

Failsafe in Consciousness: Gaia, Science, and the Buddha

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Gaia

In *The Revenge of Gaia* (2006) James Lovelock extends the impeccable logic that produced the Gaia Hypothesis to argue that the planetary control system, which has worked to maintain conditions suitable for human life, is now working against us. The dependent variable of temperature rise is now a product of this control system and implies that the interconnecting feedback systems will intensify and quickly place the situation beyond human control. The evidence for this is grim. The removal of the snow and ice cover from the sub-arctic tundra permits the heat of the sun to be absorbed by the Earth, rather than reflecting ninety per cent of it back into space. The huge and imminent release of methane gas from the exposed tundra so accelerates global warming that this alone is a major tipping point. The myriad interconnecting set of feedback loops that constitute Gaia all amplify temperature increase in a non-linear manner. Hence Lovelock's dire prediction that: "Before this century is over, billions of us will die, and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable."

Failsafe in Consciousness

In *The Essential Spiral* I coined the phrase “Failsafe in Consciousness” to describe how consciousness expansion will be held in abeyance by human ignorance until the global ecological situation deteriorates to a breaking point. This will then act as a catalyst, penetrating such ignorance and activating consciousness so it is propelled into expansion, deliberation, and change. This apparently naïve view requires more support than I provided in the 2002 work, but I must be very blunt about the context of current ecological, social, and psychological crises.

There is an external environmental pollution crisis on the planet because there is an internal pollution crisis in humankind. In addition to the waste from industrial pollution, there is the suffering from wars, atrocities, dehumanizing discriminations, and our greed and neglect of everything around and within us. The industrial waste and pollution is readily visible, yet the suffering that rests deep in our consciousness is much more intractable and dangerous. Furthermore, the dominant worldview of our global civilization sees the environment and its resources in terms of how it can satisfy our greed and economic self-interest. In claiming the world in this way, the environment has become an extension of human egocentric needs and values—an *egosphere* rather than an *ecosphere*. In this *egosphere*, our preoccupation is that of consuming mindlessly in a global economy, controlled by the collective greed and power of some 200 giant corporations, driven by equally voracious shareholders. There is little regard for ecosystem balance or concern about the creation of increasing inequality and poverty between and within countries. And so we forget that we are part of an interconnected global system. To become ecologically literate we must learn to think about the *ecosphere* in terms of interconnectedness, context and process—the basic principles of all living systems. In doing so, we can transform the accumulated garbage of hatreds, neglect, and anger so that they may become the compost for the garden of the twenty-first century. The three main components of Failsafe in Consciousness are:

1. Innate Earth Wisdom
2. Counter Culture
3. Tipping Points in Consciousness

1. Innate Earth Wisdom

Ninety-nine per cent of our evolution as a species has been predicated on a hunting and gathering adaptation known as foraging—a strategy of adaptation that rested on sophisticated ecosystem knowledge integrated into harvesting patterns and social organization through spiritual ideology. Foragers thus interfere the least with ecosystem resilience, as they know it must sustain them indefinitely. The combination of low energy needs, efficient management of the resource base and controlled population size, means that they minimally disrupt other components in their ecosystem. The fact that this mindset prevailed for ninety-nine per cent of our evolution may provide some cause for hope, as the subliminal memories of this adaptation are stored deep in our consciousness. Just as Gaia is a dynamic system of information circuits arranged in feedback loops, so is consciousness. It is the radical remembering of this mindset that will activate the feedback needed to prevent further degradation of the global ecosystem—the Failsafe notion.

2. Counter Culture

For the corporate world, Paul Hawken's 1993 book *The Ecology of Commerce* led the charge of re-evaluating commerce and redesigning finance capital. The design wisdom of nature is built into Hawken's call for a Restorative Economy, which an increasing number of manufacturers are implementing. This has prompted the emergence of a genuine environmental capitalism as opposed to the corporate "green-washing" that followed the 1992 Rio conference. There is an emerging market for sustainable energy and those companies with the foresight to see it will be the ones that will succeed in the second industrial revolution, particularly as fuel cell technology—which produces no emissions—is drawing considerable investment. From Gregory Bateson we have the critical notion of the Ecology of Ideas.¹ He demonstrates how our modern context has rules that need changing, based on a critical understanding of cybernetics and ecosystems. He shows how ecology is a set of interconnecting feedback loops that include everything. When we destroy some of the interconnecting loops we have an ecology of ideas which reinforce other bad ideas. Bad, that is, for the health of the ecosystem and its components.

