

Opening words: Elizabeth Warren

There is nobody in this country who got rich on his own. Nobody. You built a factory out there—good for you! But I want to be clear. You moved your goods to market on the roads the rest of us paid for. You hired workers the rest of us paid to educate. You were safe in your factory because of police forces and fire forces that the rest of us paid for. You didn't have to worry that marauding bands would come and seize everything at your factory, and hire someone to protect against this, because of the work the rest of us did. Now look, you built a factory and it turned into something terrific, or a great idea—God bless. Keep a big hunk of it. But part of the underlying social contract is you take a hunk of that and pay forward for the next kid who comes along.

Reading ONE: Radiohead (adapted from *Hail to the Thief*)

Are you hungry? Are you sick? Are you begging for a break?

Are you sweet? Are you fresh? Are you strung up by the wrists?

We want the young blood. Are you fracturing? Are you torn at the seams?

We suck young blood. Our veins are thin and our rivers poisoned. We need the sweet meats. We want the young blood.

Hey, are you such a dreamer to put this world to rights? I stay home forever, where two and two always makes five. It's the devil's way now; there is no way out. You can scream and you can shout, but it's too late. Why? Because: *You have not been paying attention*. Hail to the thief. All hail to the thief . . . or . . . *Maybe not . . .*

Reading Two

Thich Nhat Hanh (adapted from "Interbeing" in *Peace is Every Step*. Bantam, 1992.)

There is a cloud here in this piece of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. The cloud and the paper inter-are. Perhaps the word "interbeing" should be in the dictionary. If we look deeply, we see that in the paper there is also the sun; nothing can grow without sunshine. The paper and the sun inter-are. We can see the logger. The lumber mill. We see the wheat from fields that fed the logger. For there is no paper

without the logger, and the logger cannot log without daily bread. Likewise, the logger's father and mother are also in this paper. Looking deeply, we see ourselves in the paper. When we look at the paper, it is our perception; your mind and my mind meet in this paper, and we are both there. What is NOT here in the sheet of paper? Time, space, the earth, rain, minerals, the sun, cloud, river, heat--everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains the universe in it. How can it fit?

The paper entirely depends upon non-paper elements, things that are not in themselves paper, such as carbon, and the sun, and the logger's mother. And yet without them, there is no paper at all. To be is to inter-be; like the paper, we *cannot* just be by ourselves alone. We cannot but inter-be with everything. Like the paper, we are inevitably vast; we include all that is other than ourselves. As one Civil War nurse (Walt Whitman) said, "I am large, I contain multitudes." When we pay close attention to who we really are, there is no one *else*, no one who is left out. Acting from this understanding, service is not a strained sacrifice, but a natural activity. Within this mind, helpful care is not exactly compassion for *another*, but more like a reflex, a spontaneous gesture. The right hand does not congratulate the left hand on having given to the poor. No credit, no blame. No trace. This is Buddha.

Closing words:

Everything is divided; Nothing is complete;
Everything looks impressive. Do not be deceived!

—Talking Heads

Some will tell
you it doesn't
matter. That is
a lie. Everything,
every single thing
matters. And
nothing good
happens fast.

Carroll Arnett

Wisdom Occupies Wall Street: A Buddhist Perspective

Guy Newland, incorporating (so to speak) an adapted essay by David Loy
Delivered at UUFCM October 2011

When strange things happen in Wonderland, Alice asks herself, “I wonder if I’ve been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I’m not the same, the next question is ‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle!”¹ Alice then ponders whether she has been changed into her friend Ada, or else perhaps has had the misfortune to become her friend Mabel. For if she has been changed, she has indeed become someone else—and it might well be someone she knows!²

Those who love and raise children experience the poignancy of their rapid transformation from baby to toddler, young child, adolescent, and then adult. Is the baby I rocked on my chest *the same person* as this young man? Or is this *a different person*? We may notice the same problem, and perhaps a similar poignancy, when we look at old photographs. Am I the *same* person as, or a *different* person from, the nine-year-old Guy in the photograph? In different ways, it feels hard to give either answer.

If we are pressed to stay focused on this question and to give an answer, we quickly begin to squirm. Can we really change and still be the same person? Or are we always becoming someone different? Our discomfort with this may cause us to change the subject, or stop paying attention in the face of this pressure to work out the “great puzzle” of who we are. We squirm because there is a profound dissonance between how things really are—flowing, ungraspable, intermingling—and how we usually think and talk about them—as discrete and autonomous concrete units. And it is not just the human self that is like this. Everything is like this.

