

Introduction

DID YOU HEAR? Charles Darwin has invited Siddhartha Gautama to hike the Appalachian Trail through the Great Smoky Mountains. How would you like to join them and eavesdrop on the conversation—just about any topic is imaginable. Maybe you will even have the opportunity to ask a question or two. I have reserved a place for you on this expedition. Of course, you will have to pay attention as well as carry your own food and your own tent, and you may even learn something about forests and camping as we follow the conversation.

Yes, Darwin and the Buddha, on one trail. For some reason, people seem determined to draw a firm line between secular and spiritual life. Over the years I have enjoyed many expositions and books on the teachings of Darwin, and it is clear that his work has a great deal to say about why humans behave the way they do. I have also enjoyed many expositions on the teachings of the Buddha, and it is apparent that the practical instructions of his Eightfold Path also have a great deal to say about why humans behave the way they do. Indeed, both world views have more in common than you might first suppose. This is because both are grounded in describing what *is*. Not what we wish were true, but what *is*. So, both men have a lot to talk about when it comes to the human condition.

Overall, I have found that most Buddhist writers and visiting Buddhist teachers know only half the story. Indeed, attempts to bring science into Buddhism usually mention not biology but physics, and the ‘physics’ is often just painfully inaccurate or an irrelevant use of words, such as relativity or quantum mechanics. We are, however, biological beings, and in this conversation I wanted to focus on human biology and behaviour and how this relates to meditation practice altogether. Overall, this book began with the intention of assisting Buddhists who need some knowledge of

how their meditation practices are rooted in human evolution and how they should rouse themselves to be more useful in protecting wild nature. The selection of topics was, therefore, somewhat directed by my personal experience of areas where biology and history have something useful to say to one another.

As the book progressed, it struck me that it might also work the other way around, rather like a reversible jacket. That is, the book might equally be useful to secular readers who are curious about whether Buddhism has anything useful to say about our lives as modern human beings. Where else, I wondered, could readers obtain an introduction to Buddhist practices that is grounded in biological reality rather than mythology? Or a book that not only talks about compassion for all living beings but dares to include those non-human beings living in rainforests and on coral reefs? There was not a single book in my library that could fill this role. This book does it.

During the project, it further occurred to me that this book might also be helpful to an emerging third audience—younger people who are struggling to understand their lives and their place in society, and who know rather little about either Darwin or the Buddha. Knowing a little more about both these extraordinary men will actually assist each of us to lead a life that has less suffering and more sanity. Such a view of life may also help us understand why certain problematic behaviours keep emerging, both in ourselves and in others. It may even provide some guidance on how to work with problems more skilfully. Life is not easy, and both Darwin and the Buddha have something to say about why we find this to be the case. They were both keen observers of the human condition. Darwin was perhaps more interested in how people came to be in the first place, particularly in their exterior form (although he did write a good deal on human emotions). The Buddha, living earlier, was mostly interested in what people experienced, and hence tended to focus more on what we might call the interior of their lives. So, this book is perched on the edge—looking outward into wild nature and inward into human nature. The book, therefore, offers a kind of binocular vision. Since binocular vision is common in the animal kingdom, it apparently has certain merits. And we know that binoculars are very helpful when you are making acquaintance with wild nature.

The manuscript has been a long-term project and a difficult one. I am now going to tell you a little bit more about how it came to be and my qualifications to write such a book. My guide for this introduction is George Bernard Shaw, who wrote many a long preface to his books and

plays. If you don't like a long opening, then just jump to Chapter 1. There is also a short section on the basic teachings of Darwin and those of the Buddha which you may find helpful as a quick review prior to leaping into the first chapter.

Let us return to the topic of audience. The first challenge has been a practical one: how do you write one book for some quite different audiences? The point is to bring people together, not to create dissention. I continually wrestled with this challenge.

