

ABC anchor **DAN HARRIS** talks meditation with **SHARON SALZBERG, JOSEPH GOLDSTEIN & MARK EPSTEIN**

# SHAMBHALA SUN

BUDDHISM CULTURE MEDITATION LIFE

NOVEMBER 2014

## Get off the wheel of **Habit**

How to free yourself from habitual patterns of thinking, relating, and acting.

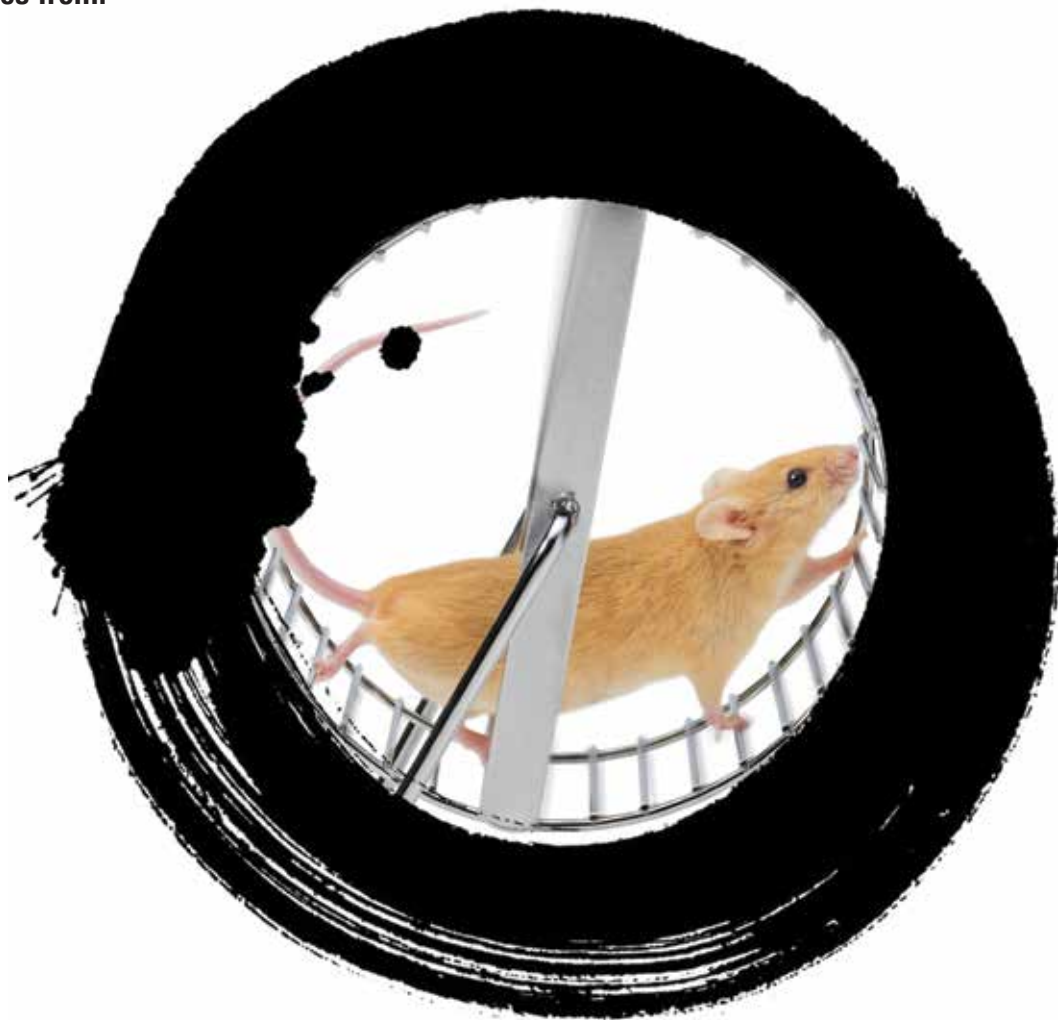
It's the whole point of Buddhist meditation. (They don't call it the Wheel of Life for nothing.)

