

# connect.empower.liberate#3

This article is a combination of transcript and notes from the talk: connect.empower.liberate#2/3. It is the third 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.

## Introduction

This is the third talk in the series: connect.empower.liberate. In the first talk I was looking at connection. Yesterday I explored empowerment. Today I will be circumambulating the theme “liberate”. As a place to start, and so you don’t need to sit through the whole thing wondering, I want to let you know what I understand as liberation in terms of the three linked dimensions of connection and empowerment that I have named in the previous two talks: the personal, the social and the ecological.

- The essence of personal liberation is captured for me in Dilgo Kyentse’s phrase: “When we recognise the empty nature, the energy to benefit others dawns, effortless and uncontrived.” There’s a simple elegance to this, weaving together both sunyata and pratitya-samutpada, both emptiness and conditioned arising. It honours the timeless heart of liberation, and yet situates it right here, right now.
- The bottom line definition I am using for social liberation is, very simply: establishing the conditions, as widely as is possible, that support people to flourish. The conditions that support that include factors like economic and social justice, a social balance of cooperation and autonomy, a basis for empowered participation in social process and decision making, and the opportunities in society for people to live useful and meaningful lives. And out of that, of course, there are the opportunities for individuals to grow into the fullness of flourishing that Dilgo Khyentse point towards.
- Neither personal nor social liberation can be separated out from ecological liberation. That’s a fantasy. As my friend John Curtain put it, “what we do to the environment, what we do to each other, and what we do to ourselves, are all interlinked”. Healthy individuals grow in healthy societies. Healthy societies grow in healthy relationship with the environment. But, still what do I mean by ecological liberation? In terms of the ecological, liberation simply means refusing the human conceit that we are somehow above and separate to nature, or that we have dominion over it. It means resisting actions that arise out of that arrogance, and creating ways of living that heal

us from it. It would be a ridiculous conceit to think that nature somehow needs us to liberate it. It is, and always will be, wild, with integral value in itself. We just need to honour that and stop treating it as merely something for human exploitation.

I'll be unpacking some of that as I go along. I finished the talk yesterday leaving the theme of equanimity hanging in the air. And today that is a good place to start. I already said yesterday that the development of individuals and the development of our communities and societies are bound together. That social and ecological engagement are a vital basis for personal development. And that personal development, of the qualities that arise through dharma practice, strongly empower social agency. Equanimity is one such quality and it is a quality closely connected with the Buddhist view of liberation.

### **Equanimity**

Studying the words of Engaged Buddhists over recent years, it appears many agree that one of the most useful contributions Buddhism has to offer social action is the quality of equanimity. And yet, it seems to me, misunderstood, equanimity poses one of the greatest obstacles Buddhism can put in the way of social engagement.

If you've done your Buddhism 101 you'll know that, traditionally, equanimity plays an important part in Buddhist Dharma. Not only is it a quality we develop to support our on-going practice, but in some formulations of the path it occupies a position almost synonymous with the liberation often depicted as the goal of Buddhist training. It suggests a deep imperturbability, which, like the depths of the ocean, maintains a profound calm, even as the waves on its surface swell and crash tumultuously.

But the traditional texts also slap some important public health warnings on equanimity. Loud and clear they caution: Do not mistake equanimity for indifference. Indifference, they say, is the "near enemy" of equanimity. Indifference might suggest some close similarities to equanimity, but as all good foragers know, it's all too easy to pick something with a passing resemblance to a tasty and nourishing species – but that is in fact a poison.

The mistaken identity is a common error. But, an indifferent, detached withdrawal, and lack of connection with the world, is not the equanimity the dharma points us towards – it's a toxic pretender, a near enemy. But even so, it offers an alluring surrogate.

The challenges of our times, with its economic and ecological irrationalities, social tensions and precarities, all too easily tip the balance in us towards tendencies to withdraw. It's no wonder

that disconnection entices us - and all the more so when, mistaking indifference for equanimity, we can use Buddhism to provide the rationalization that, rather than copping out, we're actually gaining spiritual maturity!

Turning towards the near enemy of equanimity is wide spread. It's not only Buddhists who are seduced by the coping mechanisms of withdrawal. Donald Rothberg lists a range of contemporary forms of indifference, the state of the art of equanimity's near enemies: *denial, complacency, resignation, acquiescence, numbness, intellectual aloofness, rationalization, cynicism, dogmatism, fear of strong emotions, particularly anger*. Sound familiar?

