The Arrow explores the relationship between contemplative practice, politics, and activism. We investigate topics in politics, economics, ecology, conflict transformation, and the social sciences. Inspired by the vision of meditation masters Chögyam Trungpa and Sakyong Mipham for a “union of social life and spiritual wakefulness” in society, The Arrow provides a critical and much needed space for investigating the meeting point of contemplative wisdom and pressing issues of climate change, racism, inequality, and conflict.
CONTENTS

VOLUME 5 | ISSUE 1

FEATURE

Contemplating the More-than-Human Commons 4
by Zack Walsh

IN RESPONSE

Social and Ecological Ethics 18
by Asoka Bandarage

Drala of the Landscape: Rights of the River 20
by Rachel DeMotts

Beyond Theory: Relating to Dominant Systems and Manifesting Social Alternatives in Dharma Communities 28
by David Kahane

FICTION

The Tale of Stormtamer 39
by Austin R. Pick

IN RESPONSE

A Buddhist Depiction of Ecological Dystopia 48
by Holly Gayley
Contemplating the More-than-Human Commons

by ZACK WALSH

The Stern Review on The Economics of Climate Change claims that reducing emissions by more than 1 percent annually would generate a severe economic crisis, and yet, climate analysts tell us we need to reduce carbon emissions by 5.3 percent annually to limit global warming to 2°C.1 Moreover, there is no evidence that decoupling economic growth from environmental pressures is possible, and although politicians tout technical solutions to climate crisis, efficiency gains from technology usually increase the absolute amount of energy consumed.2 The stark reality is that capitalist accumulation cannot continue—the global economy must shrink.

Fortunately, there exist many experiments with non-capitalist modes of assessing and exchanging value, sharing goods and services, and making decisions that can help us transition to a more sustainable political economy based on principles of degrowth. One of the best ways to generate non-capitalist subjects, objects, and spaces comes from systems designed to manage common pool resources like the atmosphere, ocean, and forests. Commons-based systems depend upon self-governance and reciprocity. People rely on and take responsibility for each other, finding mutually beneficial ways to fulfill their needs. This also allows communities to define the guidelines and incentives for guiding their own economic behavior, affording people more autonomy and greater opportunity for protecting and cultivating shared values. Commons-based systems cut across the private/public, market/state dichotomy and present alternative economic arrangements defined by communities.
According to David Bollier, “As the grand, centralized market/state systems of the 20th century begin to implode through their own dysfunctionality, the commons will more swiftly step into the breach by offering more local, convivial and trusted systems of survival.” Already, there is evidence of this happening. The commons is spreading rapidly among communities hit hardest by recent financial crises and the failures of austerity policies. In response to the failures of the state and market, many crisis-stricken areas, especially in Europe and South America, have developed solidarity economies to self-manage resources, thus insulating themselves from systemic shocks in the future. It seems likely that a community’s capacity to share will be crucial to its survival on a wetter, hotter, and meaner planet.

From the perspective of researchers, there are several different ways to define the commons. In most cases, the commons are understood to be material objects. For example, the atmosphere and ocean are global commons, because they are resources we must all learn to regulate and share collectively. This notion of the commons as material resource goes hand-in-hand with another notion that the commons can be both material and immaterial, a product of either nature or culture. Using this second definition enhances our appreciation for what is often undervalued by traditional economic measures such as care work, shared knowledge production, and cultural preservation. Together, both these perspectives are helpful in devising political and economic strategies for managing the commons, which remains the dominant interest of most commons researchers and policymakers.

Nevertheless, whether material or immaterial, the commons are viewed as a given concept or thing, ignoring that more fundamentally they are generated by social practices. In other words, there are no commons without commoners to enact them. From an enactive perspective, commons are not objects, but actions generated by many different actors in relationship. Whereas the prior notions assume that individuals need to be regulated and punished to prevent overconsumption (an assumption known as the tragedy of the commons), an enactive perspective on commons conceives the individual in relation to everyone (and everything) involved in co-managing the more-than-human commons. It therefore diverges from the prior two notions in assuming a relational epistemology rather than being premised on a liberal epistemology based on the individual. From a Buddhist perspective, one could say that the commons emerges co-dependently with a field
of objects, forces, and passions entangling the human and nonhuman, living and non-living, organic and machinic.

The more-than-human commons thus does not dualistically separate the material and immaterial commons, the commons (as object) from the commoners (as subjects), nor does it separate humans from nonhumans. Instead, the commons are always understood as a more-than-human achievement, neither wholly produced by nature or culture. Commoning becomes, as Bayo Akomolafe points out, a material-discursive doing shaped by practices and values that engage humans with their environments. In *Patterns of Commoning*, David Bollier and Silke Helfrich argue that all commons exceed conceptual distinctions, because they are not things; rather, they are another way of being, thinking about, and shaping the world. Commoning is about sharing the responsibility for stewardship with the intent to construct a fair, free, and sustainable world—a goal that is all the more important given the unequal distribution of risks posed by intensifying climate change.

Examples of commoning vary widely according to local needs and customs. In the Vrancea Mountains of Romania, for instance, commoners have been managing the forests since the sixteenth century. Today, 65,000 hectares of forest are managed by village assemblies pro-
viding villagers equal access and rights to the forest. Harvested wood is either used for local consumption or sold, with all profits reinvested in local infrastructure, thereby preventing the state, market, and local officials from exploiting people and the land through unsustainable logging practices. For the villagers, “managing the forest is not all about calculations, performance, material value and revenues. It is also about affective relationships and symbolic meaning as reflected in collective memory, tradition and identity.”

The inner dynamics of commoning preclude simple definitions of the commons, because as a practice, commoning shapes who we become. Particular commons can only be understood in their actual, embedded social and ecological circumstances, and in the subjective and emotional experience of those involved in commoning. In another forest commons in Rajasthan, India, villagers collectively tend the forest by mindfully cutting enough wood to sustain their multiple needs while ensuring the restoration of forest wealth. Both nature and culture are generative of the commons, and commoning describes the practice of responsibly relating to agential forces, human and non-human alike. In Bolivia, for instance, the Cochabamba water committees “share the same basic commitment to water as a living being, as something divine, as the basis for mutuality and complementarity.” Similarly, the Quechua communities in Peru design political and socioeconomic systems, called ayllu, to link individuals with the land, each other, and the spirit world. Their spiritual traditions and cultural values (embodied within a unique cosmovision) are integral to their cultivation techniques, barter and exchange practices, and stewardship of the agroecological region.

Commoning not only creates sustainable systems—it also has the potential to birth entire new lifeways and worldviews premised on relationality and reciprocity. It generates worlds where we commune with each other and with the environment, as if every object is also a subject—a being worthy of our respect. To avoid civilizational collapse, Bhikkhu Bodhi says, we need to accept a relational worldview that affirms subjectivity across all life forms and indeed the cosmos itself, so that we view everything as a subject with its own experience and intrinsic value. To move beyond the notion of the commons as an object, either of nature (material) or culture (immaterial), one must critically examine present-day definitions of nature and culture—what we may alternatively call nature-cultures—and reassess the human-nature relationship in light of its history and our contemporary predicament.
Today’s socio-ecological crises have arisen from particular beliefs, lifestyles, institutions, and power structures that encourage unsustainable dynamics between humans and nature. Recent debates concerning the origins and significance of the Anthropocene have heightened global interest in better understanding this relationship. One of the main challenges to our understanding is of an epistemological nature. The very concept of Nature in the modern period was constituted by the separation of humans from nonhumans. This separation jointly promulgated speciesm and racism, since the ways in which we classify various animals and humans directs our ways of caring for them. Whether species are considered alien, invasive, or pests and whether people are likewise considered subhuman, foreign, or Other depends on categories that order life to establish places of belonging. Those who are excluded, whether the colonized species or peoples of this planet, are similarly objectified and treated instrumentally, as either natural or human resources. Capitalism’s appropriation and exploitation of nature extends this logic on a global scale via the biopolitical control of human and nonhuman populations.

In contrast to the separation and management of nature by humans, an alternative relational understanding of nature-cultures has emerged from discourses on the Anthropocene. Enlightenment views of Man and Nature are clearly breaking down and new lenses have appeared that view the Earth as a product of civilizational history, as much as natural history, and that view humanity as inhabited by other species and technologies. Posthumanists like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti as well as new materialists and process thinkers like Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, and Bruno Latour have become particularly interested in understanding the co-production of nature-cultures. For instance, Timothy Morton uses “mesh” as an apt metaphor for the entanglement of human and nonhuman objects, whether at the micro-level of gut bacteria or the macro-level of climate change. The defining environmental objects of our time, he argues, are hyper-objects which are distributed, non-local assemblages of human and nonhuman objects. Global warming is the quintessential hyper-object. It both surrounds us and is reflected in us. We can neither locate it, nor escape it; but we can know it intimately through the air we breathe and the products we purchase. It brings us face to face with the more-than-human commons.
One may even argue that humans have always been more-than-human—inhabited by other species both in our phylogenetic structure and experience. On the one hand, evolutionary theory has illustrated that every species’ genome is a mosaic of genes from other unrelated species, transferred horizontally from one organism to another, rather than just vertically from parent to child. On the other hand, human-animal studies have explored ways in which humans are materially and discursively dependent on non-humans. Because climate change contests and reconfigures long-standing distinctions between the human, social, and natural sciences, the anthropocentric worldviews that have afforded humanity an exceptional identity and status must now give way to more embodied and situated knowledge-practices that view humanity in ecological terms. Expanding the notion of stewardship beyond anthropocentric lenses thus expands the discipline of political economy beyond the human sciences to the life sciences.

