



NATURE & EGO

THE ULTIMATE VALUE of any spiritual path, at least according to Buddhists, is measured by the degree to which the confusion and suffering generated by ego have been subdued. The great Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, Dilgo Khyentse, who taught in North America on several occasions, emphasized that all mind-training has a single goal—the subjugation of ego-clinging. The extent to which we have been able to overcome self-attachment is, he says, the only way to judge the progress in one's spiritual practices.

There is, in fact, a dangerous tendency for spiritual practices to have the reverse effect. Spirituality can often reinforce ego-clinging and self-importance. It can create spiritual materialism. The way in which we use spiritual practices and labels to make ourselves seem more important was thoroughly described in Trungpa Rinpoche's book,

CUTTING THROUGH SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM

Here in Louisiana, my sons are annoyed when I watch the religious channels on the satellite television, but the harangues and appeals to be found therein often remind me of what to guard against in my own meditation practice. Those who are self-righteous show us how ego can harness even spiritual energy to pursue its own self-centered agenda.

A spiritual path is supposed to help subdue ego. Remarkably, many of the greatest challenges to egocentric views come not from spiritual teachers but from scientific materialists. What a great insult it was to the human ego to admit that the Earth was not the center of the solar system. (Indeed, much of the opposition to Galileo arose from the fear that if humans did not believe the Earth was the center of the solar system, humans would equally question the authority of kings and popes.) The great insult offered by Galileo contin-

ues to manifest itself. A stream of electronic messages now flows back from remote space vehicles, revealing the stunning landscapes found on the other planets and moons in our solar system. Those planets and moons exist in their own remote splendor. Perhaps that is why so many of these photographs are now ignored by the media—the photos remind us too painfully that this day to day dream we call conscious life is probably trivial in comparison to the ice fields of Mars or the oceans of Europa.

But there is even a greater insult to egocentric views. It is Darwin's discovery of evolution. We now know that all living organisms, from the flowering plants through insects to whales to humans are part of an interwoven web of life that has proliferated for roughly a billion years. We all have common ancestors. We can detect them within each cell of the human body, buried as mitochondria, or as common gene sequences in our very DNA. This array of life has been produced by the impassive process of natural selection; eons of birth and death, steadily grinding away the genes for those life forms least suited to their environment.

What is the most 'important' group of organisms on Earth? It is not humans, with their petty self-centered egos. Biologists have learned that the most diverse group of organisms is—beetles. There are apparently more kinds of beetles than any other group or life form, and possibly more kinds of beetles on Earth than all other forms of life put together. (I don't recall the book of Genesis having much to say about beetles ...). It is said that when a theologian asked the famous biologist J.B.S. Haldane what he had deduced about the Creator from the study of His Creation, Haldane replied, "An inordinate fondness for beetles." There is another group of living creatures favored by Nature. In terms of sheer mass, the most abundant organisms are plants— 99.9

percent of all the living material on Earth is plant tissue. So what is the purpose of this Nature of which we are all a part? It would seem to be the proliferation of beetles and plants.

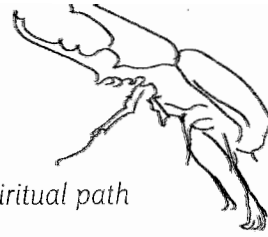
So much, then, for the human ego, which would place ourselves, our families, our nations and our civilizations at the center of something we call history. Why bother with knowledge of human trivia such as sports, or literature, or photo albums, or music? Let us focus on the important things in life. How many kinds of beetles can you name? How many kinds of plants?

THE EGO DESIRES TO BE AT THE CENTER OF SPECIAL CREATION

Much of the virulent anti-evolution activity in the United States is a manifestation of one basic fear: if evolution is accepted, it removes humanity from the center of God's creation. There is no greater insult to the human ego than to accept that the cockroach, the tapeworm, the elephant and the human are all of equivalent "value" to the great scheme of Nature. If there is a heaven, Nature says that ants and parrots and aardvarks have just as much right to a place there as you and me. (My own parish here in Louisiana, with one of the worst education records in the United States, was recently spending its budget not on better salaries for teachers or on new books, but on court appeals. Their objective was to force teachers to read a disclaimer before biology classes stating, in so many words, that the study of biology is not intended to challenge the view that God created man in His own image in six days. Of course. How important it makes each of us seem. The ego loves special creation.)

LINEAGE IN BUDDHISM AND BIOLOGY

When Buddhists do morning chants and recite the



Paul Keddy offers a perspective on scientific materialism as a spiritual path

lineage of great teachers back to the Buddha, we review a few thousand years of history. In contrast, the gymnosperms (the ancient plants that include the pines that carpet both Louisiana and the hills at Karmê-Chöling,) have a lineage that goes back a quarter of a billion years. Gymnosperms saw the dinosaurs come, they saw them go. Those same gymnosperms now have to endure these pesky things called humans, humans who cut gymnosperms down to make paper to write their self-important words and wipe their egocentric butts.

NATURE STUDY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO EGO

The personal study of Nature is a powerful spiritual practice. There is nothing more humbling to the ego that trying to learn all of the more than a thousand species of plants found in one small state. If we cannot even grasp the different types of plants in one tiny region, how limited our minds must be. Similarly, an early morning walk with binoculars challenges us to identify perhaps a dozen different species of migrating spring warblers, among the most colorful birds that live in North America. What is the purpose of a Black-throated Green Warbler? Why is there another called the Black-throated Blue Warbler?

Most humans, and their egocentric minds, remain blissfully unaware that such birds live in our forests. Even when we become aware of such birds, we usually cannot recognize them. Warblers evolved, they diversified, they migrate each year to the north to breed, and each fall they return to the tropics, and they care not a whit for whether humans are conscious, whether humans can identify birds, or whether humans participate in spiritual paths or genocide.

In the exuberance and diversity of life forms, Nature offers us one of the greatest insults to ego-clinging that reality can offer. Every time we see something we cannot

name, it is like a Zen monk striking us to wake us up. "Look," Nature seems to prod, "look at how irrelevant you are, look at how your spiritual path matters less to me than a bark beetle or an oak tree."

Nature makes all human endeavors seem trivial. We cannot be aware of the diversity of living creatures (billions of non-human beings), and the long history of their evolution (billions of years), without feeling small. That is one of the central teachings of biology— we are merely small pieces of meat on a rock circling a minor sun. That is what is— but there is no need to be ashamed of what we are. It is perfectly fine as it is. Gymnosperms do not apologize for growing their seeds in cones, beetles do not apologize for having wing covers, and Black-throated Green Warblers do not apologize for migrating each year. We do not have to apologize for being a short-lived speck of conscious meat (albeit with opposable thumbs) in a vast Cosmos.

But we can turn away from such vastness and the fear of our insignificance. The more we can wrap ourselves in our personal dramas and those of our families and friends, the more we can inflate our ego. That is why we practice mindfulness and awareness of life. That is why we return our mind again and again to our place in the Cosmos. Learning to identify and appreciate the millions of life forms around us is, then, a powerful tool for spiritual practice. ■

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