

This World Is Not Yours

In a discourse about the teaching of non-self, the Buddha offers the following illustration: “Bhikkhus, what do you think? If people carried off the grass, sticks, branches, and leaves in this Jeta Grove, or burned them, or did what they liked with them, would you think: ‘People are carrying us off or burning us or doing what they like with us?’” “No, venerable sir. Why not? Because that is neither our self nor what belongs to our self.” (M 22)

As we hear this example today, however, we have to admit that it is no longer entirely true. If that grass were being burned in the Amazon forest, for example, or if those sticks were being carried off from the foothills of the Himalaya mountains, there may well be a great number of people who would be quite disturbed. Why is that? Because one of the fundamental axioms of the modern environmental movement is that the entire planet is the precious possession of us all. The very thing that provides for the preservation of the world’s resources is to extend to every blade of grass the same care and diligent guardianship that we would bring to bear upon our most intimate possession. In short, it seems that extending the range of the self to expand and cover the entire earth is the only way to protect it from harm. The whole world is mine, and if you dump your nasty toxins on it I will take it personally and be deeply offended.

Throughout his many teachings, however, the Buddha points out that great harm and suffering emerges from our tendency to define and then protect the self. The self is a flawed strategy, born in ignorance, nurtured by craving, and perpetuated by endless moments of grasping in which we pull toward us that which we like to consider part of ourselves and push away that which we don’t like and consider to be “other.” Might it be that by enlarging the self to embrace the world we are setting up the conditions for greater attachment and suffering?

This is not to say the rainforest should not be protected, but to suggest that the attitude one brings to the task makes a big difference. There is a lot of work ahead of us as we endeavor to rescue the planet from ourselves, and we are likely to be at this work for a very long time. Perhaps we could come at it from the wisdom of the non-self perspective, rather than the passions of the “world is mine” point of view. As the Buddha says elsewhere in the same text, “Whatever is not yours,

abandon it; when you have abandoned it, that will lead to your welfare and happiness for a long time.”

The Buddha had a penetrating insight into human nature. Among the things he noticed is that while some of our best qualities, such as caring, nurturing and protecting, are directed to the things we feel we possess or own, it is also the case that our worst tendencies, rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, organize too around whatever is taken to be “mine” or possessed by “me.” It can be a useful point of view in the short term or from a narrow perspective, but in the end the self is the source of more harm than good. History offers a sad parade of examples of things being destroyed precisely because they are valued.

If this world is not mine, then what is it? The Buddha’s reply: “The instructed noble disciple attends carefully and closely to dependent origination itself thus:

*When this exists, that comes to be;
with the arising of this, that arises.
When this does not exist, that does not come to be;
with the cessation of this, that ceases.”* (S 12:37)

This is the universal formula of dependent origination. It provides a model for understanding the profound inter-relationship between all things, but it is a model that allows for no self. Nothing belongs to anybody; nobody has any self to protect; everything just co-arises with everything else.

If the whole world is my self and someone comes along and burns the forest, it is likely that I will respond with anger, hatred and an urge for revenge. If on the other hand the same action occurs in the context of an attitude of non-self, one still discerns the causal relationship between the action and the suffering it brings to many others inhabiting the same matrix of cause and effect. I can still put a stop to the activity, hold the perpetrator legally and morally responsible for the act, and put in place various safeguards to prevent it from happening again. Now, however, my response is more likely to be guided by wisdom and compassion, and to be grounded in a larger view.

I think the Buddha would argue that one is a more skillful response than the other. And considering how much is at stake, we need all the skillfulness we can muster.

—Andrew Olendzki