3. Tipping Points in Consciousness

In popular culture, the writings of Malcolm Gladwell—bestsellers *Blink* and *The Tipping Point*—have caught the attention of an unlikely audience. Business schools and corporate boardrooms are consuming his notions of simplifying agendas and making positive changes through small intuitive actions. His startling point is that social epidemics can spread when actions are placed within the right context, through the pull of certain strategically placed connectors. He endorses a form of instant mindfulness and changing consciousness in the inertia before a novel thought. Gladwell provides for pop and business culture similar ideas as Bateson, just in a different language. There are many others doing the same on the global stage.

There are over 40,000 citizen's groups, NGOs and foundations in North America that are addressing the issues of sustainability—ecological and social—in a comprehensive manner, and more than 100,000 such groups world wide. Civil society *is* mobilizing for environmental, peace, and justice issues. The most surprising factor is that no one is in charge of this movement. It operates almost as a consensual anarchy. The groups share a basic set of fundamental understandings about the Earth, how it functions as an ecosphere, the necessity of equity and of sharing the Earth's resources for the good of all humanity. Are these simple ideas enough to refocus our attention and make counter culture advocacy a reality for global citizens? The wide variety of organizations that are part of the anti-globalization movement and the emergence of alternative World Forums also feed off these cybernetic loops constituting a loosely defined counter culture. Gaia as metaphor was an inspiration that sped through the feedback cycles of this nascent movement, which objects forcibly to the effects and agendas of the corporate paradigm.

Civil society is waking up, and there is light piercing through the shadows of corporate paradigms. There are many more inspiring groups and advocates for consciousness change, but the question remains: is there enough of a critical mass that can be identified as a tipping point into a new level of consciousness? I remember many years ago in an audience with Sai Baba, the Indian sage, hearing him say that a transformation in human consciousness required at least two per cent of the population to meditate on a daily basis. I have no idea what the knowledge source was for his pronouncement yet I do remember the “buzz” of energy in my body and mind when I heard it. So the identification of the many intricate and powerful feedback loops surely

takes us closer to a tipping point in global consciousness. Gaia has entered contemporary discourse as scientific concept, metaphor, and movement in consciousness change. Lovelock has demonstrated unequivocally where Gaia as scientific concept takes us; yet he has neglected to adequately examine Gaia as metaphor and movement in his cybernetic model. I believe these latter two components have sufficient interconnecting feedback loops to justify a Failsafe in Consciousness. Using Lovelock's own logic, we are fast approaching a tipping point with respect to inner ecology, the creation of a critical mass of humanity with views radically different to the corporate paradigms that currently regulate inter-human and human-planetary relations. Just as the external ecology of Gaia has tipping points so must the internal ecology of consciousness.

With irreversible changes in the planetary web of life, and the dramatic and catastrophic environmental changes that are ensuing, it appears that there is now only one strategy available: change the collective human consciousness.

Why? So that clarity, understanding, and compassion provide the bedrock for human response to the impending crises. How? By entering into a practice of meditation and self-healing that cultivates the energy of mindfulness in our consciousness.

The Buddha

The Failsafe in Consciousness concept and its components all refer to attributes of mind. They are seeds of potential stored in our minds, buried under a general amnesia from which, as a global community, we are just beginning to awaken. To exponentially nurture these aspects of mind it is necessary to draw on liberating teachings about the mind. Thus, I take refuge in the Buddha, whose understanding of the mind came from his awakened consciousness. The Buddha's teachings are about the mind and what to do when the mind is so overwhelmed by suffering that there seems to be no way out. To institute lucidity and compassion as the basis of action, the Buddha provides guidance with a consistent set of teachings, all derived from his first dharma talk on suffering and how to get out of suffering. Thich Nhat Hanh sees the doors of psychology and ecology as providing suitable openings for the Buddha's teachings to penetrate more easily into the Western world, as the Buddha was perhaps the first ecopsychologist. In *The Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha taught that humans and nature are totally

interconnected and that if we want to look after humans we have to look after mother earth. And just as important: if we wish to take care of mother earth we must also take good care of ourselves. The “taking care of” is through meditation, the practice of mindfulness, the actualization of interbeing and being aware of the consequences of our actions. These aspects of meditation, mindfulness, interbeing, and awareness with respect to the earth are found in many spiritual traditions, particularly aboriginal ones. Yet neglect, ignorance, and exploitation of the earth are the present order of the day, whatever the spiritual tradition.