First let us consider the original audience for this manuscript, fellow Buddhists. There are Buddhists with whom I have practiced for decades who seem fearful that talking about Darwin is an attempt to explain away their spiritual life. Some of them seem to despise modern science and, instead, seem to be attempting to resurrect a medieval view of reality. An example. Some years ago, at a Buddhist retreat for families in Vermont, I was invited by some parents to lead a 'nature walk' for the children so they could be introduced to the surrounding forest. Just as I was getting under way, a senior staff person hustled out of the main building and told me in front of the children that I would have to stop immediately for I was undoing her work with the children's minds. (Yes, it surprised me so much that I really did surrender to that authority figure and let her take the children back into the building.) If only that incident were an exception. Instead, I keep meeting practitioners who seem to prefer emoting and virtue signalling to the use of evidence-based thinking. Such people are actually causing themselves (and others) harm. The current human situation absolutely requires each of us to have at least a passing familiarity with topics including evolutionary biology, the biological basis of human hierarchies, the fundamental differences between eggs and sperm, the importance of X and Y chromosomes, and the urgent need to protect wild nature. These and other biological topics have a profound impact on how we view ourselves and how we treat one another as well. Let me repeat this point: some familiarity with certain aspects of basic biology will help Buddhist practitioners with their own lives, and it will simultaneously help them to be better neighbours for other living beings. The Bodhisattva vow, after all, is a commitment to care for all living beings, which includes whales and rhinoceros and sea turtles, not to mention wilderness areas altogether. Is it possible that some or even many people are misunderstanding the Buddhist path and using it as an excuse to withdraw from reality and avoid caring for wild places and wild creatures? That is currently an open question.

Now for the scientists. There are biologists I have worked with for decades who probably wonder why a serious scholar with a reputation for empiricism would be involved with Buddhism at all. Here, for them, is part of the explanation. We are living at a time when humans desperately need solid, basic science to guide conservation and the wise use of the Earth, yet basic science is seriously distorted by greed and egotism. I have actually written scientific papers about the degree to which basic science in ecology is being distorted by human behaviour, and it was these concerns that inspired me to look more into Buddhist meditation in the first place. It offers a kind of experiential window into the inner workings of the human mind. Of course we need good science to solve (certain) environmental problems, but throwing money at problems may actually increase the distortion inherent in those problems. An example. I worked in Louisiana on coastal wetlands restoration for eight years and would have to say that greed, self-delusion and egotism were huge problems. In fact, you could say that a system ostensibly set up to restore coastal wetlands had, instead, become corrupted into a program that allowed professors to supplement their retirement funds and universities to bleed off federal money to construct new buildings and pay their administrators. The fate of the wetlands themselves and the wild creatures in them had become quite irrelevant. Mardi Gras and plastic beads were a far higher priority. The coastal restoration system, then, had become distorted by what the Buddha called 'the three poisons': greed (for federal money), ignorance (of good science) and aggression (toward anyone who pointed out the flaws in the system). The restoration venture had thus become a vivid illustration of what the Buddha called *samsara*. When I was a young scientist, I genuinely believed that if we understood the science behind environmental problems, conservation would naturally follow. Forty years later, my life experience intrudes and says that it might not be so. It may indeed be the case that effective responses to obvious problems are being delayed by human behaviours that are deeply rooted in the past. Some of these behaviours were diagnosed by Gautama Buddha two and half millennia ago. How might our success at conservation improve if we had a better familiarity with human emotive states? I use the word familiarity on purpose: it is one thing for us to know about recent advances in psychology, some of which I mention here, but it is quite another to feel them acting in our own minds. It is like the difference between seeing an alligator in a book and meeting one in person while wading chest-deep in a wetland.