The Anthropocene does not just inaugurate a time when humanity’s impact on nature is experienced viscerally and globally. It also inaugurates a time when shaping the environment is understood to fundamentally shape what it means to be human. Human bodies are now understood to have no discernible limits with their environment. Consciousness and ecology cannot be separated, but are continuous and extended. Geological reality has become human reality. Subjectivity and agency are now understood to be distributed across vast human-nonhuman assemblages, and humanity is situated within networked sets of social, biological, and technical relations.

Of course, we have always coevolved with socio-technical advances, whether through the advent of writing, guns, or computers. Now, however, the scale and pace of change is increasing and we are witnessing important qualitative changes. Klaus Schwab, founder and executive chairman of the World Economic Forum, says we stand at the precipice of a Fourth Industrial Revolution, in which new technologies fuse the physical, biological, and digital worlds. Our consciousness is now unloaded on smart devices and our lives are increasingly mediated by sophisticated brain-machine interfaces, smart algorithms, and biochemical devices.

These ongoing shifts in our cultural and scientific understanding of the human-nature relationship illustrate our together-ness with environments, objects, and nonhumans. But of course, there are many antecedent intellectual traditions that have explored such territory outside Western discourses. Many aboriginal peoples and premodern
cultures practice embodied forms of knowing. These forms of knowing are often situated within relational worldviews that conceive humans as part of nature, and nature as not ontologically divided from humans, but as already co-constituted by humans and nonhumans. Buddhism is one such tradition that challenges the epistemological and ontological basis of Enlightenment thinking and the various bifurcations of nature/culture, subject/object, and mind/matter. Shinto Buddhism’s view of sentience, for example, is extended to both animate and inanimate matter; while Zen Master Dōgen famously claimed that mind is not other than mountains, rivers, the earth, sun, moon, or stars.18

Despite these alternative lineages of understanding, the legacy of a human-nature dichotomy persists. The wild and scenic images of Nature inherited from the Romantics remain influential among conservationists and consumerists alike. Popular campaigns to promote environmentalism or outdoor recreation likewise share the idea of Nature as a wild place unimpacted by human activity. The human-nature dichotomy was artificial to begin with, but of course, it created certain affordances. It allowed Enlightenment thinkers a means of domination, it allowed Romantics a means of escape, and today, it allows capitalists and consumers a commodity to exploit or derive pleasure from. But just as humans have always been more-than-human (posthuman), nature has always been more-than-nature (postnatural). Humans and nature have always been co-constituted, and this is only more evident today, given the reach of our technologies and the ways in which globalization entangles everything.

It is not surprising then that relational worldviews and ontologies like those found in Buddhism are increasingly relevant for our understanding of humanity’s role in the Anthropocene. The complexity of life in the Anthropocene not only questions the relationship between humans and nature; it also demands the development of an ethics that respects the dignity and agency of nonhuman actors, both living and nonliving. Extending commoning beyond peer-to-peer economics, so that we extend care to every being, becomes possible if it is enacted by commoners who follow an ethics of what I call intra-subjectivity. An ethics of intra-subjectivity demands understanding that nature is not an element separated from us, but co-produced in our daily interactions.19 Environmental ethics that uphold irreducible wholeness and seek reintegration between humans and nature are giving way to an ethics of coming undone. Climate change can more often be immediately experienced by understanding how one’s daily life is always
already implicated in the co-production of (un)sustainable nature-cultures. Next, I will explore how Buddhism and contemplative practice afford resources for developing an ethics of intra-subjectivity in the more-than-human commons.

Ethics of Intra-Subjectivity

An ethics of intra-subjectivity distinguishes itself from the notion of inter-dependence, in so far as it highlights how relationships are not only externally dependent, but internally dependent and always present to one’s inner awareness. Intra-subjectivity thus explains how all beings are related vis-à-vis our experience of one another. Thus, the deeper we connect with our own suffering, the more we realize our suffering’s constituent relation to the suffering of others and the more we act to serve others as extensions of ourselves.

An ethics of intra-subjectivity allows us to more intimately understand how we co-produce nature-cultures and how they may more positively address systemic socio-ecological crises. Developing an ethics of care that extends to the many differently abled, human and non-human, beings in the Anthropocene entails queering our notions of subjectivity and agency. This will help to answer complex questions about what it means to be human, whose lives matter, how we gift and protect human dignity, and how we envision the collective conditions of transformation toward a more convivial and hospitable world.

Commoning is a mode of relating to each other, both materially and interpersonally, through an enhanced understanding of our non-separateness, our co-dependence, and together-ness. Well-established commons that integrate cooperatives and grassroots organizations, such as Cecosesola in Venezuela or Cooperativa Integral Catalana in Spain, provide for the needs of everyone in their diverse communities by practicing transparency, equality, and respect. Building trust and exercising responsibility are the essential ingredients that allow for successful self-management and self-organization. As described by ubuntu, I am because you are. Applied to the Buddhist figure of the bodhisattva, one might understand that one’s liberation is co-produced by another’s liberation, as an entanglement of our worldly and spiritual fates. Expanding inclusivity becomes about enhancing everyone’s freedom—not just the marginalized. And since consciousness is supported and maintained by material infrastructures and desires, material transformation and transformation of consciousness go hand-in-hand.
Though little recognized, commoning also has this dual valence as a pattern of both material and social-spiritual exchange—an exchange between individuals and communities who self-organize and take responsibility for one another. Unlike policy makers who often manage common-pool resources by policing and regulating rational self-interest, commoners themselves manage the commons out of a sense of emotional attachment to the land and community. In the fisheries off the west coast of Scotland, for example, fishermen follow “‘gentlemen’s agreements’ that emerge out of community commitments and obligations.”

Likewise, the open-source and digital commons movements provide evidence of how voluntary exchanges enhance public access to education and resources. The global community of volunteers who share data and information on OpenStreetMap, for example, provides a wide variety of responders with the resources and information on health facilities, government buildings, and public utilities that prove essential to provide disaster relief for those in need.

In both cases, commoners are not acting out of rational self-interest, but rather are taking care of one another’s needs according to a felt sense of commitment to others, human and nonhuman.

Deep resonances already exist between Buddhist and contemplative mindsets and the more-than-human commons. For example, one of Buddhism’s core commitments is to ensure the safety of all beings. Many preconditions of social and ecological crises are created by collective cultures of irresponsibility and unaccountability. Committed Buddhists may thus view diverse forms of commoning as appropriate responses to climate change, whether by practicing commoning through agroecology, arts and culture, digital technology, exchange and credit systems, knowledge production, or in codesigning neighborhood and urban environments. When the state and market do not offer security and refuge, we can provide it for one another; individual irresponsibility can be overcome by taking greater collective responsibility. According to this view, self-care becomes intrinsically tied to other-care, and exchanging one’s self-interest for the interest of others is re-envisioned as caring for oneself in service to the community.

As the bodhisattva would say, liberation will come for all of us, or none of us.

In the case of climate change, awakened bodhisattvas embody the literal meaning of com-passion as suffering-with. They feel the anxiety of the aggrieved and the aggressed—not only the ones who will suffer tomorrow, but the ones who already suffer today. The capacity to disregard climate change is predicated on the abject neglect of those who
already suffer its effects—the climate refugees, the impoverished, and the famished. Opening oneself to vulnerability and suffering is thus a political act of solidarity, because exposing oneself to injustice allows one to relinquish positions of privilege, which in turn liberates the oppressed and provides the conditions for their wellbeing.

Awakening not only means suffering this collective suffering, but being compelled to compassionate action. Com-passion in this sense is not understood exclusively as a subjective disposition—as empathic resonance. It is, as Bhikkhu Bodhi calls it, conscientious compassion, because it “gives birth to a fierce determination to uplift others, to tackle the causes of their suffering, and to establish the social, economic, and political conditions that will enable everyone to flourish and live in harmony.” Studies on virtual reality show that people who feel what life is like from the perspective of plants and animals are more motivated to behave in environmentally friendly ways. Compassion isn’t compassion unless it is embodied, enacted, and extended to others.

