

## The Conservation Biologist as Zen Student

*To study the Way is to study the self.  
To study the self is to forget the self.  
To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things.  
To be enlightened by all things is to remove the barriers between one's self and others.*

Dogen

*It is a century now since Darwin gave us the first glimpse of the origin of species. We know now what was unknown to all the previous caravan of generations: that men are only fellow voyagers with other creatures in the odyssey of evolution. This new knowledge should have given us, by this time, a sense of kinship with other creatures; a wish to live and let live; a sense of wonder over the magnitude and duration of the biotic enterprise.*

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*

David Barash published an article in 1973 entitled "The Ecologist as Zen Master" in which he discussed what he considered the remarkable parallels between Zen Buddhism and the then emerging public concept of ecology. He felt that the interdependence and unity of all things was fundamental to both the practice of Zen and the science of ecology. In addition, both share a common nondualistic view of the fundamental identity of subject and surroundings. A bison cannot be understood in isolation from the prairie; understanding requires study of the bison-prairie unit. He concluded that "the very study of ecology is the elaboration of Zen's nondualistic thinking."

Barash also discussed how the environmental problems the public was then just becoming aware of resulted from the Western view of the dichotomy between humans and nature. The exploitation of nature as something external and separate from humans has had disastrous consequences in both ancient and modern times.

A primary problem is that we behave in a way that we believe benefits ourselves at the expense of nature. This is true both at a collective level (jobs versus the environment) and an individual level (driving a car versus riding a bike). This perception of a "choice" is incorrect, however, because humans are not separate from nature.

Conservation biology has emerged since 1973 out of the public and scientific concern with ecology. Zen has a lot to offer the practicing conservation biologist. I depart in one central way from the approach of Barash,

who was largely concerned with world views and ideas. Zen is not about concepts or ideas; Zen is about how we live our lives. Zen can play a practical role in providing guidance for the conservation biologist in his or her life. Most of the principles considered here are found in all Buddhist teachings, not just Zen.

The goal of the Society for Conservation Biology, as stated in every issue of this journal, is "to help develop the scientific and technical means for the protection, maintenance, and restoration of life on this planet." One lesson of Zen is that knowledge alone of what needs to be done is not sufficient.

"Knowing" what is good for us is not enough to change our behavior. We need to develop a deeper level of understanding so that we can act out of feeling or experience rather than intellectual knowledge. David Orr (1994) discusses the importance of "feeling" the truth in the final chapter of his wonderful book, *Earth in Mind*. He concludes that the objective of environmental education should be to draw out our affinity for life. We cannot act wisely without knowledge; we will not act wisely without feeling.

Through meditation and the cultivation of mindfulness, Zen acts to develop the realization that self and world are not separate. Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh offers the following guidance: "If we want to continue to enjoy our rivers—to swim in them, walk beside them, even drink their water—we have to adopt the non-dual perspective. We have to meditate on being the rivers so that we can experience within ourselves the fears and hopes of the rivers. If we cannot feel the rivers, the mountains, the air, the animals, and other people from within their own perspective, the rivers will die and we will lose our chance for peace" (Nhat Hanh 1991:105).

The cultivation of mindfulness is a time-honored Buddhist method to develop such feelings. Mindfulness is a sharpened awareness of the immediate present in which we strive to look deeply into our every action. "It is precisely the lack of mindfulness that is responsible for so much of the violence and suffering in the world today. . . . The aware person sees the indivisibility of existence, the deep complexity and interrelationship of all life, and this creates in him a deep respect for the absolute value of things" (Kapleau 1995).

For example, we turn light switches on many times throughout our daily life without awareness. Mindfully performing this act requires awareness of the physical sensation of touching and moving the switch. In addition, we become aware of the effects of this action. I live in a power grid connected to the power-generating dams of the Columbia River. The connection made when I turned on the light in my office this morning connected my office with electrical power generated by dams on the Columbia River. These dams and the long pools behind them have blocked or hindered the return of salmon to their spawning grounds. I try to be aware of that connection every time I turn on a light switch; I usually fail.

Gathas, short verses used to bring the energy of mindfulness to each act of daily life, are a traditional form of Zen practice used to increase our awareness. The following gatha, written by Thich Nhat Hanh (1992:104) can be used before every meal:

*In this food  
I see clearly the existence  
of the entire universe,  
supporting my existence.*

We *can* see the entire universe in our breakfast cereal if we take just a moment to reflect. The ocean is there: the rain that watered the grain was carried from the ocean by clouds. The sun is there: the grain could not grow without energy from the sun. The Jurassic ecosystem in which the dinosaurs dwelled is there: plants that fed the dinosaurs 200 million years ago were transformed into the fossil fuel that was used to harvest the grain and to carry it to the table. Gregor Mendel is there, along with the plant breeders who developed the strains of grain. Such moments of reflection strengthen our appreciation of our interdependence to countless beings, past and present, near and far.

Cultivating such constant awareness of our actions is a powerful method to transform our behavior so that we can act in a way that will protect, maintain, and restore life on this planet. I was disturbed to see hundreds of styrofoam cups thrown away during every coffee break at the annual meeting of the Society for Conservation Biology in Fort Collins in 1995. This seemed especially unnecessary because every registrant was given a plastic coffee mug at registration. Many fewer styrofoam cups would have been used if attendees had recited the following gatha to themselves every time they threw a styrofoam cup away at a coffee break:

*Throwing a styrofoam cup into the trash,  
I am aware that I am throwing  
a styrofoam cup into the trash.*

This is not a criticism of the meeting organizers. They provided us with the choice of using our own reusable cup or a disposable styrofoam cup.

Our stated goal as the Society for Conservation Biology is to save "life on this planet". Zen teaches that we cannot save others; at best, we can save ourselves by transforming our own unskillful ways. But Zen also teaches that our identity is not limited to our ego-self. Our identity includes all living beings. Humans act in a way that they feel is in their own self interest. We will act to save "life on this planet" only if we recognize at a deep level that our "self" includes all beings.

John Seed, director of the Rainforest Information Center in Australia, gave the following answer to the question of how he deals with the despair of difficulties associated with saving the remaining rainforest: "I try to remember that it's not me, John Seed, trying to protect the rainforest. Rather I'm part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into human thinking" (Macy 1991:184).

We need to recognize and feel at a deep level that ultimately we are not conservation biologists trying to save other species. Rather, we are one emergence of life on this planet trying to save itself.

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## Fred W. Allendorf

Division of Biological Sciences, University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, U.S.A., email darwin@selway.umt.edu

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