

# connect.empower.liberate#1

This article is a combination of transcript and notes from the talk: connect.empower.liberate#1/3. It is the first in a three part series delivered by Guhyapati at the Buddhafield event – Green Earth Awakening in 2014. There is an audio version on the ecodharma website.

## Preamble

If we're listening, paying attention to the state of the world, every day we'll hear the bad news: Tales of dispossession amidst growing economic insecurity, social tensions and geopolitical conflicts, another four children were killed by Israeli missiles in Gaza yesterday, and of course there are all the statistical indicators showing, that yes, we are living in a time of a sixth great extinction and loss of biodiversity.

It can be hard to stay afloat in the swelling tsunami of the bad news. The flotsam of good news can feel tiny, like the little vulnerably improvised rafts carrying people in desperate migratory journeys across the Mediterranean, to the promised salvation of fortress Europe. Where's the good news we need to keep us afloat?

Though it can be difficult to see this, in a certain sense, the bad news is the good news. The mere fact that information about the perils of our times is being made available is a crucial factor in the healing our times. And the listening, the hearing of those signals is the necessary starting place for every change. That the dangers are being sensed and felt, that we are beginning to identify the problems, that the bad news can be heard, that is the good news.

It is as Thich Nhat Hahn has said: What we really need to do to help the world is to hear the sound of the earth crying.

We live in a time of great peril and great promise. The nature of communication technologies and the globalisation of capital means that more than ever our individual destinies and the destinies of those we are close too, are tied up with the destiny of the global community and the ecosystem. Living in these times requires that we step up to the responsibilities that entails, and find ways to share that responsibility with others, so that it becomes a support for our learning and development, and not a crushing burden.

This is what the ecodharma project is all about. We are bringing a radical dharma approach into a creative relationship with ecological perspectives and social engagement. It is about supporting individuals and communities to be alive to our times, to face the threats of our times, to recognise the potential of our times, and to learn how to flourish in the process.

Nietzsche wrote in *The Antichrist*, that “Buddhism is a religion for the end and fatigue of a civilisation.” It seems to be a ubiquitous human weakness, to want to run away. The distracting mass spectacle of a world-cup, the hedonic escapisms of party culture, or the lure of growing populist right-wing politics in times of economic precarity, all show us how much of ourselves want to turn away. And Buddhism can be used to serve that turning away – and all too often it is. Sadly, western Buddhism can be just late capitalist Buddhism! But I believe that dharma can offer us much more than a way of accommodating ourselves to a resigned and melancholic fatalism, or of colluding with the destructive forces of late capitalism.

We live in deeply uncertain times. We face challenges of an unprecedented scale. To meet them we need a training that roots our motivation and energetic engagement more deeply than we've known before – we require a training rooted in a radical vision of our connectedness, we require methods for personal and community empowerment, vision and methods that can liberate us into compassionate action beyond both hope and hopelessness.

In this series of three talks I am going to explore some of what that means. I am going to explore how committed dharma practice can augment ecological, systems thinking, and socio-political engagement; weaving them together to support us to connect, empower ourselves and others, and discover what liberation can mean today.

Today I am going to talk about the idea “connect”.

## connect: Introduction

As a teenager, along with a few of my mates, I was gently recruited into the ranks of revolutionary Marxism through contact with the mother of one of my best friends. I gained an excellent political education. At first it was revelatory. I recall the excitement of discovering a world view that talked of the potential of a society based in the values of fraternity, equality and justice. It was an inspiring vision. We learnt how to recruit, organise, and mobilise. We learnt that through that we were preparing the way for the revolution to come.

But, I also remember the gradual dwindling of that vision. It was a vision that was perfumed by a romantic modernism and avant-garde heroism. It asked us to get on board a train, chasing the wind of progress, ridden, and even driven, by great men.