Helpful teachings & techniques from:

**THICH NHAT HANH**

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**TSOKNYI RINPOCHE**





Contemplador del blanco (1999) by Tomás Sánchez, acrylic on canvas

## Bodhi Trees

In nature we see Buddhist truths unfold, while in Buddhism we find ways to heal the natural world. JESSICA MOREY on *Minding the Earth, Mending the World*.

**MINDING THE EARTH, MENDING THE WORLD:  
Zen and the Art of Planetary Crisis**

By Susan Murphy

*Counterpoint* 2014; 320 pp., \$16.95 (paper)

HOW CAN WE WRAP OUR MINDS around something so vast as the destruction of the planet, and—instead of going mad or numb—grow interested? And how do we slow down enough to quickly take right action?

These are the opening questions of Susan Murphy's new book, *Minding the Earth, Mending the World: Zen and the Art of Planetary Crisis*. Murphy does not shy away from the stark realities of the destruction we are wreaking in every ecosystem on Earth. And though her book is dense with facts, it reads like poetry or a series of koans. The reader can feel the author's presence, the inspiration of her roosters and dog, and the

rhythmic shadow of trees and winter grass outside her window. It's a book that must be absorbed slowly.

Murphy writes, "The hour is beyond 'late' and in our heart of hearts we know it." Indeed, we are living today with the consequences of carbon emissions released two decades ago—and they have only been increasing more rapidly each year since. It's not surprising that so many of us turn to skepticism or silent despair. We do not know how to hold in our hearts the disaster we've created, which may well make the planet uninhabitable for our grandchildren.

At the root of the environmental crisis is our overconsumption of the Earth's resources, our never-satiated greed for more pleasure and comfort. The West has enjoyed the benefits of postindustrial technology for decades, and now billions of people in the developing world, coming out of poverty, understandably want the same. According to our capitalist economic

system, this is a great thing. But it is very much at odds with the carrying capacity of the Earth.

The Buddha pointed to this kind of greed as the root of our suffering, and he taught an end to suffering. He taught us to see the ephemeral, unsatisfactory, and ultimately empty nature of sensual pleasure and comfort and to look instead for a more lasting contentment.

From the start, nature played a central role in the Buddha's enlightenment. As Gautama lay emaciated after years of futile asceticism, he recalled a time when, as a child, he sat in the shade of a rose-apple tree and in quiet solitude experienced an effortless, abiding calm. This memory spurred him to sit under the bodhi tree until he realized full enlightenment.

As the story goes, throughout the night, the soon-to-be Buddha was assailed by the armies of Mara, who personified sensual desire and fear. The Buddha brushed off these temptations easily. Then came Mara's final attack, meant to cast doubt on the Buddha's effort and worth. "Who are you to claim the throne of enlightenment?" he asked. "Who is your witness?" The Buddha silently reached down to touch the Earth, which roared in response, "I am his witness!" And in that moment, just as the morning star appeared in the sky, the Buddha achieved full liberation.

## As a child, the Buddha sat in the shade of a rose-apple tree and in quiet solitude experienced an effortless, abiding calm.

Perhaps the Earth arose in support of the Buddha out of her own self-defense, knowing that the teachings of the Buddha might be her only salvation 2,600 years later—a mere blink in geologic time. The Buddha did not seek support from celestial beings or other realms but from the Earth beneath him. And the Earth can lend us a similar support in our search to understand the central teachings of the dharma—of impermanence, suffering, and no-self.

Today many of us are suffering from nature deficit disorder, estranged from the Earth in our air-conditioned comfort. I am a prime example of this; despite my fierce love of nature, I spend most of my time indoors staring at a screen. But when we do get outside, when we go out into the wild, everywhere we look we can see the truth of the Buddha's teachings.

Impermanence is vibrantly apparent in the weather, the seasons, rivers, and even in rocks. Contemplate, for example, how what was once lava turned into granite boulders and how tens of thousands of years ago, glaciers dragged these same boulders to new locations.

Indeed, Murphy encourages us to look even further back and see the Earth and ourselves as actors in the story of the

universe—a story that began between five and thirteen billion years ago. Murphy writes that we are "inseparable from the ceaseless creation of an unfinished cosmos." We are sun, rain, and soil transformed through food into breathing, sentient beings. With some quiet reflection, emptiness and dependent co-arising are vividly apparent in nature.

