

Darwin as Teacher of Oneness

Evolution Sunday

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Welcome to the annual celebration of Evolution Sunday and the observance of the birthday of Charles Robert Darwin, who is considered a venerable ancestor in our Blue Lotus Buddhist School. This annual event is our way of contributing to the very important dialog around religion and science in the 21st century.

Let me begin by defining some terms, and then I will show why, in my opinion, Darwin belongs in our esteemed lineage. Many folks ask me to give a simple definition of Buddhism. I explain that the word *Buddha* is not really so much a noun as it is a verb; it is etymologically related to our word *bud*, as in the description of a flower *budding*. Understandably then, the word *Buddha* has been translated as *awakened* or *one who is/has awakened*.

The next question I often hear is: "To what did the Buddha become awakened?" Our simple answer is that the Buddha became awakened to the Oneness of all life. What then, is Oneness? *Oneness* is understood to mean that all life in the universe is deeply interconnected and interpenetrating. In ancient Buddhism, it was called, in part, *pratityasamutpada*, or Interdependent Origination. This insight is attributed to Shakyamuni (considered the historical Buddha) who, through observation and personal experimentation, discovered that everything exists in dynamic and dependently arising relationships. This was not only true of the 'outer' world of nature but also of the 'inner' world of consciousness.

It is said that at the end of the Buddha's spiritual quest, he looked up from beneath the Pipal tree where he sat in meditation and into the dawning sky. Seeing the planet Venus, he declared, "That's me! I am the Morning Star shining so brightly!" He seemed to understand that his very life was a cosmic event, the result of innumerable karmas (causal relations), and so is the life of each of us.

This led him to create a movement that would address, therapeutically, the existential suffering of our species. To that end, he taught a practice that would lead to liberation from the view that we are separate, lonely aliens in life to a vision of human beings as an unfolding evolution of connectedness and compassion. We could move from being anxious, security-driven creatures into relaxed, completely self-giving, awakened beings. We could transcend a survivalist-oriented consciousness that kept us trapped in delusive, fearful reactions resulting in the

mind poisons of greed and hatred and grow into a larger, more spacious, universal consciousness where we would awaken to our connectedness in a meaningful oneness of being.

This is where I believe that Darwin comes in. Through his particular game changing theory of evolution, he has made a unique impact on the contemporary world. However, his insights came into a world still shuddering beneath the veil of defensive delusion. Human beings still quivered with the anxiety of self-conscious ancestors who sought to ameliorate their fears through powers and deities that they imagined were in control of what seemed to be a most chaotic existence. In this milieu, Darwin's message was not received as a way to understand our commonality, but as a threat to our uniqueness. His ideas were a challenge to widely accepted notions in which some humans were deemed lower than others, closer to the animal world of which those more fortunate were the masters. The Victorian culture of the day reeled into a sexual repression that could even be seen in the growing number of utensils at the dining table and even the names of the food that was consumed had to be delicately changed to hide their hidden bestiality (a turkey leg became a "drumstick", the breast and thigh became "white meat" and "dark meat"). Some took his insights to mean that life was meaningless, a nihilistic arena where only the strong should survive. A laissez-faire economic system encouraged the victimization of the buyer to the deceit of the seller, and status was a test of the will to power. Horrible acts of genocide and social engineering would be carried out in the twisted image of a "Social Darwinism".

But, I ask you, was this really a clear understanding of Darwin's ideas? Did his theory really say that we are just hosts to a parasitic and blind force of gene expression? Was it his intention to bring humans into a dark despair where survival of the fittest would be our only realistic reaction? If we look at the latest research, we realize that this was far from the truth. It appears that as a young student he moved from studying for the priesthood to following the inspiration of botany professor, John Stevens Henslow, who understood scientific work as religious natural theology. Recently, authors David Loye, Adrian Desmond and James Moore have helped restore the missing ethical core of Darwin's work. They show us a man propelled by a passionate hatred of slavery, which allowed him to risk so much in embracing the radical view that all of life was One in an evolutionary dance of adaption.

May we always be grateful for his great contribution to the human story of awakening.