### Too late for the train

Gradually, however, it dawned on my friends and I that we were too late for that train; that we had actually arrived on the platform of history to watch its slow crashing spectacle, and to study the still smoking wreckage. Our views about who we were and our place in the world were being formed (and dismantled) amidst a landscape of ruins, the smouldering engines of wrecked ideologies lay everywhere. The post-modern culture we were growing up within told us that our identities were mere constructs; the deconstructed fragments of identity, the problem of agency, the nature of gender, and the shards of teleologies of all sorts, littered the floor of the public bar.

As we looked at the wreckage of the beliefs that we'd been born amidst, we wondered what it meant to have arrived too late to get on that train, to be born into a time when the days of great men were over. I remember the resonance of Walter Benjamin's description of The Angel of History, which he lifts from a painting by Paul Klee. Benjamin writes of the Angel of History:

*"His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress." (Illuminations, p257-8)*

## The shadow of nihilism

Nihilism haunted us. It hung around us like a shadow. And I can think of many friends who got lost in the shadows. The fact is that nihilism haunts any of us who hold tightly to views. Our insistence of the truths we hold to, our building our towers of meaning and our proclamations of our certainties from on high, are all driven by fear of meaninglessness. Growing up amidst ruins has helped me to recognising that it is those very towers of meaning that cast the shadows we fear: that in fact meaninglessness is only the shadow cast by meaning.

But, while that was all screaming at my adolescent self through punk culture and deconstructivism, it has taken me another 30 years to really start to feel that in my bones. That meaninglessness is only the shadow of meaning is not an easy one to assimilate! It is a liberating koan... but I will come back to that in the third talk on liberation! First I want to stay with this little story of my youth as it moved from nihilism to connection.

## The need for the reconstructive

When what we have known crumbles, when we are faced with newness, all too often what really happens is that we find ourselves feeling unsafe. We tighten up, pull back, panic, freeze. (That's why reactionary political tendencies do so well in times of economic and social insecurity). And yet there is always something freeing when things fall apart. Things get opened up. Knots loosened, spaces for the new arise. But empowering freedom requires more than deconstruction. In itself it is not enough to free us. We also need new ways of constructing our lives.

The train crash of modernity meant that some of us could begin to rediscover the value of walking. If we didn't need to chase the wind of progress, we could learn to wander aimlessly. If we didn't have truths to proclaim, we could begin to explore with greater curiosity.

The deconstructive power of post-modern experience opened up, for me, an important space. And exploring that space I have begun to find delight in the reconstructive power of new ideas and ways, especially the synthesizing potential of systems thinking and ecological perspectives, and the training and methodologies of the dharma.

These new ways of seeing lend themselves to a reconstruction. But it is a reconstruction that is different to the constructs of old ideologies. It is a reconstruction which stays open to the idea that our views are always partial and provisional, it's a reconstruction that enables us to move from ways of acting in the world that are about control to ways of acting that are about collaboration. It's a reconstruction that reveals that engaging in life need not be about the

grandeur of the individual self, but can be based on confidence in the creative potential of connection.

We live in a time which shows signs of a remarkable shift, the fascinating emergence of a new vision of life. It is a shift away from the world views of modernity and the industrial growth society, an old paradigm which has been reductive, atomising and alienating. It's a shift that moves towards the newly emerging ecological paradigm, towards a world view based on relationship. At the heart of these new ways of seeing are ecology and systems thinking.

## **Ecology**

The term ecology comes from the Greek word *oikos* ('household'). So, it can be understood as – the study of the Earth Household. More precisely, it is the study of the relations that interlink all members of the Earth Household. The term was coined in 1866 by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, who defined it as 'the science of relations between the organism and the surrounding outer world'.

The ecologist Bernard Patten has said: "Ecology is networks... to understand ecosystems will be to understand networks." So, it's about understanding things in relationship with each other. Rather than taking things apart to understand how they work, an ecological approach explores things in terms of connections - food chains, energetic throughput, predator-prey balances, symbiotic relationships.

In biology it's been found that to understand a living thing it's not enough to chop it up into smaller and smaller pieces. Living systems need to be explored as wholes, cells, organs, respiratory systems, immunological systems, nervous systems – and how these all function together. Similarly, where traditional biology has tended to concentrate attention on individual organisms rather than on the biological continuum, ecologists have found that sustained life is a property of an ecological system rather than of a single organism or species.