Taking responsibility for our active involvement in the Anthropocene also requires that we contemplate our relationship to everyday objects as if they were all-in-us. As Karen Litfin illustrates, meditatively walking around shopping malls can catalyze greater awareness than meditating on the cushion. Not only does my consumption afford me privilege, but my privilege to consume without regard to its social and ecological consequences jeopardizes the survival and wellbeing of marginalized populations, human and nonhuman alike. The practice of contemplating the more-than-human commons is a refusal to disregard these costs.

Tracing commodity chains can be understood as a way to more deeply understand the karma of one’s consumption. Whereas global capitalism thrives off abstraction, separating producers and consumers by great distances and timescales; contemplating the more-than-human commons makes the abstract concrete. By contemplating one’s use of everyday items like computers and iPhones, one sees the histories of colonialism, racism, and environmental harm implicated in their use and production. Likewise, in contemplating climate change, contemplative practices can make the abstract statistical analysis of typical climate communications into concrete experiences. This can help sensitize us to the civilizational upheaval afoot, so that we can move beyond denial toward realistic, morally informed action.

Thich Nhat Hanh has famously said that “now we need a collective enlightenment to stop the course of destruction.” The future Bud-
Similarly, Buddhist and contemplative practices of the future could be understood and practiced as commons. Buddhism’s historic emphasis on personal liberation—in itself a revolution during the Axial Age—would then shift to focus on communal liberation. Likewise, secular mindfulness communities that now emphasize individual happiness and wellbeing could redefine contemplative practices to reflect the full range of human experience, taking into account the undervalued potential of negative emotions and injustice as objects of meditation.

This is an important shift to be making, since contemplating today’s injustices can allow us to recognize false promises. It would help us recognize, for instance, that green tech fixes that encourage greater consumption, that refuse to acknowledge embodied energy costs, and that distract from systemic (structural, behavioral, and cultural) changes hold out the promise of a future predicated on the impoverishment of the present. If we embody an ecological self, Ruben L.F. Habito says, then “we can experience the fact that the mountains are being denuded, the rivers are heavily polluted, [and] the great wide earth is wracked with pain.” Contemplating so-called “dark” realities can help connect us to the more-than-human commons.

When we’re faced with “darkness,” if our impulse is to run away or eliminate it from sight rather than probing deeper and understanding it, then the culture of positivity and hope we’ve built becomes an ideology that squashes critical inquiry and compassionate responses to whatever it opts to disregard. Confronting injustice through contemplative practice allows us to better understand and empathize with the world, beyond our privilege, and gives us the energy to fight injustice, rather than turn a blind eye to it.

Since denial is so widespread, and is promoted by our culture of knee-jerk positivity and hope, people need to be provoked by the strange, dark, and undesirable. After all, the first noble truth is that people have to sit with suffering. Timothy Morton’s *Dark Ecology* extends this truth toward our understanding of intra-subjectivity. He says, “The struggle to have solidarity with lifeforms is the struggle to include specters and spectrality… Dark ecology is… about how do you actually coexist nonviolently with as many beings as possible?” That is as good an aim as any when contemplating the more-than-human commons. As a society, we are by and large not facing up to the suffering of climate change, and until we do, we’ll continue to place hope outside ourselves (in governance and technology) or fall prey to denial.
and despair. To actively heal and transform the suffering of climate change, we have to contemplate our place in the more-than-human commons and take responsibility for our collective wellbeing through practices of commoning.

ZACK WALSH is a PhD candidate in the Process Studies graduate program at Claremont School of Theology. His research is transdisciplinary, exploring process-relational, contemplative, and engaged Buddhist approaches to political economy, sustainability, and China. His most recent writings provide critical and constructive reflection on mindfulness trends, while developing contemplative pedagogies and practices for addressing social and ecological issues. He is a research specialist at Toward Ecological Civilization, the Institute for the Postmodern Development of China, and the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies in Potsdam, Germany. He has also received lay precepts from Fo Guang Shan, an engaged Buddhist organization based in Taiwan, and attended numerous meditation and monastic retreats in Thailand, China, and Taiwan. For further information and publications, please connect: https://cst.academia.edu/ZackWalsh, https://www.facebook.com/walsh.zack, and https://www.snclab.ca/category/blog/contemplative-ecologies/.
Notes


21. A Nguni Bantu term meaning ‘humanity’ that informs Southern African philosophy


At the root of the climate crisis is the disjunction between the exponential development of the capitalist economy and the lack of an equivalent development in ethics and morality. Human and environmental sustainability requires social action based on a transformation of consciousness, from a dualistic to an ecological worldview that recognizes humanity as part of nature and the inherent equality of all human beings.

To avoid further environmental and social collapse and conflict, it is important to recognize the history and realities of social hierarchy, domination, and oppression. Instead of speaking of a collective “we” in the context of climate action, it is necessary to explore the differential responsibilities and burdens borne by different communities for the climate and related crises. The North–South conflict over climate mitigation speaks to this reality. It is the privileged groups, especially those at the top of the global social hierarchy, that need to shift away from their egotistical consciousness and consumption, and instead share more within the global commons. Indeed, countries, communities, and social classes that are heavily dependent on the arms trade, fossil fuels, and other harmful industries bear a greater responsibility to change.

Instead of calling for a blanket reduction of economic growth and consumption, it is necessary to recognize that large groups of poverty-stricken and destitute people do need the benefits of economic growth and greater consumption. To make that possible, growth and development would need to be approached in a truly sustainable fash-
ion, rather than in the exploitative and extractive way that the Western world has modeled.

The Buddha’s teaching on the ethically based Middle Path is helpful in exploring the various non-violent transitions that individuals and groups need to undertake to develop social justice and harmony between humanity and the rest of nature. The application of the principles of “Buddhist Economics” to policymaking would require that minimizing the suffering of all living beings take precedence over maximization of profits and individual gains for a few.

ASOKA BANDARAGE (Ph.D.) is the author of many publications, including her latest book *Sustainability and Well-Being: The Middle Path to Environment, Society and the Economy* (Palgrave MacMillan). Details of her lectures, workshops and trainings on “Exploring Ethics, Society and Ecology” can be found on www.bandarage.com.
IN MARCH OF 2017, the Maori people of New Zealand finally won a 140-year long battle to have the Whanganui River legally enshrined as their ancestor. This recognition bestowed rights upon the river as a living being, with its own identity, rights, and duties. This means that New Zealand law now acknowledges its third largest river as a “living whole,” protected by two human guardians and accompanied by an initial $110 million in government funding to address past maltreatment and ensure continuous protection for the river.¹

“We have fought to find an approximation in law so that all others can understand that from our perspective treating the river as a living entity is the correct way to approach it, as an indivisible whole, instead of the traditional model for the last 100 years of treating it from a perspective of ownership and management,” stated Gerrard Albert, who was the Whanganui iwi tribe’s head negotiator in the case.² For the Whanganui iwi, one of the groups of Maori whose name reflects the river to whom they are tied, the decision was not just a legal matter but a profoundly spiritual one. “It’s not that we’ve changed our worldview, but people are catching up to seeing things the way that we see them,” Labour Member of Parliament Adrian Rurawhe said.³

Several days later, the Uttarakhand High Court in India took similar steps, giving the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers status as legal persons. A significant element of the ruling articulated the sacredness of the rivers to the country’s 966 million Hindus, who comprise nearly 80% of the population.⁴ One basis for this ruling appears to be the ways in which temple deities are sometimes treated as legal persons in court cases, highlighting the religious basis of who or what, might qualify for
such standing. The ruling also acknowledged that the rivers sustain the livelihoods of millions of people, and in so doing noted the degraded state in which the waters currently flow. While religious ceremonies are often blamed, the main sources of pollution remain sewage and chemical runoff from the cities and settlements along the rivers’ banks.  

Although the Indian Supreme Court later overturned the ruling on the basis of the impracticality of enforcement, the example remains a powerful one. It provides a possible precedent for similar steps in other cultural and legal contexts such as the US. One wonders, for example, how the protests at Standing Rock last year might have been empowered had the Sioux had clearer legal standing as the acknowledged guardians of the water supply threatened by the pipeline.

Seeing rivers as persons offers a provocative basis for a radical reexamination of how legal systems assess the “value” of the natural world. Especially in the West, natural resources have historically been viewed through anthropocentric lenses and thus allocated value that reflects the ways in which they are important or useful to humans. But the possibility of rivers-as-persons is a reminder that other views accord nature intrinsic value not dependent on its offerings to human beings. In economic terms, for example, the shift towards calculating ecosystem services has been presented as a way to make the hidden riches of nature visible at the bottom line. By adding up, say, the real cost of how much oxygen a tree provides, those costs could potentially be pushed into the system and “paid” by those who consume them. This kind of valuation aims to show that the flood prevention capacity provided by coastal wetlands ecosystems, for example, does in fact have a price tag, even if the ways in which it is often paid are deeply problematic.

