableness. All of these categorizations and judgments of worth in relation to a set of assumptions results in reducing a complex, living thing to a handful of descriptors. How many times do we miss dimensions of a person, a creature, or an ecosystem because we identify it by one or a few characteristics and base our decisions on those alone?

The contemplatives in this work say that the antidote is intimacy. Recognizing the ways in which we judge and divide and gradually becoming open and receptive allows for a new way of being to emerge. Wonder and humility, as well as trust and perseverance prepare and encourage us along the journey to discovering who we really are and how to act compassionately in the world, such that divisions are healed rather than perpetuated.

The wisdom traditions clearly communicate the simultaneous truths that there is nothing lacking, nothing that fundamentally needs fixing and that we must engage with our whole selves and lives if we wish to realize this. Our future, both in terms of individual lives and the collective life of humanity, is inextricably tied to the future of our local and global ecosystems. Realizing this interconnectedness is at the heart of addressing the environmental crisis and unlocking the depth of joy, creativity, and vitality of being human. We do not have to wait to become perfectly enlightened in order to start paying more attention and trusting the process of creatively and openly engaging with whatever situation presents itself.
In this world that is so full of clamors for our attention, committing to listening, being patient, and acting in accord with our values seems like it will be inadequate in confronting the forces that continue to destroy the environment and cause immense suffering. Joining the battle for power, aggressive confrontation, blame, and wealth is incredibly seductive, but it will only perpetuate suffering, not heal it. We need to recognize our own greed, anger, and ignorance and take full responsibility for it. Seeing that we are blinded, how can we not feel compassion for others’ blindness? This does not mean that we should support others’ delusion, but simply recognize it for what it is, not be caught up in it – not fight delusion with delusion.

Pablo Neruda’s “Keeping Quiet” blows away the masks of language, identity, and activity, opening the reader’s heart to breathe in the universe. He closes his poem with the following lines:

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.
Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I’ll count up to twelve
and you keep quiet and I will go. (Neruda)

He illuminates the power of words to strip us bear of assumptions and habits, inviting us into the story of no story. It is this expansive, quiet, and naked realm into which these wisdom traditions invite us. Rather than prescribing a single answer to the environmental crisis, they encourage us to delve into the heart of life and discover what it means to be completely human.
The path for addressing ecological wellbeing is inextricably linked to the path for addressing human wellbeing. Indeed, “perhaps the earth can teach us,” and if we listen, we may recognize the deepest desires and wisdom of our hearts echoed in what we hear. The greatest sadness would be to forget that we are alive in the midst of acknowledging and addressing the environmental crisis. It is only through recognizing the life in death, and the death in life that we may begin to accept the incredible destruction and loss of life we are facing as a call to come alive.


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