## **Integration of systems theory**

Ecological thinking has developed in relationship to systems thinking, which arose simultaneously in several disciplines in the first half of the twentieth century, especially during the 1920's. It was pioneered by biologists, who emphasized the view of living organisms as integrated wholes. It was further enriched by gestalt psychology, ecology, and also quantum physics, cybernetics and the study of non-linear dynamics.

Since biochemist Lawrence Henderson used the term system to denote both living organisms and social systems, system has come to mean – an integrated whole whose essential properties arise from the relationships between its parts.

'Systems thinking' is the understanding of a phenomenon within the context of a larger whole. This is, in fact, the root meaning of the word 'system', which derives from a Greek word meaning 'to place together' (*synhistanai*). To understand things systemically, literally means to understand them in context, to establish the nature of their relationships, to think in terms of connections. For systems thinkers, the essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have. A system is more than the sum of its parts.

While we can learn a lot about things by analysing their parts, a fuller understanding also requires that we put them back together. And when we do that many of our old ways of categorising things become problematic. We find that there are no lines of strict separation between living and non-living things, between the mind and the material, between the self and the world.

### **Lovelock's work as an example**

A brilliant example of all this is found in the work of James Lovelock. During the 1960's, working as an independent scientist, Lovelock began to notice that the Earth's biosphere seemed to be able to control the temperature of the planet's surface and the chemical composition of the atmosphere. He developed this understanding of "the living planet" through the 1970's and his first book presenting the ideas, was published in 1979.

Although initially unpopular in the scientific world, the rigorous testing of his hypothesis over the last few decades seems to have proved its value. Earth Systems Science is an increasingly mainstream field, within which there is a growing recognition that the integrated study of the biosphere, geosphere, hydrosphere and atmosphere as a total system is essential to a fuller understanding of planetary evolution.

Tracing feedback loops throughout the planetary system links together living and non-living things. We can no longer think of rocks, animals, and plants as existing separately. Earth sciences show that there is a tight interlocking between the planet's living parts – plants, micro-organisms, and animals – and its so called 'non-living' parts – rocks, oceans, and the atmosphere.

One way we can get a sense of the complexity of some of these interlocking relationships is to look at what is called Silicate Rock Weathering, and its role in the carbon cycle:

### **Silicate Rock Weathering and the carbon cycle**

In these times, with growing awareness of the issue of climate change, most of us are familiar with the idea that the levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere plays an important part in conditioning the surface temperature of the planet. The way that atmospheric carbon is drawn out of the atmosphere through rock weathering is an important process in regulating the amount of carbon in the atmosphere, and consequently maintaining temperatures conducive to the evolution of life.

Once upon a time this planet was a super-heated ball of molten material. As the molten minerals cooled they began to crystallise, and the first primordial rocks were formed, mostly basalts. In the same way granite is formed through the cooling of molten material deep in the earth. When it cools fast it forms small crystals, and the slower it cools the larger the crystals. These crystals are quartz and feldspars and silica. Within the crystal matrix of granite there are important quantities of calcium bound up there.

When it rains, water combines with atmospheric carbon dioxide to create carbonic acid. When that carbonic acid comes into contact with granite it dissolves the crystal matrix, like a sugar cube in water, and the carbon combines with the calcium that is released, forming a chalky liquid – calcium bicarbonate. This weathering process effectively pumps carbon out of the atmosphere, reducing carbon levels there, by binding atmospheric carbon with calcium eroded from the granite.

But this is not just a chemical process. It has been noticed that plants play an important role in determining the rate at which this pumping action takes place. The roots of plants grow into cracks in granite, breaking it up and increasing the surface area exposed to the weathering process. More than this, plants breathe in carbon dioxide through the pores of their leaves. Using the energy of the sun, in photosynthesis, they use this carbon to build chains of sugar. Some of these sugar chains flow through the sap of the plants down into their roots, where they are used as fuel in the growing process of the roots. As the energy stored in those sugar chains is used, the carbon is released again and breathed back out by the plant, down in the ground in close proximity to the granite and the moisture needed to create the carbonic acid which erodes the rock, combining the carbon with the calcium in the rock. So plant growth assists the rock weathering process.