Take wisdom, for example: What is it REALLY? Do we think it has some essential meaning that will come clear if we say it in a certain way, “WIS-dom” or if we squinch our eyes and regard the matter in a certain light? Do we really suppose that the etymology will reveal something that is absolute and always true? We might feel to search within the word for its essential meaning, but at the same time we are suspicious. Because we know that *wisdom* is a just a word, a grunt from one primate to another. Words are rough tools for working with the superfine quicksilver of the world as we find it, a slipstream of rushing experience, changing instant by instant. With words and thoughts we chop the stream into “things” that we mistakenly take as separate from one another and which falsely seem to us to be solid, permanent, and objectively real. Then we argue fiercely about which words are right. All of this can be good clean fun as long as we remember that all of these words—wisdom, compassion, love, God, person, table—are just rough primate grunts, coarse gestures. None of them are the very point; none *are* the sheer, ungraspable, complex actuality of the world as it flows. None of them are essential or absolute or elemental. There are no perfect words for the moon on a summer night.

In Buddhism, the word “wisdom” is the word we use to point at just this. Wisdom means: open your eyes, wake up and see what is here. Wisdom is the product of close and sustained attention to what is happening, moment by moment. It is one of the greatest virtues because, according to Buddhism, all needless misery is finally rooted in our *not* knowing this, in being deluded about what is really here. Like addicts clinging to a drug, we hold fiercely to a sense that we are substantial, solid, independent, and autonomous. Our schemes to acquire and to harm are grounded in a false apprehension of how we and

others exist, what it means to be a living being. On behalf of an exaggerated sense of self, with fear, anger, and pride, we harm others—as in the case of war or road rage. To satisfy the whims of this exaggerated self, we build up greedy personal wish lists. Yet the path of defeating others and acquiring things leads us not to the happiness we seek, but rather into cyclic fever-dreams of violence and despair.

Of course, we do exist. We are at a loss to say whether we are the very SAME person or a DIFFERENT person from decade to decade, year to year, yet mysteriously we make choices and our choices make a difference, for ourselves and others.

But unfortunately we cannot just leave it at that. To be real, to be alive, we feel that we must, at the basis of our personhood, somehow exist in a solid and independent way. Still, the cells of our bodies are changing instant by instant, right now. And though we desperately wish to believe otherwise, the truth is that beneath the ever-flowing stream of consciousness there is no private, eternal and essential self. We have no natural existence, no independent way of existing.

We instead exist contingently, interdependently. We exist *only* because we depend on our ancestors, our body parts, our food, air, and water, and the other members of our society. We could not and do not exist otherwise. Devoid of any independent or substantial nature, our existence is possible at all only because it is far less rigid, far less concrete, than what we imagine it to be.

Rather than seeing things as they are, we superimpose upon ourselves—and on things around us—a false existence, a self-existence or essential reality that actually does not exist at all. Wisdom means to know the ultimate truth that is the sheer absence, the lack, of any such essence. While this may sound bleak, disappointing, or frightening, it is

the very nature of reality. And it is reality—not fantasy—that is our final hope and our refuge. The path to freedom from needless misery, for ourselves and others, is through wisdom knowing this reality.

Furthermore, if we actually did have the solid, impermeable sort of existence we imagine, then we could *never* change. If it were our essential nature to be the person we are, we would be forever locked into just this. There could be no life—everything would be static and frozen. We could not interact with other beings and the world, growing and learning. We could not become wiser or happier without changing, as Alice feared, into someone *else*.

As we live and grow, we find that we are happy when we can help one another. Living beings, and their suffering, lack any independent reality, but this does not at all negate their existence or the painfulness of their suffering. What it DOES mean is that this suffering is not a fixed part of reality—it *can* be changed. In fact, it *will* change, but whether it gets better or worse depends on causes and conditions—which means that, in part, it depends on what we choose to do.

Meditation means paying close attention to how so-called “things” are actually flickering points in the interdependent web, a web that each instant shimmers into another shape. Buddhist practice involves becoming well accustomed to the sense everything and everyone exist *only* insofar as it is related to something else—and that nothing is ultimately real in and of itself. Since nothing has its own private way to set itself up, each and every thing is the expression of vast networks of relationships with and among other things. There is no bottom, no absolute ground of being, no unconditioned support or starting point. Everything emerges from and passes into the surging and relentless

complexity of innumerable interdependent conditions.