We've probably all heard smug reassurances that: *the planet* won't actually be destroyed, or life will go on, only humanity will be wiped out – and that perhaps we deserve it anyway. But, how contorted we must become to feel reassured by abstractions that fall back on a mineral baseline, make irrelevant millions of years of evolving bio-diversity, and the actual scale of suffering a major die-off event implies. How often do we hear views that accommodate our predicament, which present themselves as grounded in maturity and wisdom, when in fact they're merely ways of supressing the heart.

Denial is one of the defining psychological constellations of our times. It plays out around us all day long, becoming increasingly integral to our lives and our socio-economic systems. Denial underpins the passionless mainstream discourse – which allows statistical analysis, but gives no room to heart-felt response. It fuels growth economies as we consume to avoid discomfort: Denial is good for business - in the short term! And shielded by unacknowledged privilege, denial leads to a terrible life-withering complacency and superficiality.

Indifference, compounding denial, is a grave danger. And yet, despite the perils of misidentification, equanimity still remains one of the most valuable qualities Buddhism can offer us in meeting the challenges of our times. In its authentic forms it offers a source of fearless compassion and incisive wisdom. But how can we learn to know its true character and not ingest its toxic look alikes?

I was saying yesterday that, the cultivation of equanimity sits within a four-fold practice, the practice of the four immeasurables, or *Brahma-Viharas*. There are, as I mentioned, three other qualities, that are required to support the development of true equanimity in Buddhist terms: *metta, karuna, and mudita*.

Training in equanimity begins with *metta* – or loving kindness, fostering a caring intimate connection with the pulse of life, in oneself and in others – human and non-human. When this intimate caring is turned to face suffering in the world, it meets that quite naturally with *karuna* or compassion. And when we turn the intimate caring of *metta* to meet the happiness and wellbeing of others, it unfolds as *mudita*, or sympathetic joyful appreciation.

These three qualities augment each other. *Metta* offers the starting point of gently opening the heart. Compassion, turning this openness towards suffering in the world, protects *metta* from degrading into mere sentimentality, and stirs us to action. The appreciative joy of *mudita* keeps us alive to the potential for freedom and flourishing in the world, it provides essential nourishment, feeding our efforts to alleviate suffering – so that we do not become overwhelmed.

Training to cultivate these three qualities is the groundwork which protects the development of equanimity from collapsing into its surrogate life-denying near enemies. They ensure our path towards liberation is not escapism dressed up in spiritual garb. Unless our equanimity grows out of a caring intimacy, deeply alive to the pulse of life, unless it holds within it a passionate and committed engagement with the suffering of the world, unless it's illuminated by joyful appreciation, it's not the equanimity the dharma points us towards.

Rather than aloof detachment, equanimity is more like the capacity the Gitano-Flamenco tradition celebrates when it claims that our capacity to experience joy is only equal to our capacity to stay open to suffering. Equanimity is a deepening capability to stay open to the way things are, in all their heights and their depths. As equanimity grows our capacity for compassion and joy also grow. The deep calm of the ocean does not diminish the rise and fall of the waves on the surface. It adds a depth of context, but it doesn't turn away.

Damaging as they are, we can't simply cast off denial, indifference, and the constellated range of heart closing tendencies. They serve us in a way. The near enemies of equanimity are also, in a sense, our near friends. It's been said that "human kind can only bear so much reality". Opening up to the way things are can be overwhelming. And our psyche applies strategies which protect us from that crushing power. Usefully opening up beyond those self-protecting strategies can only happen little by little.

What is so deeply valuable about an integrated training in the four immeasurables - *metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, and equanimity - is that, not only does it protect equanimity from surrogate forms of denial, but the training actually provides the range of emotional skills required to

tend with care and patience to the gradual process of growing beyond the old protective strategies of our self, to recognise the fear and grief that lies beneath them, to nourish our heart and enable us to move gradually towards a more empowered and fearless commitment to the world.

In this sense, equanimity brings together connection, empowerment and liberation. With the right training equanimity really is a quality that can deeply empower our efforts to meet suffering and injustice in the world with transforming and liberating action.

### **Beyond the Politics of Catastrophe**

These are especially difficult times to engage in action for social and ecological justice, for social and ecological liberation. Social change has never been a simple thing. It's complex and in a sense mysterious! Lawrence Cox, a member of the Triratna Community in Dublin, recently drew my attention to a passage William Morris wrote in 1886, in *A Dream of John Ball*:

“I pondered all these things, and how people fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other people have to fight for what they meant under another name.”