The calcium bicarbonate begins a journey, seeping through the soil, down little streams, out into rivers, and eventually out into the sea. Once it is in the sea various things happen to it, but following this story we find that lots of the calcium bicarbonate is absorbed by microscopic algae – called coccolithophores. I am fascinated by these minute beings and I told something of their story in a talk at the Buddha filed festival some years ago. They are tiny beings, only 4/1000<sup>th</sup>mm in diameter. They use the calcium bicarbonate to build little exquisite, daisy like shields around themselves.

Of course, like all living things they die. And at a microscopic level it is as if the shells of these dying beings is like an underwater snow, slowly falling down through the water, snowing onto the ocean floor.

Once on the ocean floor the microscopic shells combine with silts and other material, building up layer upon layer, gradually becoming hundreds of meters deep. Through chemical processes these layers of dead beings and silts are transformed into rocks – chalk and limestone. Some of these rocks get pushed up into mountain ranges, like the ones where the ecodharma centre is, vast limestone ridges, vertical rock faces, where vultures and eagle soar. But some of them are subducted, drawn down into the earth at the edge of continental plates. Once they are drawn down they melt in the heat of the earth, the carbon and calcium are broken apart. The calcium often recombines with silica to become the basis for new granite, and the carbon is often thrown back up into the atmosphere again in volcanic eruptions – returning to the air after a journey of hundreds of thousands of years.

It is an amazing story in which air becomes rock, rock becomes air, rock becomes liquid, liquid becomes life, rock becomes life, and life becomes rock, life becomes air. It is a process that resembles those Chinese landscape paintings where sky and earth, clouds and rock seem to interpenetrate each other.

It is not just the length and intricacy of this journey that is fascinating, it is also the way that the relationship between air, life and minerals are interlocked in a way that actually has a regulating influence on levels of atmospheric carbon, the planet's temperature, and the conditions that support complex life. The elements are linked in a responsive feedback system.

### **Feedback in the carbon cycle**

Increased rates of silicate rock weathering reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide. Reduced carbon dioxide means lower temperatures. Lower temperatures mean less rainfall. Less rainfall means less plant growth and slower rates of rock weathering. Slower rock weathering means higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, which means higher temperatures, which means more rainfall, more plant growth and higher rates of rock weathering. These relationships show a self-regulating tendency. For hundreds of thousands of years a complex interplay of these factors have regulated the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and consequently maintained temperatures at levels conducive to the evolution of complex life.

It has worked amazingly well, until now, as we pump carbon into the atmosphere at rates that the natural systems cannot deal with.

Earth Systems Science encourages us to see the Earth as a living planet, a physiological system or superorganism. That system appears to have the consequence of regulating the climate and atmospheric chemistry at levels which are comfortable for life, suggesting that the evolution of organisms is so closely coupled with the evolution of their physical and chemical environment that together they constitute a single self-regulating evolutionary process.

Life, mineral, biological, atmospheric, meteorological are all bound together. That is how we have evolved. These are relationships are integral to what and who we are.

Interconnectedness is not just a vague idea, that somehow things are related. It points to the actual, concrete, connectedness of things in the world.

### **Implies a shift in values**

These ways of understanding life can be applied at many levels, not just the ecological and planetary. The same kinds of close interlinking between atmosphere and living things, between rocks and temperatures, are indicative of the way similar links and connections run throughout the world, through economic systems, socio-political systems, group dynamics, personal psychology, and mind. As we begin to appreciate the complexity of all these inter-related processes we can start to see why connection is such a fundamental value. Understanding things in terms of connection rather than as separate entities can help us to understand the psyche, group dynamics, and societies better. And this implies a wide ranging shift in values.