Much of our present consumption fosters violence—to our bodies, to other people, and to the planet. If we are serious about stopping violence and bringing environmental degradation to a halt, we must change our habits of consumption. Then, by generating compassion, refrain from creating internal violence to our systems—and to the planetary systems we interconnect with. We consume much more than edible food. We also consume with our senses, desires, and cravings. This consumption then feeds our store consciousness, which “eats” everything we put into it. If we fill it full of toxins, violence, and other negative energies, then it is this accumulation in our consciousness that drives us. On the other hand, if we feed our store consciousness with mindful nutriments, then a different energy occupies the driving seat of our lives, one that guides us to live lives full of understanding, love, compassion, and joy. This is the energy of mindfulness. The Buddha’s teachings about nutriments provide clear guidelines for the consequences of consumption.

The Buddha continually asserted that mindfulness is our protector. We must use it to distinguish nutriments that nourish our organism and spiritual well being from those that do not. By eliminating toxins from our sensory diet we begin to cultivate an alternative consumption based on patterns that enhance mindfulness and compassion. But we cannot see deeply into the interconnection between nutriment and consciousness until we come to a stop. That is the first meditative step before deep looking and insight help us to recognize the toxic nutriments that pollute our bodies and mind. We then cultivate the sense impression foods that nourish us in a positive and wholesome way. We resist by waking up, by knowing what to do and what to refrain from. Mindfulness and spiritual ethics of practice provide guidelines to restore our freedom.

There are three major conditions that permitted the emergence of the Mindfulness Trainings as a set of spiritual ethics so necessary for our time. The first is the awakened mind of the Buddha; the second is the great skill of the Buddha as a teacher; the third is Thich Nhat Hanh’s

insightful rewording of the Five Wonderful Precepts of the Buddha. In a language that would appeal to the consciousness of the twenty-first century, the Buddha's mindfulness trainings were renewed, in tune with modern planetary, socio-economic, and cultural developments. So when we study and penetrate deeply into the mindfulness trainings, we touch all three conditions, in particular the awakened mind of the Buddha. At the same time we also touch our potential to be similarly awakened—another aspect of the Failsafe premise. With the Five Mindfulness Trainings the Buddha communicated in a very precise way the ethical and moral basis of practice; of how to be with ourselves, others, and with the planet and society at large. There is an energy to the trainings that comes directly from the awakened mind of the Buddha: an energy that is continued through us. Once we grasp the extraordinary qualities and understand the power of the energy created by the mindfulness trainings, then something deep and very wholesome stirs in our hearts. From this initial experience, the seeds of awakening are nurtured within consciousness and distance is created between ourselves and all negative actions that can harm both us and the planet.

In the dark times facing us the Buddha's mindfulness trainings provide protection. Our world needs guidelines like these to live by. Embracing the Buddha's awakened mind in the trainings is taking refuge in the Buddha. Extending it to our society and environment is the foundation of Engaged Buddhism. This is a statement of practice and is our greatest gift to the world—the deep practice of the mindfulness trainings. This enables us to live authentic lives and be free, at the same time ensuring that a future is possible. Our practice and actualization of the mindfulness trainings in daily life defines us as true revolutionaries for the twenty-first century, for we can transform both global terror and environmental degradation.

Conclusion

From my own experience, I know that as a species we must learn to meditate, or at least a critical mass of us must—otherwise the ethical imperative to shift to a new consciousness of our interconnectedness with everything will not happen. Without this shift in consciousness, we eliminate one by one all of our life support systems, and we will become totally alienated, not just from ourselves, but from the Earth we live on. Our evolution and cognition are intricately interconnected with all that takes place within the wider ecosphere of our planet. Our

consciousness is not separate from it, and we have to recognize this. We do this by moving to a radically different perspective, first towards ourselves and second to the incredibly beautiful planet we live on, and realize that the planet is changing. We have to realize that we are part of a changing web of life, and are not the masters of the earth. We need to relate to ourselves and to the earth with a sense of wonder and humility—in a spiritual manner rather than an exploitative one. In this way our knowledge will fuel wisdom rather than create structures of dominance and destruction.

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Notes

¹ Bateson 1972.