Social change is rarely a simple story of winning and losing. There are times when movements are defeated, but the changes they fought for happen anyway. There are times when a struggle is won, but the outcomes are not what had been hoped for. There are compromises, mistakes and movement betrayals, that all add complexity to our relationship with our struggles and the process of social change.

But the stakes feel so high today that all this is hyper-charged. In recent years I have seen many engaged people despair, fall into despondency, give it up. We live in deeply uncertain times. We face challenges of an unprecedented scale. To meet them we need a training that roots our motivation more deeply than we've known before – we require a vision and practice that will sustain compassionate action beyond both hope and hopelessness.

### **COP15**

Several years back a group of us were restoring the old peasant farmhouse in the Catalan Pyrenees that went on to become the main accommodation for the courses we run at the Ecodharma Centre. We spent six months building with traditional techniques and local

materials, constructing with limestone, laying pine trunk beams, and insulating the roofs with sheep's wool beneath salvaged terracotta tiles.

Half way through the work we downed tools and nine of us set out on the long journey across Europe to Copenhagen. It was the year of the COP15, the United Nations Conference on Climate Change. Delegates were heading there from all over the world to explore globally coordinated efforts to address the perils of human induced climate change. The political optimists were dubbing the meeting *Hopenhagen*.

COP15 was a magnet for Campaign NGO's and grassroots activists. The scientific consensus had again underscored the evidence, rising carbon emissions are leading to serious devastation of the earth's biodiversity, and human suffering on a vast scale. Not taken in by the Hopenhagen feel good hype, amongst the grassroots the rhetoric in the air was that this was our last chance.

Some long time climate activists scoffed. For them the maths was clear. It was already too late as far as they were concerned. But for many others it was still worth a last ditch effort to avert climate chaos.

So, amidst the Scandinavian winter, delegates argued, campaigners lobbied. Activists gathered, planned, generating a wealth of meetings, protests, and actions – aiming to pressure global leaders to do something worthwhile, or to inspire people to take matters into their own hands and side step the political circus in a popular struggle for climate justice.

The Danish police response was unapologetically, if predictably, harsh, repressive, and illegal. The grassroots were battered. The outcome of the conference itself was the announcement, amidst self-congratulatory fanfares, that the representatives had agreed to talk more at some point: Basically, no action whatsoever. Five years later, they're still talking.

So, the "last chance" passed us by. No meaningful coordinated effort was agreed upon. Economic growth continued to trump ecological security. Amidst the sense that it was now or never for the planet, we missed the "now", so presumably it was "never". The last ditch had been overrun.

As people dispersed, bruised and exhausted, there were tears, anger, and disillusionment. Soon enough the theme of climate chaos dropped back in mainstream discourse to phantasmagorically drifting in and out of focus (editors must struggle to get the news cycle quite right for the story of the end of the world and our reluctance to face it). And in the

following years, the levels of burnout amongst environmental activists soared. The anecdotes tell of action groups falling apart, generalized dismay and despondency, even increased suicide attempts. The zeitgeist of the moment is captured by Frederick Jameson's phrase: "It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism".

Since then there's been much said about the counter-productivity of the politics of catastrophe: How it fosters a self-righteous and sacrificial radicalism, breeds cynicism and hopelessness, drives public awareness into deepening ruts of psychological denial, and generally strengthens the hand of reactionary social tendencies – both hedonistic evasion and the fear induced right wing populism.

Consequently, many environmental activists are looking for new stories to tell, stories that can inspire vision, confidence, and action for a life affirming future. We hear that we need not wait for government to act before we can begin to build resilience into our lives, and that our collective efforts to do this can nourish our need for community and renew the spirit. New land-based projects for sustainability spring up. Fresh and creative approaches to mobilizing are in the air. New economics, gross happiness indexes and permaculture are all reclaiming life affirming design for the future. The Occupy movement, M15, and climate camps, have been reshaping an inspired politics of creative optimism.

These all provide priceless contexts for people to flourish, to realise their values in collective efforts to benefit the world. And, clearly, as far as motivational psychology goes, this is an advance. It's learning to be celebrated and welcomed. And yet, I still feel that there's a place for caution.