Implicit in clichés such as “every snowflake is unique” is a celebration of our uniqueness as specific living beings. This is almost ok. The subtle but crucial problem is that we believe, usually unconsciously, that our uniqueness arises from an inner essence that is our own personal and private core. And then, in preemptive defense of that core, we harm others; to nurture that core, we build up our greed.

In fact, our uniqueness arises from our distinctive, ever-shifting, and infinite matrix of connections with others. We are unique and important, but we do not *own* our uniqueness. We have no core that is ours alone. Just as Elizabeth Warren preaches that no one gets rich on his own, our intrinsic worth is something that cannot be absolutely private. That we are unique, that we are so very precious: this is something to be grateful for—because we do not pull ourselves up by our bootstraps into intrinsic worth. It is a gift, *we* are a gift, from the whole world.

Wisdom is to know this; and wisdom and love are two sides of the same coin.³ To realize that I *am* the world – that “I” am one of the many ways the world manifests – is the *cognitive* side of the love that an awakened person feels for the world and those that live in it. Love is not a passing feeling; it means being inspired and animated by deep care for the well being of all beings, the 100%.⁴

Now, in practical terms, what does this mean in the face of the current global financial crisis. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek recently spoke to the Wall Street Occupiers at Zuccotti Park: “They tell you we are dreamers. The true dreamers are those who think things can go on indefinitely the way they are. We are not dreamers. We are awakening from a dream which is turning into a nightmare.” Interesting. The Buddha also woke

from a dream: *Buddha* means “the awakened one.”

Now the Occupiers are criticized for the vagueness of their demands. Recently, some did begin calling for higher taxes on the wealthy, a tax on stock trades, and reforms to separate commercial and investment banking. These are worthy aims, but it would be a mistake to think that such measures will by themselves resolve the basic problem. We should really *appreciate* the general, unfocused dissatisfaction that so many people feel, because it reflects a general, unfocused realization that the roots of the crisis are very deep and require radical transformation, a great awakening.

For *Wall Street* symbolizes a great nightmare: our shared delusion that the present economic system – globalizing, consumerist, corporate capitalism – is not only the best possible system but the *only* viable one. Margaret Thatcher claimed, “There is no alternative.” But the events of the last few years ought to undermine that confidence. And these events are a response to dawning awareness that our economic system is now rigged to benefit only the wealthy (the “1%”) at the expense of the middle class (shrinking fast) and the poor (increasing fast). And, of course, at the expense of many ecosystems, which will have enormous harm for our grandchildren and their children. We are waking up to the fact that this unfair system may be cracking up, and that it really *should* crack up and crack open in order for better alternatives to emerge.

It is not only the economy that needs to be transformed – because there is no real separation between our economic and political systems. With the “Citizens United” Supreme Court decision last year – removing limits on corporate spending to influence elections – corporate power seems to have taken direct control of all the top levels of federal and state government, including the presidency. (Obama has received more

campaign contributions from Wall Street than any other president in the last 20 years, which helps explain his choice of economic advisors.) Today the elite move back and forth easily – from CEO to cabinet position, and vice-versa – because both sides share the same entrenched worldview: the solution to all problems is unfettered economic growth. Of course, these folks are also the ones who benefit most from this blinkered vision. So the people who control our economic/political system see no self-interest in any fundamental change.

The Democrats have not become as loony as the Republicans, but on the most basic level there's really not much difference between them. Dan Hamburg, a Democratic congressman from California, concluded from his years in Congress that “the real government of our country is economic, dominated by large corporations that charter the state to do their bidding. Fostering a secure environment in which corporations and their investors can flourish is the paramount objective of both [political] parties.” As Will Rogers noticed back in the 1920s, we have the best Congress money can buy.

At the heart of the present crisis is the economic, political, and social role of the largest transnational corporations. Their constant advertising says otherwise, but the best interests of these corporations are quite different from what is best for the rest of us. The burgeoning power of corporations became legally codified in 1886 when the Supreme Court ruled that a private corporation is a “natural person” under the U.S. Constitution and is thus entitled to all the protections of the Bill of Rights, including free speech.

And this is a huge problem. Corporations are *not* actually people. They are not alive. Filing articles of *incorporation* does not mean gaining a physical, corporeal body. Corporations are legal constructs based on a government charter, which means that rather

than having intrinsic worth as persons, they are inherently indifferent to what actual people experience. A corporation cannot laugh or cry. It cannot enjoy the world or suffer with or for it. It is utterly unable to feel sorry for what it has done; it may rarely apologize, but that is just public relations.