While making the invisible visible through ecosystem services can create significant opportunities to rethink behavior, it remains underpinned by the same economic logic that got us into the current environmental mess in the first place. When we try to consider the import of the more-than-human commons that Walsh discusses in this special issue, value for the “things” that populate the landscape is difficult to elucidate in shared language. The dualism of the commons and the people who populate it is inherent in most notions of the human-environment relationship. It is also deeply rooted in many Western conceptions of nature, from Christianity’s resurgent assertion that natural resources are given to humans by God for their own use, to manifest destiny’s determined transformation of the American landscape, to consumption patterns that value growth above all else. The legacies
of privileging humans over nature articulate themselves in the current moment through our disconnection from each other and this place in which we live. Seeing natural resources as just another cost to pay, for example, does not challenge the underlying logic that they are there for the taking, but rather focuses on getting the price right. A more fundamental shift might recognize that humans live in landscapes of finite value and closed loops, in which our behavior continues to impact the environment even if we calculate the associated costs. As many environmentalists have argued and I remind my environmental studies students, there really is no away to throw things to when we struggle to understand the short-sighted manner in which “value” is calculated at the present moment.

If, as Walsh posits, a better alternative is to understand the commons as reflective of a responsibility to sustain it (and therefore, our human selves in relationship to it), it rapidly becomes clear that we are not doing an especially good job. In a recent talk in Denver, Colorado, Sak Yong Mipham Rinpoche described his understanding of global society as, in essence, a single large person of which we are all a part. This clearly reflects long standing notions of the earth itself as a living organism consisting of intertwined and largely indivisible parts, illuminating some of the possibilities in looking beyond economic value to other traditions’ understandings of how humans might live in and with nature. The Maori belief in the river as an ancestor, for example, emanates from convictions about deep interconnection. This is not entirely dissimilar to more recent notions of deep ecology, such as Arne Naess’ seminal arguments that the rich diversity of the natural world was valuable just because it existed, as reflected in the grassroots environmental movements of the 1960s and 70s. But bringing a Buddhist lens to this conversation, as this special issue seeks to do, raises the puzzle of how to argue for the right of the landscape to exist in the frame of a tradition that argues that none of us, in the broader sense, actually do.

Many argue that there are natural affinities between Buddhist views and caring for the natural environment, especially in the wish to protect all living things, or at least not to harm them. The Dalai Lama, for example, has consistently argued that human beings have a responsibility to act to protect the environment from climate change, with particular concern for the glaciers of the Himalayas near his homeland. But what would it change if we understood those glaciers as having their own life, their own energy, their own purpose?
The Tibetan notion of *drala* is instructive here. The word *drala* translates to “above the enemy,” to arriving at a place where aggression has been subdued. Drala signals our connection to the vast and powerful world around us. It describes the life energy of the world, which we perceive through our senses *because* we are inherently and deeply connected to it. Features of the landscape sometimes seem to reach out to us, to speak; a particular flower may radiate or the wind through the trees may strike a unique tone, quieting our own inner dialogue and reminding us to notice the space we are in. In this way, drala can be both a present and powerful sense of being in nature in the moment, but can also express itself more specifically as a feeling of connecting to the spirit of a particular living thing. In both cases, we momentarily transcend the enemy of the dualism that blocks our view of where we are in the present moment.

As Russell Rodgers describes, “Practitioners who are familiar with the term *drala* often associate it with places that have power for us: they provoke a sense of primal vastness and spaciousness. Perhaps they provoke awe, or a sense of beauty. Size is not the issue here—it could be a mountain top, a mossy forest, or a drop of dew.”

The sense of place
that is evoked creates connection by reminding us that we are not, at any essential level, separate from that feeling of power, from the energy of the places in which we reside. This expansive inclusiveness shifts entirely our presumption that the world is made up of things that we can collect and experience. It also reminds us that our own well-being depends consistently on that of others, and not just of other humans but of water, of air, of plants. In this way, the dralas reflect the understanding of the Maori, in that they are both our ancestors and our present companions along the path of being human. We have simply forgotten how to see them.

“Luxury is experiencing reality,” according to Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who taught extensively on the presence of drala in an effort to help his Western students recover their sense of place in the world. Trungpa observed that the creation of an enlightened society depended in no small part upon our human ability to recognize ourselves as entirely dependent on each other and the world around us. But to do this, we have to be still enough to allow ourselves to see and feel:

> It sounds very simplistic, but it has a lot of magic. You begin to pick up on clouds, sunshine and weather, the mountains, your past, your chatter with your grandmother and your grandfather, your own mother, your own father. You begin to pick up on a lot of things. Just let them pass like the chatter of a brook as it hits the rocks.¹²

This process of “picking up on” reorients our understanding and elucidates the fluidity of our being with all of the many beings around us. Trungpa felt that this kind of understanding was what would bring an end to the aggression he saw pervading Western society—against ourselves, other people, and the planet upon which we live. The notion of drala, by encouraging both a reconnection to a sense of place and a recognition of nature’s energetic agency, is very much in harmony with the idea that landscapes, too, have their own ways of being, and that these ways of being deserve protection. This fundamental shift in view relies on an entirely different conception of value that is unlikely to be captured by creative economic measures.

The pursuit of legal status for the landscape has significant potential to extend notions of what can be protected, and by whom. If the Maori are right and “I am the river, the river is me,” then we might better understand what matters by further blurring the boundaries between people and planet. Making the rights of the river explicit and entrusting them to human guardians, for example, acknowledges the
deeply connected relationship that the Maori believe already exists. Giving these relationships legal standing also empowers people to act as protectors. The Maori’s prolonged battle for legal recognition of their relationship with the river in particular shows one powerful way forward in shifting not just our views of human impacts on the environment, but a concrete step that could be taken to promote a less anthropocentric, and more inclusive, understanding of life. In the case of the Ganges and Yamuna, the effort to enshrine their sacredness in legal terms offers another avenue for reconsidering human responsibility to the places in which we live. If we consider that the personhood designation was overturned based on concerns for implementation rather than a substantive criticism of the nature of the ruling itself, there may be an opening that subsequent cases could expand.

In some respects, both the Indian and New Zealand cases are threads in an emerging tapestry of ways in which to help create new mechanisms for environmental stewardship. They complement growing efforts in the West to recognize animal rights. One such achievement was France’s 2015 recognition that some animals have sentience, which became grounds for improving welfare standards. Even in the US, advocates for animal rights continue to press the legal system to enforce higher standards of humane treatment, pushing for increased corporate transparency when systemic abuses are uncovered. And recurrent legal efforts by the Puyallup Tribe in Washington State to return Mount Rainier to its traditional name also reflect a desire to make hidden understandings of the peaks visible; long-told stories about the mountain describe her as a mother with a wealth of offerings to those (of many species) in her care. Taken together, these and other examples of the expansion of legal boundaries of who, and what, has rights, are a potentially valuable way to care for the planet in a more inclusive way.

Creating legal grounds for protecting animals, and rivers, and perhaps mountains as well, offers both a practical way to protect them and a reminder of our human relationship with them. It is hardly new to assert that people exist not apart from, but wholly within, nature; and yet this is something we humans seem to need to be reminded of constantly. To play with Joko Beck’s plea for loosening our tendency to privilege one thing over another, if nothing on the earth is “special” then everything can be. In this gentle light even the pieces are, at some level, also the whole: “Though for short periods it seems to be distinguishable as a separate event, the water in the whirlpools is just the river itself.”
RACHEL DEMOTTS is an associate professor in the University of Puget Sound’s Environmental Policy and Decision-Making program. Her research interests lie in southern Africa, especially the intersections of transboundary conservation, gender and natural resource use, and human-elephant conflict. A student of Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, she also teaches courses in Sacred Ecology and offers meditation instruction as part of a budding Tacoma Shambhala Meditation Group.
Notes

7. The Court specifically cited the rivers’ course through many regions, creating a myriad of legal and administrative structures that would have to be navigated in order to harmonize what legal personhood would mean in different regulatory contexts.
9. The Record of Understanding giving the river legal status, for example, acknowledges the Maori conviction that tributaries come together to form rivers in the same way that groups of people have shared ancestors. See full text of the Record of Understanding, which predated the official court decision, here: http://www.wrmthb.co.nz/new_updates/Record%20of%20Understanding%202012.pdf. The Record includes the assertion that the health of the people and of the river are inextricably entwined.
13. The renaming of Mount McKinley to Denali by President Obama in 2015 spurred discussion of other similarly named mountains, even as many of those discussions predated this step. Given that tribes in Washington have many names for Mount Rainier, which one to return to is also a source of much discussion. See Daniel Person “One Challenge to Renaming Rainier: Getting the New Name Right” Seattle Weekly News, September 1, 2015, http://archive.seattleweekly.com/home/960474-129/one-challenge-to-renaming-rainier-getting; for broader context of this discussion relative to other peaks, see https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/09/150901-renaming-mountains-dena-li-rainier-helens-harney-devils-tower/.
Beyond Theory: Relating to Dominant Systems and Manifesting Social Alternatives in Dharma Communities

by DAVID KAHANE

WE LIVE IN A TIME of seemingly inexorable devastation and destruction. Carbon emissions and climate change intensifying. Ecosystems ground up by consumerism, ignorance, and greed. Industrial agriculture destroying topsoil and causing vast animal suffering. Marginalized and poor people oppressed and disenfranchised with increasing brutality. Refugee flows growing, together with cruel backlashes. And complex feedback loops through which these and other dynamics reinforce and accelerate one another.