All too easily the continuity of our efforts can be trashed by the swing from the energized uplift of hope, into the seemingly inevitable downturn of hopelessness. A motivational economy raised on a bubble will burst, just as surely as a market raised on sub-prime mortgages will crash.

Powerful social movements are slow to arise. Their causes are complex, at times even mysterious. But they *do* arise out of continuity of effort. Just as with personal change, we need to maintain a gentle and persistent heat to bring the crucible to the temperature that catalyzes deep transformation. Too hot and it burns. But if we keep taking it out of the fire we never reach the melting point.

To support on-going engagement, with the necessary longevity for movement building, we require a motivating vision that can fully embrace the uncertainties of our times – an inspired vision that is not propped up by a merely hopeful optimism, but that retains its power and value whether we succeed or fail.

These are complex times. We can't know if our present actions will succeed in bringing forth new ways of living that honour our wovenness within the ecological web, or whether, indeed, we stand amidst currents whose flow towards calamitous end times is just too strong to turn.

Two images come to mind: A midwife tending to the birthing of new life, and the hospice nurse, tending to the passing of the terminally ill. In our actions at this time we cannot know if we are the midwives of a life affirming future, or whether we nurse the dying process of a terminally ill civilisation. Or perhaps it is both!

What really fascinates me, is that whether midwife or hospice nurse, both call on the same life-affirming qualities of care and compassion. Both witnessing the first breath of a new born child and the last outbreath of a dying parent can be met with wonder and deep appreciation of life. The value of life is not lessened for the fact of death – at times it is even heightened.

So, I want to be clear. I am not trying to validate a Dharma inspired approach which confirms the Nietzsche's statement in *The Antichrist*, that I quoted a few days ago, that "Buddhism is a religion for the end and fatigue of a civilisation." Nietzsche seems to have seen Buddhism as a way of accommodating ourselves to a resigned and melancholic fatalism. That is not what I am pointing towards.

What I am pointing to is the empowering attitude of the Bodhisattva, the Buddhist compassionate warrior, who trains to perfect an unwavering, vigorous effort, an energetic action grounded in compassion, amidst both birth and death. That energetic engagement is what is known as *virya*.

Importantly, however, *Virya* only matures into an unwavering compassionate engagement because it is perfected in balance with *Ksanti*. *Ksanti* is a profound patience, a radical receptivity to the way things are. *Virya* and *Ksanti* together combine to dynamise effort with a resolute energy that is like the steady turning of the sun and moon, not the mere motivational bubble of optimism.

Motivation of that depth is what can support on-going engagement with the necessary longevity for the complex process of movement building, fully embracing the uncertainties of

our times. It provides an inspired vision of what is possible that is not propped up by hopeful optimism, but that retains its power and value whether we succeed or fail.

So, I think it is useful to interrogate in ourselves how we understand success and failure. What do these mean to us?

### **A deep shift in views**

Responding to the challenges of our times requires three kinds of action. Firstly, we require actions that resist further on-going degradation and damage to ecosystems and society. In addition to stopping more damage, we need actions which create alternatives in economics, social relationships, and production. And as well as resistance and creating alternatives, we also need actions which enable a shift in the world views and values which have underpinned our historical trajectory to the current point of crisis. We require a shift in consciousness. (I discussed some of those new ways of seeing in the first talk – especially emphasising the value of connection).

Working for a transition, from the industrial growth society to an ecological and socially just future, requires us to ensure that our efforts don't reproduce the old world views that got us here in the first place. As Aung San Suu Kyi once stated that,

"Without a revolution of the spirit, the forces that produced the iniquities of the old order will continue to be operative."

If we want our social action to be congruent with the shift in consciousness needed for a real transition, we need to bring awareness to how the views we carry shape our social aims, political objectives and our strategizing. How we understand success and failure sets our vision. Our vision will shape our strategies. And our strategies will shape the actions we take to fulfil the objectives which are the stepping stones of our strategic pathways.

### **Time**

One of the most important clusters of views, inherited from the old order that are often carried over into the visioning of our socio-political work, are views about time. In his work *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler writes:

"It is by the meaning that it intuitively attaches to *time* that one culture is differentiated from another."

The way we relate to time plays a key role in shaping our world. Time is so fundamental, the assumptions so basic, that we often take *time* to be a given characteristic of reality. But different cultures and traditions give different meanings to time. They understand its structure differently. Consequently live in different worlds and interact with those worlds in different ways.

