



OTHER TEACHINGS

# ch of the Sacred, by oy, Part 4 of 4

*Enlightenment, we might well say, is the means by which the self-organizing cosmos wakes up.*



Read [Part 1](#), [Part 2](#) and [Part 3](#) of this series by David Loy.

The American cosmologist Brian Swimme spoke in an interview of what he saw as the “*greatest discovery of the scientific enterprise: you take hydrogen gas, and you leave it alone, and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes, and humans. . . . If humans are spiritual, then hydrogen’s spiritual.*” Needless to say, such an organic perspective differs considerably from the materialist and reductionist paradigm that has been so successful in explaining the world and bending it to human will—a model that an increasing number of contemporary scientists and complexity theorists no longer find persuasive.

One such difference lies in the implications of the new model for how we understand the integral role of consciousness. We usually assume that we are “in” the objective world in much the same way as other physical objects are, yet considerable experimental and theoretical evidence suggests that what we experience as reality does not become “real” until it is perceived. Consciousness is necessary to collapse the quantum wave into an object, which until

then existed only in potential.



According to the Nobel laureate Erwin Schrödinger, the father of quantum mechanics (and an early exponent of Buddhism and Vedanta) in his collection of lectures Mind and Matter:

*“Subject and object are only one. The barrier between them cannot be said to have broken down as a result of recent experience in the physical sciences, for this barrier does not exist. . . . The material world has only been constructed at the price of taking the self, that is, mind, out of it, removing it; mind is not part of it.”*

And if our minds are part of it, we need to revise our understanding of the secular world. Such perspectives call into question the common reductionist view that consciousness is only a product of physical processes.

Laszlow's statement that we are "a being through which the cosmos comes to know itself" suggests that we are an integral part of it, and that we have a role to play. If the cosmos is a great organism, it is something more than the place where we happen to reside. Human beings are an organ of that far greater coherent whole.



In *The First Three Minutes*, the American physicist and Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg famously claimed that "*the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.*" But to examine the universe objectively and conclude that it is pointless misses, well, the point. Who is observing the universe? Who is comprehending that it is pointless? Someone separate from it, or someone who is an inextricable part of it? If cosmologists themselves are a manifestation of the same universe that they study, then with them the universe is comprehending itself. When we come to see the universe in a new way, the universe is itself coming to see itself in a new way. Our ability to understand the universe is another product of the same laws we have been discovering.

Weinberg's bleak conclusion is very different from the traditional mythologies of ancient civilizations. For all of them, humanity is part of a larger pattern, and we have an important role

to play in maintaining that order. The performance of religious rituals was essential in this process. For moderns, the ancient myths and rituals don't hold the same power they once did, for the beliefs that underpin them no longer reflect our deepest sense of the world.

But our commonly held belief that the universe is ultimately pointless is problematic in its own fashion. From one perspective meaning is inescapable: it is built into our priorities. If my focus is "looking out for number one," the meaning of my life becomes the promotion of my own self-interest. This orientation, however, is based on the premise that I exist as separate and independent from my world. But in a universe that is a living, coherent whole, this premise is nothing short of delusion, and my own well-being cannot really be separated from the well-being of others. The more widespread the delusion, the more harmful the consequences for the functioning of a whole society.



One uniquely human characteristic, emphasized by Buddhism, is that we can develop the ability to "dis-identify" from anything and everything, letting go of the individual sense of a separate self. This can be extended as well to our collective selves. We can dissolve the dualisms that are basic to patriarchy, nationalism, racism, and so forth. The nonattachment developed in

meditation can allow us to dis-identify with either side of any dualism and realize ourselves in and as the whole. As the great 13th-century Zen master Eihei Dogen wrote...

*“I came to realize clearly that mind is no other than mountains and rivers and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars.”*

The fact that human beings have the capacity to recognize themselves as a manifestation of the entire cosmos opens up a possibility that, if embraced, may help us through the crises that now confront us. Recognizing that we are not separate from the rest of the biosphere brings a deep sense that the whole earth is our body and an aspiration to live out the implications of such realization. Instead of continuing to exploit the earth’s ecosystems for our own supposed benefit, we can choose to work as contemporary bodhisattvas, for the well-being of the whole. ***Enlightenment, we might well say, is the means by which the self-organizing cosmos wakes up.***



*In Search of the Sacred*, was written by [David R. Loy](#), a professor, writer and Zen teacher in the Sanbo Zen tradition. This article was originally published in the Spring 2017 issue of *Tricycle Magazine* as [In search of the Sacred, Buddhist Reflections on the Secular](#).

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