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The COVID-19 Pandemic: An Environmental Humanities Perspective



From Anthropause toward a More Ethical Whole-Earth Vision

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by Julie Hawkins



Abstract

There are noticeable parallels between instituting a global plan to deal with COVID-19 and the need to respond urgently to Earth's accelerating ecological crises; human behavior has affected environmental factors, contributing to both situations. The Anthropause during 2020 to 2021 has demonstrated that consistent changes in day-to-day occupations and industrial operations can favor a behavioral shift designed to select a cleaner, rebalanced Ecosphere over one that is utterly compromised. The choice to facilitate the more ethical alternative, the whole Earth vision, must also deploy behavioral change. The approach discussed here draws on three eco-philosophical concepts: "ecosphere thinking," Daoist "wu wei," and a "deepened aesthetic experience" to support a viable path. In comparison to the sudden arrival of COVID-19, the compromised ecosphere is a consequence of long-term thinking and living under the influence of a Human/Nature binary opposition reliant on objectifying Nature. If certain values, ethics, and circumstances have promoted behavior that degrades the natural world, then thinking of Earth as a "whole planet" could shift humankind's general orientation away from Human/Nature binary thinking toward a more purposeful, empowering "ecosphere thinking." Emphasizing life-honoring values and behavior in educational systems world-wide will improve the prospects for coming generations on this fast-warming planet.

Keywords: ecosphere, behavior, ecology, ethics, whole, earth



About the Author

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From Anthropause toward a More Ethical Whole-Earth Vision

Julie Hawkins

Notable parallels exist between the global problem of addressing COVID-19 and the increasingly urgent need to respond to Earth's escalating ecological crises. Both situations involve changes to human behavior relating to environments.

In 2020–2021, a series of worldwide lockdowns occurred in a period named the Anthropause (Rutz et al. 2020, 1156–59), which altered humanity's ecological behavior temporarily, as authorities implemented hygiene and isolation rules to reduce COVID-19 outbreaks and led to two historically significant events: 1) the pause in industry and 2) the shift in ecological behavior. The incidence of reduced emissions and altered personal habits demonstrated that a similar approach might be applied to changing habitual behavior that is damaging to Earth's ecosphere, and thus revolutionize societal and industrial approaches toward climate adaptation. This paper suggests a strategy toward shifting ecological behavior patterns in communities, grounded in eco-philosophy from Freya Mathews, J. Stan Rowe, Anthony Lynch and Arne Naess. For a society to have damaged the ecosystems it needs for continued survival in this way supports theories that a general sense of cognitive separation from the natural world has occurred. This is perhaps more noticeable in industrialized/urbanized parts of the Global North where a connected sense of disengagement has been responsible for widespread ecosystem loss worldwide. To help remedy these problems, a shift to values, customs, and practices aligned with a virtue ethics approach is suggested, combined with the introduction of ecosphere thinking, with a widened deep aesthetic experience, elements of Daoist *wu wei*, and a practical approach to spreading environmental and ecological literacy in communities.

The section begins by briefly exploring how behavioral changes have been encouraged as a means to prevent spread of COVID-19 during the Anthropause—a term suggested by scholar Christian Rutz and colleagues for the period during global

lockdowns when a silent stillness fell over cities as business activities moved onto the internet. This is followed by a discussion of Environment-Human attitudes, particularly as affected by a generalized Human/Nature binary opposition, much discussed in literary criticism and ecophilosophy, leading into a discussion of *wu wei*, a Daoist approach to undoing the human/nature binary, which is acknowledged as an artificial, superimposed element of an anthropocentric worldview. Ecosphere thinking is then introduced as an important means of shifting societal values, after which the deepened aesthetic experience suggested by Lynch, and Naess's idea of *Friluftsliv*, a key Norwegian term unpacked as having fun time out of doors, a key approach to reconnecting with Nature (Naess 1989, 178). The term "Nature" is capitalized throughout this article to differentiate it from the more general use of "nature" which has the meaning of "character" or "essential qualities of a person or animal," and also as a means of respecting the importance and force of Nature as being worthy of moral considerability as the source of all life. Such recognition arises from the realization that without Nature in the form of Earth, humanity and other species cannot continue to exist, let alone thrive.