At the heart of the dominant western world view which has underpinned the historical development of the industrial growth society is an approach to time which prioritises its linearity. Our socio-economic structures, political ideologies, and ways of living, are all influenced by assumptions about the fabric of temporality – that suggest it has directionality, that we are heading somewhere. And that that somewhere is somehow better.

The dominance of the idea that time is primarily linear, can be traced back to the influence of millenarian Christianity, and its vision of history heading towards a salvational (or damnational) end point. This religious myth of salvation has been repeatedly reproduced in secular political myths. It's apparent in the Marxist view of history and other utopian-revolutionary traditions, and also in ideological neo-liberalism (leading to the now embarrassing claims of "the end of history" that accompanied the fall of the Berlin wall).

One of the dangers of such grand historical narratives is the way they enable the justification of means by reference to some idealised end. As Frederick Jameson pointed out, it was Marx's view of the communist utopian end of history that provided the step from Hegel's teleological and idealistic philosophy, to the Gulag. And we can see the same tendencies played out again in the missionary rhetoric of globalising freedom and democracy, used to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Even where the salvationist views of politics are tempered, a deep faith in progress still predominates. The liberal humanist view may reject the idea that we are heading towards a predetermined endpoint, realist-humanism may scoff at the naivety of such utopian idealism, but it still champions the history of humanity as fundamentally one of progress.

The core assumptions underpinning our growth based industrial development, have been that growth will go on: Technology will advance; things will get better; that increasing production, more consumption, rising population, are all monuments to humanity's ingenuity and our wedded destiny with progress.

Some of us are beginning to recognise these assumptions as part of the hallucinatory self-image that shaped modernity - a deluding and conceited fantasy. The story is crashing against the non-negotiability of ecological limits, its threadbare weave is torn apart by mounting social tensions, the myth of more and more becomes ship wrecked on the rocks of simply not enough.

And yet, how much do such deep views, ideas like the myth of progress, still underpin our political and social struggles and strategies? Have we really awoken from that dream? How much do we still invest in our work for social change as a project of salvation? To what extent, seeking the new, do we continue to reproduce the old spirit?

### **Circular time**

Many older and indigenous traditions ground themselves in a different view of time. For them time is cyclical. Rather than the modernist obsession with ever unfolding into newness, time is shaped more in terms of repetitions and returns. Re-emphasising the cyclical, the passing and returning of the seasons, the waxing and waning of the moon, the passages of growing, dying, and the re-growing of things, roots us here, in our basic ecological identity – a basic ecological identity that salvational programmes, both religious and political, seek to deny.

It is not that pre-modern people are unaware of the linear dimensions of time. No doubt a nomadic tribesperson erects a shelter with a clear sense that her actions will add up, progressively, to a constructed temporary home. And yet the accumulative linear steps of construction take place within an awareness of the non-progressive aspects of life, with an acknowledgement that, one day, what has been built will be dismantled or destroyed. As a simple Buddhist refrain points out:

the end of hoarding is dispersion  
 the end of building is destruction  
 the end of meeting is parting  
 the end of life is death

But this reminder of impermanence shouldn't be taken to imply a fatalistic, or nihilistic, end point either. Death in turn becomes the basis for life, as the darkly composted forest floor reveals.

What does this mean for our political and social projects? If there are no mundane achievements which resist the transience of things, if time is not assuredly ticking towards historical salvation, what is our politics for?

Some years ago I was trying to promote more awareness and action within the Triratna Buddhist Community addressing climate change. I remember one practitioner correcting my misguided efforts by pointing out that “we cannot fix samsara” – the round of existence characterised by impermanence and suffering.

At the time, and I think rightly so, I regarded that as a rationalisation for disengagement – justifying a kind of Buddhist quietism. But now I find it crucial to integrate that idea with passionate engagement with actions for healing our world.

It is important that we do not invest in our socio-political action salvational expectations they cannot deliver. And yet, unless we want to retreat into a life denying escapism, to arrive at that developmental dead-end Myles Horton called “getting stuck on the inside”, we need to attend to the social, material, and ecological conditions of life. Our political and social action may not offer a basis for some ultimate salvation, but they can create conditions which reduce and alleviate suffering, even that support our flourishing, at least temporarily – sometimes for generations, and in terms of ecological impacts perhaps even for many generations.