At the same time, Buddhists practice with the teaching that basic goodness or emptiness underlies all phenomena. We work with the view that between the cracks of our torn and troubled societies is enlightened society, and that simple acts of genuine kindness and conversation can transform situations. In this essay I bring the inquiry into dharma, degrowth, and climate change down to the level of practitioners and communities of practitioners. In particular, I explore how it is that different groups hold different degrees of awareness of the harms caused by dominant systems, and how we might recognize these harms as we unravel cocoons that insulate us from the sharp edges of our contemporary situation.

The call for submissions for this issue invites us to prefigure alternative economic models by drawing on the dharma, and Zack Walsh’s article offers “commoning” as model of a dharmic way forward. I appreciate his article. And in this moment I feel impatient with models. Yes, many humans are deeply enmeshed in ideologies and conceptualizations that deny our interdependence and intra-subjectivity: markets, growth as good, nature/culture, patriarchy, white supremacy, more.
But models are not at the root of these destructive forms of collective life, nor are better models the primary path out.

Each reader engaging with *The Arrow* relates intimately with destructive systems, minute by minute—we embody practices by which, for example, we produce, consume, and move from one place to another; and by which we construct relationships of intimacy and exclusion, empowerment and marginalization, privilege and subjection. To me, a distinctive power of meditation, dharma, and sangha in relation to these systemic dynamics is as path to feeling and understanding the fine grain of social practices that shape us as subjects within systems. Unless we bring such awareness into our bodies and energies and emotions as well as our intellects, theorizing is at risk of being mere wheel-spinning. Karl Marx put it pithily: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.” He was pointing to how our intellect tends to swirl with stories and meanings that arise from and reinforce concrete, embodied practices that make up our world, including practices specific to our locations within unjust and destructive systems.

So how do we use our paths as practitioners to understand how our own life practices enable and challenge systems like those I mentioned at the start? How can we ground work for societal change in embodied knowledge?

Mindfulness and meditation practice do not necessarily build understanding of how our life practices fit within destructive social systems. The realities of the world are painful, including the impacts of capitalism and climate change that are the focus of this issue of *The Arrow*: pains of oppression and marginalization, poverty and homelessness, colonization and theft of lands, deprivation and starvation, and differential vulnerability to drought, famine, storms, wildfires, and war. Many western dharma practitioners are insulated from direct experience of the worst harms and insults of powerful systems. We’re privileged. And so we often hold a paradoxical kind of knowledge. I see this in myself: I can talk at length about capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy, the pathological state of our food systems, consumerism, the degradation of our democracy, and so on. I know about these things. I teach political theory and engage critically with these dynamics as my profession. At the same time, I’m privileged in relation to these systems. I’m advantaged by capitalism. I’m advantaged by white supremacy and patriarchy. I can afford local and sustainable food. I can afford to consume (sometimes happily, sometimes unhappily). I can be granted disproportionate credibility in democratic discussions by vir-
D. KAHANE  MANIFESTING SOCIAL ALTERNATIVES IN DHARMA COMMUNITIES

tue of education and language and whiteness and masculinity. Not only do my critiques ring a little hollow because of this, but my awareness of the harms of these systems can stay mainly in my head. Meanwhile, in my body, my habits, my desires, the deep grooves of my conditioning, I’m full of not-knowing. Privilege is a system of not-knowing. I go through my days not-seeing. I know a bunch of propositions about privilege, oppression, and damaging systems, and my identity as a good progressive person has me invoking these propositions, often. Yet as an embodied being I very often manage to not-know these same things.

Deep meditation practice starts to reveal the illusoriness of thought and perception, and invites us to connect with a vast, unbiased substrate of mind. Insight and creativity can arise from these deep states. Yet I’d posit that the specific social and systemic dynamics that we don’t know in our societal lives can remain unknown through our meditation practices, so long as we practice within cocoons of privilege.

People of color within white supremacy, indigenous people in settler-colonial systems, precariously housed people, disabled people, trans people, and many other marginalized and oppressed groups continually run up against the sharp edges of unjust systems. They also learn a lot about the perspectives of the powerful, given that powerful people’s intentions and confusions give rise to those sharp edges. Where marginalized people are meditators, these embodied and socially embodied knowledges are potential grist for their meditation practices.

Privilege is insulation from this direct and visceral knowledge of self, other, and systems. Not-knowing sticks to the privileged, enticingly and stubbornly. It does so even for those privileged people who are social justice advocates within our dharma communities—yearning and working for diversity in our centers; for lower economic barriers to participation; for diminished objectification, harassment, and predation by male teachers; and so on. We see injustice, cultivate lovingkindness for those harmed, struggle for change. And yet there is much that the lived practices of privilege prevent us from seeing and knowing.

The dissociation by privileged people from realities of power—our not-knowing—represents a deep rupture in our integrity as practitioners and our usefulness as allies. In our dharma centers, for example, white people sit right in the middle of realities of racial division and harm and hurt—it’s in the room with us, in the present or absent bodies of people of color. Yet still, white people may perceive a basic togetherness. And so it is for gender, sexuality, class, indigeneity, and more. This not-knowing is a fundamental obstacle to skillful social and
political action, insofar as well-meaning action would build on a foundation of ignorance and dissociation. Privileged people are prone to miss key power dynamics in the systems we try to affect. We’re at deep risk of reiterating power dynamics in our efforts to help.

A similar break exists, I’d suggest, in our relationship to environmental destruction and climate change. Many progressive and privileged people have strong convictions about environmental responsibility. We have a lot to say. But this may coexist with not-knowing about environmental devastation—shying away from encountering this in visceral ways, in our bodies. It’s too painful, too raw. And we are able to insulate ourselves from many of these realities, especially if the wildfires and floods and storms and refugees are somewhere else. And here too, this shutting out of perception, of body, of gut feeling, is likely to make us unskillful, insensitive to the power dynamics and systemic flows underlying the problems we care about. The same is true for our relationships with economy and class. Moreover, systems like whiteness and patriarchy and heterosexism and transphobia are not separate from climate change or from the devastation wreaked by capitalism; these are interlocking dynamics.

It’s these embodied qualities of privilege that can make theory forlorn. In reference to Walsh’s article, we may know about climate change, about how our electronic devices embody exploitation of the human and more-than-human world, about how our patterns of consumption are incompatible with environmental and therefore human flourishing. We may know about commoning, about post-humanism, about the Capitalocene. And yet we mostly live on within dominant structures, untroubled in most moments, part of the engine of destruction. This is the scary thing about inhabiting privilege: Our bodily comportment, our patterns of interaction, our whole material world reiterates the terms of our own advantage, invites us to live on in privilege, subtly pushes aside experiences that challenge privilege, so as to allow our privilege to continue. This intransigence of privilege leads me to wonder whether commoning points, as Walsh suggests, to a way out: Couldn’t people “common” in racist, patriarchal, anthropocentric, and otherwise harmful ways?

I don’t mean to reject theory, including around dharma, degrowth, and climate change. Rather, this theory needs to be woven together with ways of being and acting differently in our everyday lives. In particular, I want to ask what this weave might look like in dharma centers. What ways of being and acting could start to undo the not-know-
ing and dissociation wrapped up in various forms of privilege within our sanghas, and also in our pathological economic and environmental practices and systems? How do we seed change?

Part of my answer is a promissory note: I hope to write more on this for a future issue of The Arrow, in relation to the richness of existing literatures and initiatives. For now, and very briefly, let me point to four elements that we can work with as dharma communities: practices rooted in teachings; practices of unlearning and healing oppressive relationships in our dharma communities; practices for building societal alternatives with our own hands; and practices of learning from and acting in solidarity with communities outside our dharma centers. These practices complement each other—indeed, each needs the others to break through our complicity in pathological systems so that we can prefigure something different. In the space of this article I’ll offer just a sketch of each element, knowing that each deserves deep, extensive, and multi-vocal exploration.