Honouring connection implies a shift in values:

<b>FROM</b>	<b>TO</b>
Reductive	Relational
Analysis	Synthesis
Rational	Intuitive
Atomistic	Holistic
Innovation and growth	Conservation
Individualistic	Cooperative
Anthropocentric	Ecocentric
Maximise	Optimise

There is so much we could say about each of these. But right now I want to focus on the last one, a very important shift that can easily be overlooked; the shift from the value of maximising to the value of optimising.

### **Maximising to optimising**

It is often the case that we think that if something is good, then more of it is better. But this is often not the case. Most things are useful in the right balance (like carbon levels in the atmosphere) or in the right dosage. Something that is an essential nutrient for plant growth becomes a poison when there is too much of it in the soil. Just because nitrogen is essential to plant nutrition, doesn't mean that more nitrogen is always better. Just because economic growth can feed more people and generate higher material standards of living for some, doesn't mean that more economic growth is always better. In all of this, balance is crucial.

The same is true of values. We might recognise the imbalance in our culture towards the rational faculty at the expense of the intuitive. But to maximise intuition over the rational is as damaging as maximising the rational over the intuitive. Analysing things into their parts might have its limits, but so does rejecting reductionism in favour of maximising synthesis. Both have a part to play in understanding the world. And finding the optimal value for each changes from context to context.

What can look like a simple shift, from maximising to optimising, is actually very challenging. It places tough demands on us. It demands from us a more nuanced, more complex and less black and white approach to the world. Values cannot be assigned simple labels like good and

bad. They need to be explored in context, to be understood in terms of their function in relationship to other factors – in a constantly shifting world.

This is an important part of what the Buddha was getting at with the idea of the Middle Way. It suggests that we need to check and adjust our approach to find what balance of method works at any one time. Not just assuming because something worked that more of it will work better. Sometimes we need discipline. Sometimes deep relaxation. Sometimes it is a subtle interplay of both that is what is needed. In meditation we need to learn how to balance calm and vitality, checking and adjusting our approach continually. Sometimes we need strong effort, sometimes effortlessness. It all depends on the context, the moment. And to know what is going to be useful we need to be very attentive.

Often we get attached to certain approaches, certain values. We often roll them out regardless. We get stuck in habits. A developmental approach to meditation can be useful, or become a pushy attitude that straightjackets the psyche. An open awareness approach to meditation can be useful, or it can just compound a flaccid laziness. Which is right, and in what balance requires a constant responsiveness to actual experience, not attachment to one way or the other. In a changing world, attachment to maximising one value at the expense of another can become a trap that stalls our development.

### **Responsiveness**

Healthy systems incorporate pathways of information and feedback loops. This is what enables responsiveness to change – as we saw in the carbon cycle. This is also what enables self-organising systems – like us - to learn, adapt and evolve.

For many years I've been deeply impressed by the writings of Donella Meadows. In the 1970's she was one of the co-authors of the ground breaking study *The Limits to Growth*. Its publication prompted widespread discussion about our ways of living and the non-negotiable ecological limits we live within - it was instrumental in helping us begin to wake up.

As a systems thinker, Meadows helped to explain how healthy systems, biological, ecological or socio-economic, all exhibit characteristics of good feedback and responsiveness. It is through sensing what's going on (both internally and in the surrounding environment), channelling the information effectively, and responding to the feedback, that a person, a society, or an ecosystem survive, adapt, and flourish.

### Car analogy

In the 30 Year Update to the original Limits to Growth book, Meadows and her co-authors offered a simple analogy for the industrial growth society heading on its way towards resource depletion and environmental degradation. She likened it to a car driving along a road at speed. Not far ahead on the road is an obstacle, perhaps a heavy stone wall. The road is wet, and anyway, the brakes are not working very well. Slowing down is difficult. In addition to that, the windscreen wipers just don't work. So, it's hard to see what's coming, through the wet and steamed up glass.

In this analogy, feedback into the system is poorly sensed. Information of the approaching hazard isn't getting through, not arriving where it's needed to influence action. And, because of the bad brakes and wet road, the capacity for responsiveness within the system is severely compromised. That's the industrial growth society, systemic failure to notice approaching hazards, amidst power interests which compound political intransigence and short sightedness. These are characteristics of a sick system: A system that needs healing.