Socio-political action can and does have value. But we must be wary of over subscribing power to our social actions that they do not have. We need to take care not to grasp after permanence in what is not permanent. If we can give up the conceited notion that there are permanent solutions to human suffering, and that somehow we are destined to get there, we can begin to fashion ways of living that integrate the incredible ingenuity of human kind with deep humility. We can stop arrogantly overreaching ourselves in projects which pit an inflated human will against reality, that seek to repress mortality, that vainly deny the limits we live within, and apply our creativity to living with a renewed maturity.

### **Ecological liberation**

As well as helping us to shape socio-political vision, the shift towards both honouring human potential and finding within ourselves a renewed and deep humility supports ecological liberation.

As I said earlier, ecological, liberation simply means refusing the human conceit that we are somehow above and separate to nature, or that we have dominion over it. It means resisting actions that arise out of that human arrogance, and creating ways of living that heal us from it. It would be a ridiculous conceit to think that nature somehow needs us to liberate it.

I remember taking a long walk a few years ago, turning over in my mind and heart yet another drop of information about the ecological destruction being caused by our social trajectory. At one point I sat on an outcrop on the high ridge of the Serra de Carreau that runs east-west above the ecodharma centre. As I looked out across the majesty of that landscape, I felt that mix of pain and numbness that such reflections can give rise to. But as I sat a pair of Alpine

Chuffs swooped into view. Playing and diving as chuffs do. They are such agile and intelligent birds. And something in their play transformed my experience.

They broke me out for a moment from my anthropocentric anxieties. They revealed a quality in nature that is not reducible to our human concerns. They reminded me that in a sense nature is, and always will be, wild. That it has an integral value in itself, irreducible to our ways of understanding the world.

Nature needs nothing from us. In a sense it is complete in itself in ways we can scarcely imagine, but of which we can feel the resonance. Plum blossom needs no liberating, nor is it on a path to liberation. Liberation is only a human concern. It is only us that need to resolve our struggles with freedom.

But part of our own liberation requires us to honour the integral value of nature beyond our own views about what it is. And ensure that our personal actions protect nature from our delusive ways of living, ensure that our socio-economic systems are transformed to honour that integral value in nature, and stop reducing it to something for our exploitation.

There is something about reality that is always wild. And we need to discover ways of living that are not at odds with that wildness – to stop vainly asserting our petty views and ways on that reality through deluded action.

Ecological liberation demands we make that shift away from anthropocentrism (a human-centred conviction – that we are special and fundamentally different from nature). It encourages us to decentralize the world. It shifts the gravitational centre of meaning away from our self and redistributes it. It asks us to step into a world where reality no longer revolves around our belief and understanding, but which also takes account of the diversity, fecundity, and the irreducibility of the wild.

This kind of decentralising of the world challenges us at two levels: both emotionally and cognitively.

- Emotionally it challenges us in terms of desire. It asks us to open up to the way that the world does not conform to how we want it to be – and that perhaps it never will.
- Cognitively it challenges us in terms of our views. It demands we begin to recognize that the world is not reducible to the way we think it is, and that it never will be.

This shift away from the anthropocentric asks us acknowledge that we and nature are not separate, and in terms of action asks us to act in basic solidarity with all of life. Perhaps we can begin to get a sense of what the rainforest activist John Seed is getting at when he says that he doesn't experience himself as someone try to save the rainforest. He experiences himself as that part of the rainforest most recently emerged into consciousness protecting itself.

### **Letting go**

There is something integral to liberation in Buddhist terms that is about letting go. Many key teachings concerning liberation in Buddhism emphasise that. The Heart Sutra says:

So know that the Bodhisattva  
 Holding to nothing whatever,  
 But dwelling in Prajna wisdom,  
 Is freed of delusive hindrance,  
 Rid of the fear bred by it,  
 And reaches clearest Nirvana.

As Dilgo Khyentse's statement reminds us, true letting go does not lead to a quietistic endpoint: "When we recognise the empty nature, the energy to benefit others dawns, effortless and uncontrived."

It is through this profound letting go that truly creative and compassionate action arises. But letting go is not easy, and rarely happens all at once. It tends to be incremental. We edge forwards. We pull back. We need the right conditions that support the confidence to really let go or what in Buddhist terms is called *sraddha*.

**Comfort Zone – Learning Zone – Panic Zone** : A useful scheme to explore this is the simple idea of three spheres, which represent the Comfort Zone, the Learning Zone, and the Panic Zone. (see flipchart – and audio version for this section).