Element 1: Teachings

There is tremendous transformative power in Shambhala and other Buddhist lineages, teachings, and practices. Hinayāna practices can show practitioners the hamster wheel of painful storylines and delusion that fully occupy most people most of the time; connect practitioners with the simplicity of the body breathing and so reconnect body and mind; and offer a ground of stability and openness for our everyday perceptions, experiences, and actions. Mahāyāna practices support equalizing and exchanging ourselves with others, undermine the tendency to clutch our own happiness and push away the suffering of others, and loosen the tight grip of ego. Vajrayāna practices connect us with the unfathomability of mind before thought, and with the wisdom and energy that arise from there. These teachings and practices offered by our lineages are treasures, rich in transformative possibility. And at the same time, they can be practiced diligently in ways that coexist with the forms of not-seeing that I have talked about in this essay. This both grieves and intrigues me. It raises the question of how these teachings and practices can be held with respect, and also supplemented and situated so as to challenge the dynamics of privilege and oppression that haunt many western dharma communities.
Element 2: Undoing dynamics of power, privilege, and exclusion in our sanghas.

There are practices that can directly address dynamics of power, privilege, and exclusion in our dharma centers—that can reveal the sharp edges of these cultural and societal realities so that they can be brought within our spiritual and political attention. There is a burgeoning of writing and practice around this, especially by people of color—from Kelsey Blackwell’s “Expanding Awareness: How Patterns of Interaction Support White Supremacy,”\(^2\) to Rev. angel Kyodo williams, Lama Rod Owens, and Jasmine Syedullah’s *Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation*,\(^3\) to the activity of Charlene Leung and the Diversity Working Group in the Shambhala sangha, to learning arising from the 2017 Social Engagement Think Tank in Shambhala.\(^4\)

Two tasks stand out to me as a privileged person wanting marginalization and exclusion and harm to diminish in my own Shambhala sangha. One task is for white (and otherwise dominant-group) practitioners like me to support the creation of spaces in our dharma communities where people of color and other marginalized groups have an authoritative place as leaders and teachers—not someday, as the demographics of mainly white western dharma communities shift, but now. This is about how scarce financial resources are channeled. It’s about creativity in how gatherings are structured and invitations extended, in order to move beyond the predictable groups and faces and power dynamics. It’s about supporting marginalized people to move quickly into leadership and teaching roles. It’s about protecting the ability of marginalized groups to claim spaces where privileged people are not at the center. And at times, it’s about getting out of the way so that others may enter.
A second task for white (and otherwise dominant-group) practitioners like me is to do our own work with others sharing our forms of privilege—for example, as groups of men discussing patriarchy, as groups of cis people discussing how gender norms are policed, and as groups of white people discussing white supremacy. Dominant-group leaders and teachers need to skill up to be part of opening and holding such spaces. As these two tasks are advanced, the chances for fruitful dialogue and work across lines of privilege and marginalization increase; until they are advanced, there may not be strong ground for change around privilege and marginalization in our sanghas.

Element 1 is a tremendous support for challenging and unlearning privilege (Element 2). Buddhists practice with holding strong energy, aversion, distress, and groundlessness, which arise insistently when privilege is explored or challenged; we learn to notice habitual storylines triggered by these forms of intensity and to come back to the present. My own Shambhala community is also focused on deep dialogue, listening, and conversation, which can be connected powerfully to anti-oppression work. And many Buddhist communities work with embodied as well as verbal ways of exploring systems, which to me seems crucial in understanding and undoing the most visceral and elusive aspects of privilege and marginalization.

Element 3: Building societal alternatives with our own hands

As noted earlier, each of us engages in fine-grained societal practices that either affirm dominant systemic dynamics or challenge them. Our Buddhist sanghas do this in relation to economy: We are enmeshed in a dominant system in which we pay rent, charge fees, cultivate patrons, and manage exigencies; and we may work to counter these patterns through generosity and practicing economic alternatives. We do it in relation to environmental harms, in the foods we serve, the travel we fund and expect, the products sourced for our centers, and more. We do this in relation to dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, and other social hierarchies. The discussion of commoning in Walsh’s essay offers useful cues about places where Buddhist sanghas might support change on the ground, and how we might envision broader societal ideals. Here there are important and longstanding experiences and experiments by dharma communities, and room for much more experimentation—with social enterprises, community gardens, car shares, mutual care and public provision (including around disasters and crises that are intensified by climate change), circular economies,
alternative currencies, economic redistribution, health care, education, and more.

These innovations can start at the grassroots, prefiguring and prototyping forms of society that might be scaled up and out. And crucially, these are forms of *practice*—they change us through the work of our own hands. Oakland-based transition and climate justice activist Gopal Dayaneni explains why this hands-on quality is so important:

> You’ve got to knead in the work of love and the love of work. We have allowed the notion of the job to alienate us from our labor and to not feel the power of our work. And so the idea for us, the central piece of resilience-based organizing, is this idea of direct action resilience, this idea that we are actually going to build it with our own hands. And when I say direct action, I don’t just mean we’re going to do something that breaks the law, though we do need to do that—a lot of that. When I say direct action, we mean people doing for themselves directly what they need. We need to create the solutions ourselves. What the hands do, the heart learns. And if all we do is fight against what we don’t want, the heart learns not to love our vision, but to only long for it. We have to apply our labor directly to meet our needs, and we need to do that in the communities where we live.⁷

As Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche has said repeatedly to the Shambhala Buddhist community and its leaders, “you have to be it.” In the context of this volume of *The Arrow*, I take this to speak to the place of theory around dharma, degrowth, and climate change. Theory has uses, but should not mainly be about constructing ideals separate from action. Indeed, spinning linguistic alternatives can happen amidst marginalization, be part of sustaining not-knowing, be part of iterating marginalization. Languages of common identity, common goals, and commoning can elide what *isn’t* common in our fates and experiences. So Element 3 needs steadfastly to build on and build in Element 2, so that sanghas hold their societal experiments within deep, challenging dialogue about our diversity and the diversity beyond our walls.

Element 4: Practices of learning from and acting in solidarity with communities outside our dharma centers

The work discussed in this essay so far has been about how, in our practices and sanghas, we can recognize and unmake systemic marginalization and discrimination, and seed ways of being and acting diff-
ferently in relation to dominant systems. But for these efforts to bear fruit, they have to extend beyond our walls.

One aspect of this relates to the limits of internal diversity. Many dharma centers, including my own, have memberships that skew toward privilege—in North America this can include being predominantly white, non-indigenous, higher income, cisgender, able-bodied, and highly educated. While we may aspire to diversify over time, that is a long-term proposition, and one that presupposes learning about how we exclude, as well as how we can develop cultural humility and undo implicit biases. Moreover, opening to the diversity of the broader world cannot simply mean welcoming diverse practitioners into our communities. Society’s diversity includes forms of life and spiritual practice that will not assimilate into Buddhist communities but that we need to know nonetheless—for example, learning with Muslims, including about Islamophobia; and learning with indigenous people, including about entrenched settler colonialism.

Another aspect relates to our ability to learn from established social movements outside of our own dharma circles. Just about every challenge and initiative discussed in this essay has been the object of mobilization, community, and learning for decades in grassroots movements of the marginalized. These movements hold tremendous knowledge, and it would be arrogant to seek to reform Buddhist communities or seed social alternatives without learning from and with our non-Buddhist peers.

Yet another aspect relates to the need for collaboration and solidarity to seed real change. Many of the pathological systemic dynamics referenced in this essay, and much of the work of constructing alternatives, requires mobilization and coalition-building that must stretch far beyond Buddhist communities.

My vision of how we unlearn privilege, how we construct practices and institutions that prefigure alternatives, and how we resist dominant systems involves work within and beyond our dharma centers. And this in turn calls upon our practices and pedagogies. In the words of Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, “the fact that our society is experiencing a high level of fear and doubt is a signal for humanity not to give up, but rather to engage further with our enlightened tendencies…” How can we practice humble perception and attentiveness as we step outside the comfort of our everyday social worlds, into spaces that provoke fears and harmful storylines? How do we bring discipline and energy to social change initiatives, given tendencies we might have toward anxiety
and aggression? How can we go beyond a vacillation between hope and fear to bring empathy and equanimity to the work of undoing privilege, minimizing the harms of pathological systems, and manifesting societal alternatives? And how can we draw on the unfathomable space we touch in our practice, arising with confidence and wisdom in the face of social challenges, as well as in the face of conventional responses to these challenges?

Drawing on the richness of our lineages and traditions, we can step onto new ground in recognizing how the pathologies and exclusions of dominant systems permeate our own Buddhist institutions and practices. We can work to heal these internal divisions while developing practices and institutions that prefigure different societal patterns and possibilities. We can work with communities beyond our dharma centers to further unlearn patterns that manifest social pathology, and to build collaborations, solidarities, and coalitions that manifest futures outside of current patterns. This will be challenging, and at times scary, and we will screw up. It needs to be done in a spirit of experimentation and learning and humbleness, with accountability and a sense of humor. The voices of those marginalized in our communities need to be given space and authority as we find ways forward, making the path by walking.

This complex path of change excites me. It speaks to my own yearning to practice and teach the dharma in ways that acknowledge and feel the sharp edges of injustice and pain in our communities, and that refuse to give up on ourselves or the world. By practicing in these ways we can speak authentically to a yearning that is felt, tentatively but also very deeply, within broader societies—to live in ways that do not hide from the pain and injustice of our world, and that manifest our highest capacities and aspirations.