The application of this analogy to the industrial growth society is something many of us can recognise. What we might not always notice is how much it can apply to the way we live our own lives!

### The role we play in the social body

Each of us can play a crucial role in the healing process of society, improving the systemic capacity to receive the feedback and get it to the places where responsive action can begin. We can play a role in the social body like that of the immune system in the healthy functioning of the physical body - identifying perils, flagging them up, and gathering the antibodies and resources to deal with the threat to the system. The immune system also plays a role in repairing the body, and rebuilding healthy tissue, just as we can create alternative ways of living, new economics, ways of growing, ways of creating community.

But this immunological function within the social body is a role that asks a lot of us. It requires that we become good receivers of the systemic feedback. Open channels for the flow of information. It requires that we train our sensibility and our capacity for responsiveness. This is all about connection. How can we increase our capacity to be connected? To increase our responsiveness we need to attend to three specific facets of our own experience:

- the quality of our awareness,
- our emotional capacity,
- and our ability to become increasingly conscious of the views and beliefs which frame our interpretation of our experience.

Returning to Donella Meadows' analogy of the car in the rain with poor visibility, we could say that: attending to our quality of awareness helps get the windscreen wipers going again and clean the glass; attending to our emotional capacity is what enables us to look out of that windscreen and not turn away in terrified anxiety; and bringing increased awareness to the way that our views about the world condition experience, is what will help us understand where and how change can happen.

### **Training in these three facets**

These three dimensions of our experience are the foundational concerns of basic Buddhist training. The greatest hindrances to a clear quality of awareness, contributing to the poor visibility, are the mental habits of distraction and fragmentation. The basic antidote is training in mindfulness, which brings brightness and lucidity to the mind. The greatest hindrances to an increased emotional capacity, to our ability to keep looking, are the heart constricting tendencies of aversion and fearfulness, which can be transformed through simple daily practices cultivating skilful emotion, kindness or *metta*. The greatest hindrance to increased awareness of the conditioning influence of our views is the grasping attachment that comes from our existential insecurity. The best antidote for this is deep reflection, grounded in both mindfulness and unconditional kindness for our self, on the impermanence and insubstantiality of things.

Building this kind of training into our daily lives can greatly enhance our capacity to sense and respond to what is going on around us. And personal training of this sort is crucial to healing the systemic dysfunctionality of our society. Such training is essential in enabling us to recognise that the bad news is the good news, to stay open to it, get the information flowing effectively, and enable what responses there can be.

This kind of training is training in connection. There are three important dimensions to this.

## Deeper systems – nested wholes

To explore what they are, let's dive a little more into the world of systems thinking. Thinking in systems we see that the essential properties of an organism, or living system, are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have. A system, as a whole, is more than the sum of its parts. But what is a whole?

Actually we can identify systems at many levels. We can look at a cell as a whole system. We can explore the immunological function of the body as a whole system. We can understand the psyche of an individual as exhibiting the characteristics of a whole system. We can examine society as a whole system. In each case, at each level, the system we are looking at can be usefully analysed and understood.

But in each case, each system sits within a larger system, a wider set of relationships. Systems are nested within other system. An important idea here is that of the 'holon'. A 'holon' is a system that has an identifiable systemic integrity and yet is itself nested within larger whole systems. Good systems thinking requires the agility of mind to be able to shift one's attention back and forth between systems levels.

When we take a plunge into systems thinking we discover a subtlety of relationships, an intricate network of relationships, which connect things together – both externally and internally.

The subtlety of systems thinking not only points out the way that things are connected between each other, but also how the layers of systems within systems link between themselves, up and down through the hierarchy of layers. The cell is a whole system, but part of the larger system of an organ. An organ is a whole system, but part of the larger system of the body. The individual can be recognised as having systemic integrity, but exists within community and society. And so on.