Flourishing as human animals involves us being in conditions that enable us to find the nourishment of the comfort zone, while also being supported to step into the learning zone again and again. That's how we evolve and develop. Some of these conditions are internal, and others are external to us. Buddhist practice helps us to set up the internal conditions to keep stepping into the Learning Zone and to expand it. But social conditions also play an important role. So, before concluding, I want to touch back into the social dimension of liberation, how the social is a necessary condition for really letting go.

As I said, although supportive social conditions might be temporary, we do need to create them as a support for human flourishing.

### **Social insecurity**

It is easy to see what happens to us amidst conditions of social insecurity. All too often they throw us into the panic zone. Economic uncertainty, precarity of employment, insecure housing, atomised communities – all play into the hands of closing us down. It is a recognisable social phenomenon that social insecurity breeds fear, and commonly the fear based politics of right wing populism, nationalistic self-interest, xenophobia, and racism. It is as if the clubbing together against a phantasmagoric threat offers a surrogate sense of unity to replace the real sense of connection that's integral to human wellbeing.

The globalisation of Late Capitalist Neoliberalism has especially added to these experiences of precarity in society today - corroding the values of community and civil society, often leading to a withdrawal from public life. Consumerism has replaced meaningful participation in shaping our shared social sphere, and we've seen an increasing withdrawal from political life.

The classic reference is Robert Putnam's extensive survey, *Bowling Alone*, which amongst other data graphs the drop off of membership in most voluntary association in America during the neoliberal period.<sup>i</sup> In his excellent book, *Prosperity Without Growth*, Tim Jackson claims,

*“more generally, western society appears to be in the grip of a ‘social recession’. There is surprising agreement on this from across the political spectrum. For example, Johnathan Rutherford, a commentator from the political left, points to rising rates of anxiety and clinical depression, increased alcoholism and binge drinking, and a decline of morale at work. Jesse Norman, from the political right, highlights the breakdown of community, a loss of trust across society and rising political apathy.”<sup>iii</sup>*

And these views are backed up by research. Where neoliberalism has been most vigorously pursued in Europe, namely the UK, the European Social Survey shows significantly greater break down of trust than in countries which have pursued neoliberal policy less vigorously. One of the authors of a Sheffield University study of community claimed that ‘even the weakest communities in 1971 were stronger than any community now’.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Selfishness and altruism**

Of course, most of this can be testified to in our own experience, and is unlikely to come as any surprise to Buddhists. The Dharma points out that human nature is conditioned. We are capable of both selfishness and altruism, and in fact both these capabilities play a crucial adaptive evolutionary function in our survival. Jackson points out that:

“Each society strikes the balance between altruism and selfishness (and also between novelty and tradition) in different places. And where this balance is struck depends crucially on social structure. When technologies, infrastructures, institutions and social norms reward self-enhancement and novelty, then selfish sensation-seeking behaviours prevail over more considered, altruistic ones. Where social structures favour altruism and tradition, self-transcending behaviours are rewarded and selfish behaviour may even be penalized.”<sup>iv</sup>

Basic economic justice and security, as well as empowering social settings, supporting a sense of connection and community are needed to create the conditions for people to thrive. To support people to develop, to be nourished and able to step into the learning zone in their lives we need these supportive social settings. And create those conditions is what social engagement is all about.

### **Reclaiming the possibility of change**

But in a way perhaps we first need to reclaim the possibility! As Mark Fischer writes in his excellent and recommendable paper, *Capitalist Realism*, “for most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizon of the thinkable.”<sup>v</sup> We are left as spectators on the side line, enduring what Fischer calls a ‘reflexive impotence’. This demise of an alternative vision and potency was stunningly articulated by Frederick Jameson in the quote I mentioned earlier: *“It is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.”*<sup>vi</sup>

But it’s important to recognise, that whilst we can’t determine the outcomes of our actions, our social agency can count. That social change is possible.

We can often forget the important achievements of earlier social movements. We often take them for granted, or lose sight of those achievements as they are co-opted and claimed by those in political power. Whilst we still face many challenges, it is valuable to recollect how far

we have come, how many times we have won, and how much we have inherited from social movements of the past.

So, another quote that Lawrence Cox presented me with recently comes from Ken MacLeod.