This ceaseless changing from one thing into another—prey becoming predator, decomposing leaves transforming into trees—only causes suffering when we cannot perceive it as a shifting whole, when we cannot see beyond our one life.

Murphy provides a striking story that speaks to this truth. She describes an abandoned mining pit in Montana that is still today slowly filling with water toxic from heavy metal. A number of years ago, a flock of geese drank the water and died from festering burns throughout their intestines. Months later, scientists discovered that growing in the pit there was a new form of yeast that has the ability to extract heavy metal from water at a rate nearly seven times more efficiently than other yeasts. They also discovered that this yeast is found in the rectums of geese. Things are as they are.

Not only do the Buddha's teachings provide a powerful view for relating skillfully and compassionately with the Earth, but the Buddhist contemplative practices of meditation and koans may also hold answers to our current environmental challenge. Murphy points out that these practices cultivate a "flexible, non-fixated, creative, and playful state of mind" out of which wise action can emerge.

Mindfulness meditation practices teach us that meeting difficulties directly can be healing, joyful, and deeply rewarding, and this is an important lesson for us as we face the difficulties of the climate crisis. I witnessed the intractable complexities firsthand at annual UN climate conferences, many of which I attended as a clean energy analyst representing both small nonprofit think tanks and multinational organizations. The other representatives and I always came prepared with expert financial strategies and technical solutions, only to find no traction in the political morass. It didn't matter if a proposal would save millions of tons of carbon, spur innovation, and pay for itself through a small tax that would be offset through hundreds of well-paid jobs. It didn't matter that our solution made perfect sense when you took the greater good into account, rather than the short-term profit of a few powerful corporations and their beholden political representatives. Each country, corporation, and politician at these conferences took a perfectly rational position, which cumulatively assured environmental destruction.

Our environmental crisis will be the making or breaking of us as humans in a global community. It's the ultimate opportunity to realize our interdependence and act accordingly with kindness and generosity. To confront the climate crisis, every country must participate, or at least a critical mass of us must decide to trust each other, to broaden our frame from national to global, from short term to long term. We must not only recognize but also act on the truths of interconnectedness and karma.

*Minding the Earth, Mending the World*, like a koan, does not



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photo by Janine Guldener

**TENZIN WANGYAL RINPOCHE**, founding director of Ligmincha Institute, is renowned for his ability to convey the ancient wisdom of Tibetan Bön Buddhism in a way that is highly relevant to Western students. He is the author of numerous books, including *Awakening the Sacred Body*.

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provide easy answers, but Murphy does sprinkle in some signposts. She touches on ideas from the major eco-philosophers of the past half century, including Joanna Macy, Thomas Berry, and Wendell Berry. That said, this is where the book is weakest, a bit too simplistic. The concrete solutions Murphy references feel a bit tired and unworkable, but perhaps it's me who is tired and disillusioned. I was inspired by many eco-philosophers in college only to find no foothold for their ideas in the worlds of Washington, D.C., and international finance.

Murphy also seems a bit too nostalgic toward indigenous cultures in juxtaposition to our plugged-in, frenetic modern society. We definitely have much to learn from indigenous cultures' relationship with the Earth, and perhaps ultimately a wise dialectic will emerge from the discussion between our paradigms, but an overemphasis on returning to indigenous wisdom feels like an internal inconsistency in the book.

If we are to believe that we modern, tech-obsessed humans are embedded in and inseparable from the story of the universe, then Facebook, Google, smartphones, nuclear power, and late-stage capitalism are all perfect threads of this story—not an aberration. So the question becomes: where do we go from *here*?

Reading this book has been a personal call to reawakening. Several years ago, I left my career in climate policy to teach mindfulness full-time, and since then I have mostly ignored the scientific and political developments in the field of environmental policy. My meditative practice has certainly ripened and benefited from this time, but there is a gap between these two passions.

As I put Murphy's book down, I find I have a new, personal koan: How is teaching mindfulness meditation also fighting climate change? Healing this divide might be the most important and joyful practice of my life, for, as Murphy reminds us, "in the end we practice being aware, not for our 'enlightenment' but to ease the existence of all beings who happen to be with us in the ark of the world." ♦

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