DAVID KAHANE is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta in Canada. From 2010-2016 he led Alberta Climate Dialogue, an international project that convened citizens to deliberate on climate change and influence climate policy. He teaches and researches democratic theory and practice, especially as these relate to the design of public dialogues and consultations, and to questions of power, sustainability, and systems change. He is a national 3M teaching fellow, a permaculture gardener, and Shastri (senior teacher) at the Edmonton Shambhala Centre in northwest Canada.
NOTES


4. Four short articles in the *Shambhala Times* describe the Think Tank, especially in relation to learning about racial dynamics within the sangha. See Shastri Charlene Leung, *Think Tank: Four Voices*; Tuyet Cullen, *Think Tank: One of Many Voices*; Ashley Hodson, *Think Tank Reflections*; and Alexandria Barnes, *Contemplating the Think Tank*.


6. Within the Shambhala sangha, these methods include Mudra Space Awareness, *Social Presencing Theatre*, and *Interplay*.


The Tale of Stormtamer

by AUSTIN R. PICK

There is nothing whatever to remove from this,
Nor the slightest thing thereon to add.
Truly beholding the true nature –
When truly seen – complete liberation.
—Uttaratantra (vs. 154), attributed to Maitreya¹

This is how I heard it. One time in Ivy Field, near the place where the lake waters meet the streets of Wind City, where drowned buildings can be seen to the east and the south, tall and ruined, tenements where white laundry flaps like surrender flags and merchants sell their wares from skiffs through open windows, everywhere calling “Hey Cheecago!” and thus invoking the city’s proud old name to stir their business, ’Treya talked up the masses gathered there, speaking the truth to everyone.

In the Long Before, when Ivy Field was a place where ritual games were played with great pageantry, the people harnessed rain to make the grass there ever-green, and changed the night to day with a fury of stolen light, chanting and roaring and eating too much. Now Ivy Field is a sanctuary for all who seek to know Buddha-nature, the undying and never-born, the everlasting beyond all weather.

When ’Treya came with her first followers, many were already living there in misery and disrepute, having fled the floods and fractured seasons to build a stacked shanty town under the stadium’s eves. With infinite compassion, ’Treya taught those who would listen to tame all grasping vines, both outer and inner, and to open the wisdom eye. In time Ivy Field was transformed into a holy refuge, the beginning of the
wheel’s new turning in our lawless land, where the Dharma had once taken root, but mostly been forgotten.

Beyond the great diamond, mandala of the Four Noble Truths, where the faithful meditate in daily circumambulation, ‘Treya took her customary seat under a parasol atop an old flatbed truck left there in the Great Panic. Before her, shielded from the intense sun under a patchwork awning above the ivy wall, sat the assembly of the faithful. To either side, in the far fields, stretched the refuge’s gardens, the crops and fruit trees arrayed in mutual affinity, netted from parrots and watched over by mindful attendants. Below her, in the center field, sat the people of the neighborhood and others who had traveled far for the teachings, many bedraggled and encouraged also by the promise of a meal.

There were a thousand people or more gathered within the friendly confines. Among them was Mayor Brassman, merchant king of Wind City, who had converted to the Dharma under ‘Treya’s guidance, and who had since spread the teachings all along the waterways. Hundreds more were also gathered on the nearby rooftops, where the clarity of ‘Treya’s voice would be carried to them like birdsong on the favorable out-blowing wind. Above them all, strung with a tangle of prayer flags, towered the stadium’s old scoreboard, its many zeros painted over with a bright mural of bodhisattvas bearing a Dharma Wheel.

Raising her hand with great compassion, ‘Treya prepared to teach, welcoming all who had come together and exhorting them to purify their minds with perfect wisdom. Indicating the monsoon clouds gathered like a furrowed brow overhead, Rosario, devoted leader of the assembly, then asked ‘Treya how it was that the weather, so hostile to the world’s suffering inhabitants, could possess Buddha-nature, which pervades all things.

After herself looking skyward, Maitreya, the aged Buddha of our era, graciously spoke these words: “There was a time, in the Long Before, when I lived another life, and greedily chased after the power of the storms, until my heart was opened in inner wisdom, and I saw the true nature, genuine when genuinely seen, and equal within us all.” Having thus begun, ‘Treya then told this tale, the tale of Stormtamer, to all who were gathered there.

In the last days of the Long Before, when the Great Panic was presaged everywhere but ignored by all but a wise and obstinate few, the cyclic patterns of weather, once stable and often predictable, began to shift with violence and
increased warning. Floods and droughts, watery tempests and dust-blown twisters, all became more frequent and gathered strength in the ever-warming climate, bringing suffering to overpopulated places. In the winters too there were harrowing storms of snow and ice, growing ever longer, but for most people these disasters were merely a source of entertainment, the images of destruction broadcast across the planet, watched with awe and morbid fascination by the millions who remained, for the time being, comfortable elsewhere.

In that time there was a storm chaser named Victor Demara, who, along with others like him, made a living capturing these images, and who thrived on the thrill of nature's manifest power. In the spring, the fair season of emerging life following winter, these chasers began to track storms all across the Great Plains, watching with a knowledgeable eye for the ominous, spiraling rotations that foretold tornadoes.

Late in the month of May, Victor, together with his trusted companion Marcus, left their city and ventured out into the grid of long, straight roads that ran through a green ocean of crops, stretching in orderly rows for miles to the even horizon. It was edging toward evening when the first warnings came, the roads between the city and its outlying towns jammed with the vehicles of people returning home from a day of work. Against all reason, fearless in their excitement, Victor and Marcus rushed in the opposite direction, their own vehicle a special truck outfitted with tracking equipment and capable of great speed.

The two friends were seasoned storm chasers—Victor the driver, Marcus the navigator—and their intimate, terrifying images of tornadoes touching down and whipping across the Plains were popular around the globe. On this day, obstinate in his self-assurance, Victor had left the city despite his anxious wife and young children pleading for him to stay. He concealed this inner turmoil from Marcus as they leaned into the road, gulping coffee and talking
only of weather, Victor’s churning emotions directed outward and driving them on.

Traveling southwest, wind and rain already lashing the truck’s windows, the two watched as the storm fronts heaped and collided above them, blotting out the evening’s diffuse and golden light. Where it had been calm moments before, the sky boiled with a mass of knotted thunderclouds before their eyes, and they hurried onward, racing not only against the weather but against other chasers, eager in their reckless pursuit.

To the west, against the horizon’s now eerie grey-green light, the chasers captured images as the storm distended and vortices began to form, snaking tendrils of bloated, angry cloud reaching for the earth and spiraling together in rapid expansion. Rotation brought low, the tornado swelled and darkened as it ate up the fertile soil, backlit with lightning that flashed in jagged fissures of terrible brightness. The chasers now sensed that this was no ordinary funnel, roping with ghostly elegance from on high, but a wedging monster of unprecedented magnitude. His heart thundering, Victor directed Marcus to call and share what information they had, an intention already turning in him to help those who might be caught unawares by the storm’s furious movement.

Victor was known across the Plains for his intuition with storms and his skill behind the wheel, and attuned in their long teamwork, Marcus trusted him completely. Wrapped in blinding rain and a battery of hail, the chasers maintained their course, tracking south of the tornado’s predicted hook and drawing closer to a small crossroads town where the roofs of houses were trembling visibly, shingles and debris strafing through the air.

Ever-growing, the storm swallowed the horizon, trees along the road bowing and crumpling as Victor and Marcus sped past, their vehicle rattling in the tornado’s pitched roar. And then they were weightless, floating for a single crystalline moment as the truck was lifted and thrown from the road before crashing into the adjacent
field and rolling in a blizzard of jangling glass. The truck spun a hundred times or more, compacting around them like a shrinking metal coffin, the breath smashed from their lungs as they toppled.

Victor’s mind edged back from smudging blankness as Marcus pulled him from the crushed truck, his friend’s face gashed and bleeding, the two of them muted by shock. Without thought of their own survival, however, Victor’s attention was seized by a sudden high cry of terror cutting through the storm’s whine somewhere nearby. Selfless in spontaneous action, Victor lifted himself to run as soon as he was free of the vehicle, Marcus following close behind, limping in pain. Beyond the field, Victor approached a set of stairs leading nowhere, the house already obliterated as the full violence of the tornado closed in, buildings seemingly exploding before they were even touched by the storm.

Victor found a woman crouched behind the stairs in the house’s shallow foundation, screaming even as he approached, her hair a muddy tangle. Sensing Victor’s noble aspiration, Marcus stooped to join her and held the woman close. Throwing his body over theirs, Victor gripped rebar and concrete, his clothes hanging like a tatter of robes, his mind empty, holding on with his whole heart as the woman curled in Marcus’ arms below him and wept silently, a tumult of fear and relief swirling in her eyes.