And the key point is that, unlike actual persons, corporations cannot love. As matters stand today, when CEOs of publicly traded companies try to subordinate their companies' profitability to their personal love for the world, they quickly lose their positions because they are failing in their prime directive: to maximize return for shareholders. Corporations are "fuelled" by, and reinforce in us, not love but a very different human trait: Greed. In our corporate-dominated economy, greed for ever more profit is the engine of the economic process. And in order to keep the economy growing consumers must be conditioned into always wanting more.

The anonymous demand for greater return on investment translates into an impersonal but constant corporate pressure for profitability and growth, preferably in the short run. Everything else, including the environment, employment, and the quality of life is subordinated to this goal-that-can-never-be-satisfied. We all participate in this process, as workers, employers, consumers, and investors, yet normally we have no personal sense of moral responsibility for it. Such awareness is lost in the vast scale and impersonality of the system.

Some corporations (usually family-owned or small) take good care of their employees and are concerned about effects on the environment. Of course there were also some slave owners who, as individuals, had genuine concern for the welfare of their slaves; this does not at all refute the fact that the institution of slavery is intolerable. In

the same way, it is morally intolerable and globally insane that transnational profit-driven corporations are right now making the decisions that will determine our collective welfare. We might say that the fate of the world rests in corporate hands, yet this is only a metaphor because they have no actual hands, no hearts, no bodies, no feelings.

It is good that we are *waking up*, beginning to *pay attention*. We are wising up to the fact that although transnational corporations may be profitable, they are structured in a way that makes them morally and socially defective. We will never solve this problem by deploring the particular excesses of BP, or Enron, Citigroup, Lehman Brothers, Morgan Stanley, or Bank of America. The basic institution itself is the problem.

Given their enormous power in our political process, it will be hard work to change the nature of corporations, but it is possible. It is not this particular system, but rather change itself, that is inevitable. Corporations are human creations and their *charters can be rewritten to require social and ecological responsibility*. Groups such as the Network of Spiritual Progressives have been calling for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would mandate just that; similar initiatives are needed throughout the world.⁵ If our destiny is in corporate hands, then corporations must be given some facsimile of a human conscience; they must be made accountable most of all not to anonymous investors but to the broader human communities they affect. Perhaps Occupy Wall Street will be a step toward accomplishing that.

But even this won't be enough. There's something even more basic at stake: the very worldview that encourages and rationalizes this economic nightmare. In Buddhist terms, the problem isn't only greed; it's also a deluded, unrealistic view. It is no coincidence that total corporate dominance burgeoned along with the rise of social

Darwinism, an ideology that misapplies the theory of evolution to social and economic life. It's a jungle out there, and only the strongest survive. If you don't take advantage of others, they will take advantage of you. And Social Darwinism, in various guises, creates a feedback loop: the more people believe in it and act according to it, the more society becomes a social Darwinist jungle. It's a classic example of the Buddhist teaching that we collectively co-create the world.

And this may be where Buddhism has the most to contribute, because Buddhism offers an alternative view of the world, based on a more sophisticated understanding of why we are unhappy and how to become happier. Recent psychological, anthropological, and economic studies confirm the destructive role of greed and the importance of healthy, cooperative social relationships, consistent with Buddhist emphasis on generosity and interdependence.

In other words, the problem isn't only our defective economic and political system, it's also a faulty worldview that promotes, celebrates, and encourages selfishness rather than community and harmony. The modern West is split between a theism that's hard to believe in, and a dog-eat-dog ideology that makes life worse for all of us. Fortunately, there *are* other options.

And Occupy Wall Street reminds Buddhists that it's not enough to seek awakening from our private nightmares. It is time to take our spiritual practice to the streets. As the Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh says: "If we continue abusing the earth this way, there is no doubt that our civilization will be destroyed . . . The Buddha attained *individual* awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop this course of destructive competition for power . . . and profit."⁶

¹ From Chapter Two of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Modern Library (2002) has a nice edition.

² The first half of this sermon draws heavily from my *Introduction to Emptiness* (Snow Lion Publications, 2009).

³ From this point forward, I am using David Loy's ideas and almost entirely his words, somewhat rewritten and rearranged.

⁴ The idea of solidarity with 100%, not just 99%, comes from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship statement on Occupy Wall Street. <http://bpf.org/occupying-the-present-moment>.

⁵ The Network for Spiritual Progressives is <http://spiritualprogressives.org/newsite/>. Information of the proposed amendment is at:

http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/525/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=4159

⁶ This quote is in the original Loy essay. I slightly adapted it as I revised Loy's piece for this context.