Behavior Change during the COVID-19 Lockdowns

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a plan was devised to prevent exponential spread of the virus. The approach involved initiating then enforcing worldwide behavioral change. The suggested changes originated in scientific and medical advice and involved altering personal hygiene habits and reducing movement and socializing in communities; it was supported by an evolving and eventually comprehensive framework for effecting these changes. This experience alone sufficed to demonstrate how humankind is capable of deliberately choosing to live differently.

Robert West and Susan Michie published several articles together and also researched with Maartje M. van Stralen, and with G. James Rubin and Richard Amlôt, suggesting various aspects of a plan to facilitate society-wide behavior change as a means to halt or prevent future health threats due to contagion. They developed a "Behavior Change Wheel Framework" aimed at designing interventions, utilizing a COM-B analysis (West, Rubin, and Amlôt 2020, 451). This approach employs a comprehensive social framework to establish behavioral goals (Michie, van Stralen, and West 2011, 4; West et al. 2020). Their plan for preventing infection would guide behavior by reducing opportunities for zoonotic infections and preventing initial and later spread within human communities, while building resilience into public health systems and minimizing sociological inequality. Scholars Susan Michie and Robert West's (2021, 750) analysis points out not only intervention types but also policy options "most likely to be effective in a given situation." Their work set the premise that "for any behavior to

occur, people must have: a) the relevant physical and psychological capabilities; b) the opportunity; and c) greater motivation to perform that behavior than anything else they could be doing at the time” (2021, 750). They stated that “behavior then feeds back,” while capability and opportunity feed into motivation and can even increase it (750). This means that changing behavior can in turn influence capability, opportunity, and/or motivation in mutually reinforcing ways.

The research suggests that general behavior change can also be achieved ecologically by introducing a fresh, structured approach to society’s functioning. Despite some resistance to efforts at altering societal behavior, there is a case for introducing small general changes accompanied by an ecology-based approach to extend community education in eco-literacy, values, and ethics.¹ This would ideally be freely available to all age groups as a crucial element in addressing the growing climate crisis. The term Anthropause was suggested by Rutz et al. (2020) to refer to the time when industry and commerce were paused during enforced global lockdowns, and has shown that people can willingly follow a set of restrictions if they know it protects their families, themselves, and the wider community (1156). This is backed by research carried out by Schultz et al. (2001; 2005) on relations between self, family and community, and the biosphere. As far as restrictions go, it is a feature of daily living for people in most places of employment to follow guidelines and restrictions on their time and activities routinely, in order to earn the income that supports them and their families to access housing, food, and the other necessities of life.

Research into these elements has led to the suggestion that a similar framework to that outlined above, but based on eco-philosophical and educational concepts, could play an important role in the project of altering behavior to address the climate crisis. A philosophy/education-based approach would offer increasingly accessible education, while mediation could involve community discussion—as a project—to improve environment-related behavior (Hawkins 2023, 124). Communities could learn a range of skills together and apply adaptive measures to meet the challenges associated with the increase in unpredictable weather events and permanently altered environments and landscapes (125). This would involve populations in learning additional skillsets to join new professions, which would then incorporate ecosystem and biome restoration-based activities that can address ecosphere rebalancing and move communities out of the way of harm.