At this point you may ask, how is it possible that one can write for two such apparently-different audiences? Perhaps it is a foolish errand and will just annoy both. What has kept me going on this project is the conviction that beneath the differences there are real common interests: how do we accept our limitations, how do we live as decent people, how do we organize compassionate societies, and how do we care for all the other sentient beings with whom we share the planet? Modern terms like intersectionality and our fascination with diversity are mostly just excuses for us to ignore our common interests as human beings. Speaking of caring for all sentient beings, this does not just mean your friends, relatives and pets, but rhinos, elephants, sea turtles, salamanders and tree frogs, and even more humble creatures. I am surprised how little attention they receive from my fellow Buddhists. The whole Buddhist path, says Bhikkhu Bodhi, is anchored in having *Right View*. Part of that right view surely includes a view of life expansive enough to include the biological nature that is inside us, and the wild nature that is outside us.

Overall, it seems as if biology and spirituality still each have their own communities and there is little meaningful exchange. If anything, the gulf may have actually widened over the past decade. My secular friends and fellow biologists mostly seem to avoid ‘religion’ as a topic of conversation, probably for fear of causing offense or perhaps from simple lack of interest. Yet many of these same friends have a deeply spiritual relationship with wild nature, which is no small matter. So they take long canoe trips or hike in the mountains or go camping. Such trips might be enriched by some appreciation of how our own mind conditions our experience and how it is that we find the experience desirable. We don’t even need to bring up the name of the Buddha. And, further, many spiritual leaders have, themselves, spent time alone in the wilderness, including Jesus and St. Francis of Assisi. Many of my secular friends have spent more time in the wilderness than my Buddhist friends, and I think my Buddhist friends have missed something important. But wilderness trips themselves can easily be distorted by the human ego, as when they turn into athletic endurance contests aimed at covering as many miles as possible in a day or opportunities to display high-tech camping gadgets. The same is true of other activities. Even academic science and conservation biology might, as noted, have better outcomes if we were less fixated on our sense of self-importance, the size of our grants, and our desire to climb in the academic hierarchy. Overall, then, self-examination is likely to be useful in even the most secular life.

And now for the third audience, younger people. Although I have lived in the forest for a decade, I do see younger people as visitors and at various events. I am continually struck by how little they seem to know about history, biology, or Buddhism. The internet and social media seem to be drowning out important information in a sea of ephemeral thoughts and emotions, each up-voted or down-voted. Hence, the social media seem, by and large, to be increasing the amount of human confusion. Indeed, if we take the view that the Buddhist path opens us up to experience our own confusion, it is just possible from this perspective that the internet has become a kind of amplifier, creating levels and styles of confusion that the Buddha himself could not have imagined. Apparently many young people also have little connection with wild nature. I come to this conclusion from hundreds of causal conversations where I have paid careful attention to topics that arise. Few incidents of real wild nature enter into conversation naturally. Sometimes I deliberately raise the topic by asking something apparently innocent. Questions like, “What was the first bird you saw this spring?” or “Which park did you last hike in?” are met all too often with a strange look as if I had asked about their recent descent into a black hole. Here is the awful conclusion that I have been forced to accept: it is not just that they have nothing to say, but that they do not even understand why I am asking. Of course, I am testing whether they are connected to reality. Each interaction with wild nature connects our mind to what *is*. Overall, I tend to think that we are now seeing one of the opportunity costs of the internet: every hour online is an hour not spent interacting with real birds or real plants or real forests. It is even possible that some kinds of meditation actually harm such people, by further detaching them from reality. In some essential way, reality itself is a part of the path and wild nature is therefore necessary for sanity.

My purpose here, for all these audiences, is to present some basic Buddhist teachings on the human condition and some basic human biology and history, then explore why humans are the way they are and why we experience the world in a confused way, and finally look at how this affects the way we live our lives and what this might have to do with the future of all the other species with whom we share this planet. This inquiry may not make everyone happy. Science is not the search for happiness or pleasure, but the search for truth. The same might be said for the teachings of the Buddha. To pick a third authority figure, even Jesus said that the truth would set us free. He did not say that the truth would bring us pleasure or find us a soul mate or pay off our mortgage.