“Hey, this is Europe. We took it from nobody; we won it from the bare soil that the ice left. The bones of our ancestors, and the stones of their works are everywhere. Our liberties were won in wars and revolutions so terrible that we do not fear our governors; they fear us. Our children giggle and eat ice cream in the palaces of past rulers. We snap our fingers at kings. We laugh at popes. When we have built up tyrants, we have brought them down.”

Beneficial change does happen. It has happened. And it is happening as people come together in collective efforts of many sorts. There is a growing movement for social and ecological justice. And connecting with that movement, connecting with each other we can empower each other to support more change. We don't know what the outcome will be, but connecting, empowering each other, and opening up possibilities for liberation are also ways of truly flourishing in themselves. And for me they are integral to meaningful dharma practice in our present times.

### **Conclusion**

When we talk about Buddhism we can often forget that it is not monolithic, that it is, in fact, a tradition of incredible richness and variety. Throughout its history it's adapted to all sorts of cultural settings. Buddhism has continuously evolved and re-shaped itself. Its forms have mutated and changed to keep its basic truths and methodologies responsive to the differing needs in different places and cultures: The baroque feudality of Buddhism in Tibet, the austerity and simple aesthetic of Chan, the contrasting formality of institutional Theravada and the shamanic aura of the forest renunciate, all reveal the creativity of the tradition. But as well as blossoming with relevance and usefulness, Buddhism has also, at times withered into reactionary and stifling forms, such as the ethnic bigotry of some Sinhalese Buddhism, or the warmongering of Japanese Zen in the 1940's.

Again today we see Buddhism changing its shape, applying its heart teachings to our times. A few decades ago it might have made some sense to talk about Western Buddhism. But what does that really mean in an age of globalisation?

In recent years, in most of the countries where Buddhism is newly taking root, globalisation has meant the globalisation of Late Capitalism. And there is a danger that contemporary

Buddhism, adapting itself to be relevant to the specific historical conditions of our times, actually becomes not Western Buddhism, but a Late Capitalist Buddhism.

Rather than Buddhism bringing its radically transformative energy to meet this late capitalist world as a force for much needed change, it could so easily be that Buddhism is actually degenerated by the power of contemporary socio-economic forces. It could so easily be that Buddhism actually becomes colonised by the influence of late capitalist society.

The dharma is not immune to the coopting power of capitalism – which has so far shown itself to be, undoubtedly, the most dynamic and potent socio-economic formation in human history. And we'd be naive to believe that our approach to dharma practice is insulated from the influence of our education and socialisation. The ubiquitous sway of neo-liberalism and consumerism, emphasising individualistic and narcissistic preoccupations, powerfully shapes our interpretation of the world – and almost inevitably colours our interpretation of Buddhism.

In Buddhist circles in recent years there's been plenty of criticism of Slavoj Žižek's presentation of Western Buddhism, which, he claims,

“[presents] itself as the remedy against the stress of capitalism's dynamics – by allowing us to uncouple and retain some inner peace – it actually functions as the perfect ideological supplement [to capitalism].”

Žižek's critics have got a few things right (his take on Buddhism is superficial at times, and suggests a rather limited familiarity with the tradition). Nevertheless, he does highlight a distinct danger. There are tendencies within Buddhist practice that can lead us into dead ends. And in a late-capitalist world these dangers are super-charged.

There is a crucial question for Buddhists today. It is like the challenge that met the Catholic Church in Latin America in the 1960's. The social injustices of their situation asked the question: Whose side are you on? It was out of answering that question that Liberation Theology arose. Liberation Theology went on to make important contributions to civil society, contributing to a social landscape in which the recent shift towards more socially progressive politics in South America could take place. Similarly our times ask us, what side is the dharma on?

I hope in these talks I have made it clear where we position ecodharma. We're bringing the dharma into relationship with the aspects of contemporary culture that we can call an emerging ecological paradigm. It is an approach that recognises that the connection, empowerment and liberation of individuals, communities, society, and the ecological are necessarily interlinked. It is a vision that can help us to resist the social and ecological damage wrought by the Late Capitalist order, that can support us to create alternative ways of living that are in solidarity with life, with nature and with each other – and which can support us to truly flourish as human animals to discover our deep potential for authentic liberation.

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the collapse and renewal of American Community*, New York, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> Tim Jackson, *Prosperity Without Growth*, Earthscan, 2011, p144.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, p145.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid*, p163.

<sup>v</sup> Mark Fischer, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Zero Books, 2009, p8.

<sup>vi</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Future City*, in *New Left Review* 21, May 2003.