How Changes to Behavior Reduced Industrial Pollution during the Anthropause

During the Anthropause, people stopped moving around communities and between nations, as most travel and employment outside the home ceased. Those working in

crucial medical, scientific, and service roles kept utilities functioning and provisions available to prevent the spread of the virus. Further, corresponding lockdowns and restrictions relied upon the public to conform with limitations on their behavior, while researchers worked to develop new vaccines. These changes in societal behavior patterns impacted the planetary ecosphere as emissions slowed, reducing air pollution drastically. That this was a temporary side-effect of COVID-19 restrictions showed that more long-lasting measures would be needed to make a real difference to the causes and effects of climate change. As cities suddenly grew silent, skies became cleaner and rumors circulated about birds and other animals changing their behavior. Multiple wildlife studies were launched with one scientist filming “deer and other animals wandering around during daylight,” as automated cameras filmed “vulnerable” animals, and scientific studies were conducted worldwide (Stokstad 2020, 893). These examples demonstrated that some recovery of ecosystems and biological organisms could still occur should built-up industrial pollution be allowed to dissipate. It is certain that in terms of environmental ethics, the world’s diverse religious and philosophical traditions would have much to offer a joint approach and would complement one another in terms of shared values of compassion and empathy. Further, these values might partner with virtue ethics and Daoist *wu wei*, and, taking an eco-literacy approach, could join with science to encourage ecosphere thinking, to shift behavior in the diverse areas of traditional, agricultural and urban lifestyles.² These ideas will be considered in the next section.

An Approach to Shifting Behavior Patterns in Communities through New Capacities, Opportunities, and Motivations

In developing new capacities, eco-literacy would need to be introduced through mainstream educational programs made available for all students and citizens, making it accessible as life-long learning. Courses concerned with developing creativity would also help shift ecological behavior patterns away from negative views and toward the neutral by introducing non-linear and non-conceptual practices which tend toward more openly positive and less objectifying and dualizing behavior.

The creation of new opportunities with ecologically interesting and diverse environments could begin with homes and workplaces and involve travel by incorporating a practice of effortless respect toward Nature. Developing stronger social “norms” around the mitigation of ecological degradation would also include encouraging Earth-honoring behaviors. Fostering new values would play a significant role in developing fresh, Nature-oriented motivations and encouraging new ways of identifying with Nature through a sense of friendship via practical experiences, such as creating

gardens and learning how to care for them while preventing eco-logical degradation. How can stronger social “norms” be developed to inspire people to live more nature-oriented lives? The activities described above involve a Nature-based virtue ethics, indicating ways of going along with Nature rather than opposing it, including learning to be less divisively action-oriented and oriented more harmoniously toward agency. These are qualities associated with *wu wei*, and this approach will become clearer in the next section. First, consideration must be given to how opposing attitudes and views will need to be addressed before a fresh approach can be considered.

Environment-Human Attitudes: Toward a New View, Elements, and Impediments

In an anthropological context, Tim Ingold’s writings on dwelling and livelihood from his research on hunter-gatherer societies have described how people can perceive the natural world in two different ways. He writes that “the contrast . . . is not between alternative views of the world; it is rather between two ways of apprehending it.” Only one of these, the Western, he notes, “may be characterised as the construction of a view, that is, as a process of mental representation.” As for the other, “apprehending the world is not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view of the world but of taking up a view *in it*” (Ingold 2000, 42). This quotation casts light on the subject of viewpoints and how individuals can situate themselves differently within Earth’s ecosphere.

Ingold suggests it is more a question of how Nature is related to, as in whether one considers oneself to *inhabit* the landscape, or whether one simply *visits* it. In general, human beings inhabit buildings as dwellings, homes, places of work and study, and of refuge while landscapes are generally places to be visited. Human cultures are accustomed to erecting various types of dwelling, from tents to houses and apartments, in which people dwell indoors much of the time, and go out-of-doors to travel, to engage with the community, or in outdoor work or exercise. Ingold’s suggestion is that people who no longer live in areas of natural wilderness, but rather inhabit built-up and urbanized areas, tend to participate in a worldview that is based on living *indoors* rather than *out-of-doors* or *within Nature*. Ingold’s point is that people can experience a sense of disengagement from Nature, due to perceiving it differently from those who still live naturally as inhabitants within areas designated as wilderness. This experience of disconnection arises from a lifestyle in which people tend to feel a sense of unease as if they belong outside of wild nature and are looking into it. In contrast, those still situated in nature-oriented cultures appear to experience inhabiting the world more fully and naturally. This is not only a matter of how the world is perceived, but of how it is inhabited, and what one’s specific mindsets regarding inhabitation involve. Concepts,