### Three dimensions of connection

At the ecodharma centre we talk about three important layers of connection, which interlink. These are the personal (psychological/cognitive/emotional dimensions), the social, and the ecological. A simple way of looking at this is to think in terms of three dimensions of connection that we need to attend to:

- Connecting people to themselves
- Connecting people to people
- Connecting people to nature

We can train to deepen our connection in each of these dimensions, but, because of their interlinking, to address anyone of them adequately requires paying attention to the others. These layers each have their own characteristics and dynamics, but they are not separate from each other. Training in connection requires that we address connection in all three dimensions: to our self, to other people, and to nature.

Connecting people to themselves is about self-awareness and emotional capacity, but also about discovering the greater depths of who we really are. Connecting people to nature includes getting ourselves out from the human centric world we have built around us, and rediscovering the non-human world and our own ecological identity. This is not just about feeling connected, it's not just about consciousness, it also needs to translate into ways of living (socio-economic structures) that honour our basic ecological nature. Connecting people to people involves the development of empathy, compassion, but also the basic skills of creating new kinds of social relationships.

### People to people – control to collaboration

When we begin to appreciate the ways that we are each part of a greater whole, it demands that we transform the way we live and work together. One of Dana Meadows suggestions for acting in a way that honours the insights of systems thinking is to “go for the good of the whole”. And of course, because we are part of the whole, this does not imply neglecting our own needs in the process.

Perhaps one of the most elegant ways of understanding how we can “go for the good of the whole” is to explore how we can learn to collaborate.

### Experience of activist groups

The work I've been doing in recent years around sustainable activism and burnout has brought me into close contact with hundreds of activists across Europe. For many right now it's easy to feel despondent, seeing ahead of them a long uphill struggle, amidst a political climate where their values of ecological and social justice are so marginalized. But often what they find most disheartening, what really depletes their energy, are the struggles and conflicts amongst those they work with. Frequently, to meet the challenges of transforming society, it's first necessary to transform the culture and relationships within their own groups, so as to become a truly effective and sustainable force for social change.

Whenever we choose to step into action to support social or ecological wellbeing, for most of us it's going to mean collaborating with others, working together.

And working with others is not always easy. It can feel frustrating, draining, and unproductive. Meetings drag, personalities clash, both hidden and overt power struggles arise. And all this gets in the way of achieving what the group or organization started out to do. Whether at the level of grassroots and community organizing, or larger NGO's, it's not uncommon to despair at our chances of making meaningful change in the world if even within our own groups we can't overcome such challenges!

One of the first things that can help is to acknowledge that, at this point in our history, our capacity to collaborate is often severely compromised.

Both self-survival and social cooperation are tendencies that have been integral to our evolution as a species. The tension between them is central to what it is to be a human animal. Within every human group, and within the heart of each individual, the tension between self and other is continually playing itself out.

But, during the recent decades of neo-liberal social development an emphasis in favour of the values of individualism and self-interest have often prevailed. This legacy, with its consequent effects of social atomization and the erosion of community, continues to exert an undermining influence on our collaborative endeavours. Many of us have grown up in the wake of the Thatcherite view that "there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families", in a world where the skills and the values required to work well together, are seriously under-developed and under-practiced. Consequently, for most of us today, effective collaboration requires a focused *re-training*.

## Using tools requires personal qualities – the real secret of effective collaboration

At the ecodharma centre we support people to train in necessary skills, like collective visioning, decision making processes, ways of including diverse opinion, active listening, and so on. All of these tools and methods can help transform collaborative work from a struggle into a nourishing synergy.

Nevertheless, the application of these tools and approaches all rest on some basic values and qualities essential to reclaiming our natural capacity to work well together. And to me, one of these qualities stands out above all the others, as the real secret to effective collaboration.

