

Julie Nelson

*Taking Vows, Attaining Nothing: A Zen Perspective on Personal and Social Projects*

Week Four: “Living on a Fragile Planet”

July 23, 2018



When I was in junior high and high school, I lived in the greater Los Angeles area in a town called La Crescenta that's up against the mountains. When my family first moved there, I didn't know that there were mountains. They were only about a mile away, but this was the mid to late 1960s, and the smog in LA was so bad that I could not see mountains that were a mile away. On a clear day, it was beautiful—reaching out you'd think you could touch the shrubs on the mountains. But the smog was so bad that on some days we could not see them at all. We used to have smog alerts in junior high: we couldn't go outside to play in gym class because they didn't want us breathing that in any more than we had to.

Around that time, environmental consciousness was just beginning. Over the course of time that I lived there, there was activism and legislation including emissions controls, and the smog was actually reduced. That's not the case all over the world. My kids are grown now and have lived in Delhi, India and Changsha, China, where the air pollution is off the charts.

Of course, it's not just air pollution. Climate change, storms that bring rising sea levels, changes to agriculture, droughts and all of the issues that come along with them, plastics in the ocean, species extinctions, and water shortages are all occurring on our planet right now. Unfortunately, the most harm is falling on the people who have the least resources to deal with it and bear the least responsibility for bringing about these detrimental changes. We're living on a sick planet. Our vows of saving all beings and our vows of compassion clearly speak to this terrible situation we're finding ourselves in.

In my second talk in this series, I spoke about living with a sick body. Some of those aspects, and the responses we have to them, carry over to living on a sick planet. Like living in a sick body, one of our responses could be to deny or avoid the situation. For example, we might deny our illness or deny that our illness is staying around, thinking that cures are just around the corner.

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We could deny that we're feeling bad by feeding ourselves opiates or fentanyl. We could avoid facing it.

The sick planet may not be affecting us on a daily basis, unlike the experience of a sick body. This presents us with another avoidance option. Douglas Adams included a great invention in his series *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. He called it the “Somebody Else's Problem” field. In one of the books, there was a spaceship that landed next to a cricket match, and the spaceship didn't want to be noticed. It took too much energy to put up an invisibility shield, so instead they put up a “Somebody Else's Problem” shield. Everybody walking by could see the spaceship, but immediately forgot about it because they considered it somebody else's problem. This is an example of another denial we can get stuck in. Climate change, poverty—somebody else's problem. But if we really are one with the universe, this “sick planet” body is *our* body.

Another response to problems is to immediately jump in and try to fix things, which really means making the world function as we imagine that it should. This is similar to how people with chronic illness tend to get a lot of unsolicited advice about cures. Those giving advice mean well, but can't accept that person just being ill. People tend to want to jump in and fix things right away.

Speaking of unsolicited advice—there's a wonderful book by Toni Bernhard, a long-time meditator, called *How to Be Sick*. The title alone is worth the price of the book. There is so much out there today about how to get healthy. What about how to be sick? What about how to live in a sick world? Health might be possible for this body or for this world, or it might not be. I want to suggest that the first step, counterintuitively, is to give up the project of attaining health. Don't give up responding to the world, but give up the project of attaining personal health and global health.

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As I talked about earlier, making a project like that tends to blind us to what is actually going on. We tend to filter what we see through that project. It turns a lot of our efforts into a variety of “selfing”; a project of trying to make the self *be* good in order to *feel* good. Can we feel the pain of the world, and can we let our response arise from the mind of non-attainment? If that's true, we'll be much less likely to get in our own way, and getting less in our own way, we might get less in the world's way.

There are some Zen teachings that are fairly radical when put up against our “fix-it” mentality, our “wanting to change things now” mentality. This teaching is from the *Xinxin Ming*, also translated as *The Heart of True and Trusting* by Jianzhi Sengcan, the third patriarch of the Chan school. He writes, "The great way is not difficult for those unattached to preferences. When love and hate are both seen through, everything is clear and undisguised. But make the smallest distinction, and heaven and earth are set far apart. If you wish to see the truth, attach to no opinions pro or con. Setting what you like against what you dislike is the disease of the mind. When the deep meaning of this is not understood, the mind's essential piece is disturbed to no avail."

“No opinions, pro or con”? I have plenty of opinions. I can tell you about my opinions all day, pro or con. We tend to think that we need to take sides. We need to know that we're on the good side, and that we're the good people. But there's a centrality of *me* in that. Jianzhi Sengcan continues, "All dualities come from the one, but don't cling even to this one. When this one mind rests undisturbed, nothing in the world offends. When no thing can give offense, things cease to exist in the old way." “When nothing in the world offends”?—I'm very offended by environmental destruction. I'm very offended by meaningless consumerism and the waste that it generates. I'm very offended by tone-deaf industrial actions that keep climate change running along as if on rails. I'm very offended when a species becomes extinct. I could rant about this all day. Yet, note the warnings about this kind of taking offense.

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The reading goes on to say, “To live in the great way is neither easy nor difficult. But those with narrow views are fearful and irresolute. Their frantic haste just slows them down.” But what do we often hear? “Be fearful. Make frantic haste.” This ends up being a lot of what our “fix-it” energy feeds into. I think there is wisdom in these old readings—that when we make a project of healing the planet, we make a goal out there, and we start to filter the world according to that goal. We tend to skip over what's happening right now and instead look toward that utopia—that vision, that goal that's out there. Our filtering makes it very easy to imagine that the problem is caused by some evil that is out there and that we, the good people, can attain purity and perfection by our virtuous actions.