Together the three were engulfed as the tornado’s full violence bore down upon them, raging winds gnashing indiscriminately, belching fireballs of exploding gas and showering everything with a spittle of lacerating debris, shucking the town of its skin in the breathless moment of its concentrated motion. His legs unmoored, Victor was lifted in weightlessness again before being entirely inhaled, taken while the two were spared, his life released to the whim of the rapacious funnel and flashing terribly before his eyes as he began to spin around within the storm’s full circumference, losing all sense of direction.
Whirling interminably, Victor came to know the twister in his very bones as it stripped the clothes from his body and marked him in miniature with the logic of its destruction. More than three miles wide and still moving, it would be, Victor sensed, the largest tornado yet recorded, and he saw that his entire life—his yearnings and his confusion, his family safe somewhere distant, his dreams, his fantasies of the future—was but an infinitesimal scribble in the great script of the planet, which in turn marked only the merest circuit in a long arm of the cosmos, itself a great ever-wheeling storm, undying and never-born.

He saw as he spun that the tornado had no precise beginning or end, but bled freely between the heavens and the earth. Though propelled by the incalculable causes and conditions of global weather patterns, he understood that the storm was fed also by vehicle exhaust and the fuming of factories, the noxious exhale of humanity’s grasping,
anxious chase to calm the inner storms of ignorance and acquisition, ever turning and unsatisfied.

As time dilated in the storm’s vortex, Victor glimpsed not only his present life, but a whole sequence of existences, a net of lives in interconnection, each progressing in an arc of unfolding wisdom. Together these existences charted a slow awakening from the delusory sense of isolated selves, an understanding exemplified in compassionate deeds that catalyzed the mind’s wisdom eye, blinking through the eons and slowly opening to see things as they are, interdependent and ever-changing, yet comprising but a single, radiant instant, the sum of all things immediate in self-evident completeness.

His mind opened, freed of the seeming deficiencies that had colluded in its sleep, Victor sensed in wisdom that he too had no precise beginning or end, but was himself tornado, was planet, was cosmos and beyond, before and ever-after—empty of discrete being yet full of luminosity, inseparable and eternally whole in ineffable suchness, from which it is impossible to add or subtract anything, the true nature, genuine when genuinely seen, and equal within us all. Vanished into the void, Victor-gone, victorious, there was no storm, no rage or violence, no creation or destruction. And blinking back into embodied presence, mind luminous and equal now in understanding, Victor then extended a hand, reaching into the current of the tornado, and in stilling his heart brought the storm itself to stillness, clouds parting in the relief of settling dust and opening to the tranquil evening sky, visible again to the two who had survived through his noble and selfless sacrifice.

So it was, in the last days of the Long Before, that the Storm Chaser Victor Demara gave his life to save others, witnessed the one taste of Buddha-nature, and became Stormtamer, liberated in an instant and long remembered for his deeds.

When ’Treya, the Buddha of our age, concluded this tale in illustration of her words, offering this splendid vision of Buddha-nature, she
made the connection for all present in the jewel box of Ivy Field, and summed up the jātaka, saying: “He who was then Marcus, faithful companion, was Rosario in that former life. The woman saved from the storm was Mayor Brassman, the merchant king of Wind City. And Victor Demara, the Storm Chaser who became Stormtamer, was I myself.” Having heard this tale, all who were present gave thanks for the skill of the great teacher, who so compassionately turned the wheel of Dharma. And thus instructed, many in the assembly were then able to see Buddha-nature in the most intense weather, whether outer or inner, and so opened the wisdom eye.

**AUSTIN R. PICK** was born in North Carolina and has traveled widely while pursuing an interest in contemplative practice and a love of the world’s wild places. He is a longtime dharma practitioner and holds an MA in Religious Studies from Naropa University, where he is now on staff. He served as contributing editor of a travel guide for Nepal and India entitled *Along the Path: The Meditator’s Companion to the Buddha’s Land* (Pariyatti Press, 2009). Austin’s fiction has appeared in *The Stockholm Review, Epiphany, Tahoma Literary Review, Pleiades, Adbusters Magazine* and elsewhere. He lives in Colorado, and is currently at work on a novel. His website is [www.FudoMouth.net](http://www.FudoMouth.net).
Notes

A Buddhist Depiction of Ecological Dystopia

by HOLLY GAYLEY

IN “THE TALE OF STORMTAMER,” the age-old jātaka tale of ancient India meets “cli-fi,” an emergent subset of science fiction dealing with climate change and its potentially cataclysmic effects. Invoking the cadence of spoken word, Austin Pick transports us to a future urban dystopia, Chicago’s iconic Wrigley Field transformed into a shanty-town of climate refugees. Like the half-drowned city of Kim Stanley Robinson’s New York 2140, Chicago is portrayed with tenement buildings peering out of the rising tides of Lake Michigan with a series of canals where roads once were. Presiding over this wasteland is the buddha ‘Treya, who transforms the shanty town into a place of refuge, a regenerated urban garden and buddha-field for turning the wheel of dharma once again.

A writer, outdoorsman, and contemplative practitioner, Austin Pick joins contemporary authors in adapting Buddhist genres to ecological concerns. As with Gary Snyder’s witty “Smokey the Bear Sutra,” Pick transforms the jātaka tale about the Buddha’s past lives into a penetrating reflection on the ecological challenges before us. To signal its Buddhist pretext, he leads with “This is how I heard it,” a slick rephrasing of “Thus have I heard” (evam mayā śrutam), the opening phrase of Buddhist sermons. As a twist on the classic jātaka, he casts the future buddha Maitreya (‘Treya) in female form, looking back on our own times as climate disruption intensifies and ordinary people watch the specter of ecological disasters unfold, too overwhelmed and paralyzed to mobilize. His tale draws attention to our collective failure to effectively confront climate change and, in spite of this, the enduring prospect of human heroism and resilience.
From an undesignated future time, ‘Treya narrates the tale of Stormtamer in “the Long Before, when the Great Panic was presaged everywhere but ignored by all but a wise and obstinate few.” The protagonist of the present-day story, Victor Demara, is a journalist who chases storms to deliver their harrowing images to a global viewing public. Mesmerized by the raw power of nature, Victor and his sidekick Marcus chase a tornado across the Great Plains to their own detriment as they get trapped in a small town being ripped apart by its fury. There is a hint that the tornado engulfing Victor is an allegory for humanity’s insatiable drive toward material acquisition. What tames the storm, as it spirals out of control destroying everything in its path, is an act of heroic self-sacrifice and insight. In this regard, “The Tale of Stormtamer” echoes the “gift of the body” motif in jātaka literature, as when the buddha-to-be offered his body to a starving tigress on the brink of eating her own cubs. Victor’s sacrifice is coupled with insight into the interdependence of all things, suggesting the need (in Buddhist terms) for humanity to reorient itself away from the individualistic presumptions undergirding hyper-consumerism in order to make a significant shift in our collective ways of life.

A key intervention in this cautionary tale is the ascription of buddha-nature to the natural elements, breaking down the divide between human and nature, inner and outer. This corresponds to the kind of “intra-subjectivity” articulated in Zach Walsh’s introductory essay to this special issue on “Dharma, Degrowth, and Climate Change.” It is only when Victor no longer sees the raging storm as something outside himself that he can tame it by stilling his own mind and heart. The collapse of inner and outer vantage points invites readers to reflect on our own emotional entanglement with consumerism and its connection to climate change. If we are not fundamentally separate from our world, if the appearances are influenced by mind—as some Buddhism theories suggest—then what is called for is a new way of seeing and inhabiting our world. This is not so much an appeal for austerity measures as for a perceptual shift that can inform our approach to human flourishing and the stewardship of our planet.

In the end, Victor’s transformation from a “storm chaser” to Stormtamer through his heroic act of self-sacrifice did not prevent the dystopian future from which the story is narrated. His legacy nonetheless continues in his rebirth as ‘Treya, who transforms the wreckage into a buddha-field, suggesting that chaos and destruction contain the possibility of regeneration and human flourishing. In Pick’s vision, it is nev-
er too early or too late to attempt to tame the storm, shifting from an observer chasing after the news to an active agent for change, creating alternative horizons for the future. Yet there is also no guarantee that we can reverse the causes and conditions of climate change already set into motion.

HOLLY GAYLEY is Associate Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Colorado Boulder. Her research focuses on Buddhist literature in contemporary Tibet, including biographical writings, epistolary literature, and works of advice to the laity. She is author of *Love Letters from Golok: A Tantric Couple in Modern Tibet* (Columbia University Press, 2016) and co-editor of *A Gathering of Brilliant Moons: Practice Advice from the Rimé Masters of Tibet* (Wisdom Publications, 2017). Her articles on ethical reform spearheaded by cleric-scholars at Larung Buddhist Academy have appeared in the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics, Contemporary Buddhism, Himalaya Journal*, and *Journal of Religious Ethics*. 