Aldous Huxley, so I understand, was asked towards the end of his life if he had any advice to offer based on what he had discovered during his many years of exploring and researching the human predicament. Aldous was a visionary author and astute social commentator, his curiosity about the human condition led him to explore eastern mysticism and psychedelic consciousness. No wonder his companions were keen to hear a distillation of the wisdom Aldous had gained on his adventures into the depths of human psyche. So what was the great psychonaught's answer, what advice did he have for humanity after his many years of thought and exploration? Huxley's answer was, simply: "Try to be a little kinder."<sup>1</sup>

For some this answer might feel slightly deflating. This man, a preeminent intellectual of his time, led by a hunger for deep wisdom, arrives at a position that could seem a bit trite. But perhaps the issue is not so much the obviousness of the advice, as our inability to really feel the deeper resonances in the challenge of this suggestion. What if that really is all there is to it? "Try to be a little kinder."

Personally, I think that kindness is one of the most underestimated virtues of our times. It is radically transformative of both our self and of our relationships. If there is one secret to effective collaboration this is it: Don't underestimate the power of kindness.

It won't solve all the problems. Some of them might be unsolvable! But as a touchstone to test whether or not we are bringing our best to our collaborative relationships, laying down the most helpful conditions to support the greatest potential to arise amongst us, it is the unbeatable question: In this, can I be a little kinder?

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<sup>1</sup> "It is a bit embarrassing to have been concerned with the human problem all one's life and find at the end that one has no more to offer by way of advice than 'Try to be a little kinder.'" As quoted in *What About the Big Stuff?: Finding Strength and Moving Forward When the Stakes Are High* (2002) by Richard Carlson, p. 293

In my experiences of working with others for social change, I can see that where things failed, all too often my own lack of kindness was a major factor, and that whenever I have been able to really allow this quality to inform my approach, it's transformational, things work so much better – and collaboration gains longevity, continuity, and depth.

### The power of kindness

The radically transforming power of kindness is what we call *metta*. It involves cultivating an intimate awareness of the pulse of life, as it runs through our self, as it runs through others, and as it runs throughout the world, and letting that awareness influence our action. This quality of kindness, this intimate sensing of the pulse of life is at the heart of connection: to ourselves, to others people, to the social and ecological dimensions of the world.

- Kindness for our self supports the intimate awareness that's a key to self-knowledge and the integration of our energy with our intentions and values.
- Kindness furnishes the trust to venture beyond the comfort zone into spaces where we can keep opening gently and consistently to more and more learning.
- Kindness is the basis for the courage we need to sit amidst contradiction and diversity, to feel it unfold towards wisdom- rather than fearing the incoherence of reality.
- It provides us with the nourishment that enables us to loosen our grasping onto views, and acknowledge their provisional and partial nature. It allows differences to deepen into shared understanding, rather getting entrenched in conflict.

Kindness underpins so many other essential virtues: Demanding generosity, counselling patience, and dynamising compassionate and courageous action. Kindness is a solvent which melts away the brittle dualism of self and other. The empathy it implies de-centres our world from self, and relocates our reality in the fecund world of inter-subjectivity.

And even when it all goes wrong, kindness is the basis of an emotional resilience that enables us to bounce back, to forgive, to learn from experience, and to usefully share that between us.

Kindness is a quality we can consciously develop, especially through the basic dharma trainings of ethics and meditation. If we want to step into effective action for social and ecological wellbeing, we will need to work with others. If we want to collaborate effectively with others we'd do well to make training in kindness our radical priority.

Kindness is a key to connection. And connection is a key to empowerment. And if we want to respond to the needs of our times we need that empowerment. On the flyer for these talks

there is a quote from Dilgo Khyentse: *When we recognise the empty nature, the energy to benefit others dawns, effortless and uncontrived*

There is an important truth to that. The empty nature he refers to is the awareness that our self and the world are empty of separateness, that fundamentally we are relationships – internal, social and ecological. When we see the emptiness of separateness, we see that we can't fall out of the web of life, that in a sense we are never alone, that the wisdom of millions of years of evolution fires through our synapses, and that the courage of hundreds of generations of our ancestors flows through our veins.

As we begin to recognise that what we think of as self is fundamentally social and ecological, acting for others flows from us with greater ease. And as it does we find that we are empowering others and that others are empowering us.

And I will be talking more about what that means tomorrow.