I need to speak here in the spirit of friendly critique—these are people that I mostly know and have talked to—about some writings of Buddhist colleagues, primarily about environmental issues, but about issues of injustice as well. I’m thinking of people like [Dr.] David Loy, [Dr.] Clair Brown, and [Dr.] Joel Magnuson. Particularly, they speak about economic issues—and here, I’ll reveal my other side. I'm actually trained as an economist; I'm a professor of Economics at the University of Massachusetts Boston. But all through my career, I've also been a Critical Economist. I have worked in Feminist Economics and Ecological Economics—areas that are looked down on by the elites in my profession.

I spent a lot of time studying both the economy and what my profession teaches about the economy. This has influenced my perspective on Buddhist teachings about social activism, particularly what that means about the economy and the planet. With regard to the economy, a lot of Buddhist social activists talk about how bad our economic system is. Notably, how it institutionalizes greed, and how it's based on principles of greed, competition, and globalization. Because it's based on these poor principles, these activists argue the need to get rid of the old system; stamp it out, banish it. Then we can create a new economy, a green economy, a Buddhist economy—it goes by many names.

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This Buddhist economy would be based on the diametrically opposite principles. Instead of greed, it will be based on altruism and feelings of care for others. Instead of competition, it will be based on cooperation. Instead of being a global system, it will be based mostly in local community. Instead of being corporate, it will be nonprofit or public community entities. This economy will probably have less technology because even technology is part of the problem.

We build up this vision of the economy we've got now—bad, based on all of these poor principles—and compare this to the good economy, to this vision of where we want to get based on something else. In these writings, there's this idea of the need to stamp out consumerism. Corporations usually get most of the blame. It's said that corporate charters mean that corporations have no choice but to go after every last dollar of profit. In this view, corporations are, by their nature, greedy and need to be either tightly controlled by a public sector or stamped out entirely, depending on your view.

While I'm reading about the evil corporate boards and the need to transform the current patterns, I notice how it feels in my body. I feel an undercurrent of hostility there. I can feel the making of an "us versus them." It is the evil *them*. Buddhanature may be everywhere except for corporate boardrooms. I feel my desire to be good coming to the fore. I feel my desire to externalize those bad things like greed. I feel the thought of, "If only the universe would do it my way," coming up.

But there is a way out of this, and it comes from my study of the economy. There's a much more radical way of looking at the economy and its relation to our fragile planet than thinking, "Current economy, corporate economy—bad. Some new vision of a cooperative economy—good." This radical view is to notice that the economists got it wrong, and that the social activists who want the new economy have totally bought into what my profession teaches.

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When I started studying economics, what I learned from my textbooks was exactly what the social activists are teaching—that our market economy, the corporations and businesses, maximize profit. Markets are essentially, by principle, competitive. Within economics, that competition is considered the invisible hand of markets that serve the social good. Critiques of market economies and corporations take those same teachings about profit maximization and competition and say, “Actually profit is greed and that’s bad, and competition is bad.” In actuality, the critics agree that the economy is all about profit maximization and competition.

I suggest we take a deep breath and take another look at the economy. I’m in the minority of people who say we should take a look. Markets are not that competitive and corporations are not forced to maximize profit. Profit maximization was invented by economists because they had physics envy. Profit maximization allows for the creation of a mathematical model of a firm that looks similar to a physics model. They wanted to create a discipline that looked a lot more like high-ranking macho physics and a lot less like that soft, squishy, feminine sociology. That's where profit maximization came from—it's actually not in the law, it's not in corporate charters, and it's not in legal cases. I have written a book called *Economics for Humans* that goes more in depth about this.

When we say that corporations have no choice, we're actually giving them a Get Out Of Jail Free card. “You have to do that because you have to make profits,” excuses these corporations. But in actuality, they didn’t have to—they’re social entities, they have responsibilities. This false notion is a shield created by economists. Neither are markets entirely competitive. A lot of what is wrong with the economy now is not coming from competition—it's coming from cooperation. It's elites sitting on each other's boards. It's a revolving door between the big banks and the financial regulators. It's cooperation—not competition—that's causing a lot of these problems.

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This idea that we need to move from the current economy to a new economy based on other principles is influenced by a poor analysis of what is going on right now. Going to work and making money—is that always just about greed? The person who gets paid to take care of your children—are they doing it just for the money? Do any of us work just for the money? How we earn money, corporations, and our workplaces are all complicated social relationships.

I propose we step back and take a fresh look at our economies. When we do that, I think it can help us get past “us” and “them.” There's still a great need for citizen action, boycotts, shareholder resolutions, and the like. But when those work, it's often because there's people on the inside of organizations who are human beings, also thinking about the future, and also want to move in a positive direction. If we can give up the concepts of “us” and “them,” we have a much better chance of getting all hands on deck.

It doesn't need to be small community groups fighting governments and corporations, or corporations fighting government, or government fighting corporations. All of these sectors can instead come together to address the problems of the world if we can stop the narrative of “us versus them.” When I read about small community groups and a lot of these personal actions, it's not that they're bad, it's just that they're incomplete. I'm reminded of an episode of *South Park* that my son, who watched the show, told me about: A lot of people in the town decide to be good and virtuous about environmental issues so begin carrying their reusable shopping bags around and driving Priuses. This gets so extreme that the town has to declare a smug alert.

Can we act without the liability of being declared too smug? There is really no way we can personally be pure and perfect. There is no way we can escape responsibility or guilt for our sick, suffering, and fragile planet—but we can respond. To help us get there, we need an open mind of investigation about how our economies and societies actually work, and a mind of

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non-attainment about where we think we're going. The mind of non-attainment is not in contradiction to our vows. The mind of non-attainment is how we live our vows. Thank you.