perceptions, and beliefs about the world and how to inhabit it influence one's state of mind, and questions might arise such as "why are we here?" and "who controls how we live?" A further and very significant question might be "how have we been taught to understand and view the world?" The extent to which this includes either subject-object thinking or ecosphere thinking relates to a) whether belonging is experienced in homes and towns, and b) whether ecospheric values are held. For example, can one think of oneself as a participant in Earth's natural ecosystems?

A range of significant studies that consider how people relate to the environment through sets of values, have accessed the Schwartz values model to understand how accepted human-nature values, feelings, and interactions have come about (Schwartz 2012). These include two studies published in 2005, one authored by Thomas Dietz et al. and the other by P. Wesley Schultz et al., which both consider the relationship between values and environmental concern. In two further studies published in 2022, Sneddon et al. (2022) also engaged with the pandemic's impact on environmental values, while Daniel and colleagues (2022) examined changes in personal values arising due to the pandemic.

Worldviews that influence this complex human-environment understanding are sustained by systems of values further underpinned by beliefs held within communities, some of these based on binary oppositions, such as human/Nature (Milstein et al. 2023). When underpinning beliefs involve such contradictory ideas and perspectives, and the conditions under which such views were formed begin to change, communities might become increasingly polarized. This can lead to an us/them perception and invoke a kind of class/values warfare. Introducing education for general ethics and environmental values in communities would support activities for reengagement with Nature, through friendly, mediated experiences in local uncultivated spaces.

The concepts under consideration here involve mental faculties of thinking and attention. However, there is a missing piece: what is it that forms a connection between oneself and the outdoor world, between concepts about ethics and trees and woodlands, and a physically grounded experience in which such ideas are felt as an experience *in situ*? Both awareness and a connected aesthetic experience are involved in feeling such a grounded connection with the world. Tony Lynch, in writing about an aesthetic approach to deep ecology has noted that "one thing the aesthetic mode of vision does do is to entirely rule out the propriety of *instrumental* attitudes" toward the natural, because in the peak aesthetic experience "the will is silent." This silent kind of deeper awareness can only rule out instrumental attitudes because it is simply a state that is beyond words. Lynch adds that, although "the will is silent *in* aesthetic experience, it most assuredly is

not silent *about* such experiences” (Lynch 1996, 153). The aesthetic experience allows awareness to open in silence and in connectedness with Nature, and such an encounter is not to be forgotten. Like a profound experience of mindfulness, and like the encounter with a deep sense of oneness, the aesthetic experience is connected with *wu wei*, which is also free of instrumental attitudes, indeed of any attitudes. The sense of being interconnected with Nature is a common way to describe being in the world in a way that seems to transcend the ordinary aesthetic appreciation of what appears beautiful or of that which is admired. A deepening of personal aesthetic experience can allow each person to feel interconnected with the life in Nature, more grounded toward Earth, and less separate through identifying with mental concepts. This suggests the benefit of encouraging deeper, more nature-oriented aesthetic experiences, as practices to regain a sense of groundedness within the Natural.

The range of approaches to spending time in Nature also includes forest bathing and forest walking. Like Ingold’s explanation of two ways of being within the world, these practices can also involve two ways of encountering Nature: one that seems to adopt a view from outside Nature, while another experiences being a natural participant and inhabitant within Earth’s ecosphere. This experience is connected with letting go of a subject-object orientation (the view from outside) in order to approach ecosphere thinking and live as a participant in Earth’s Ecosphere (the view from within).

If the next urgent step to be faced by civilization is to adapt behavior to a more logical and ecologically ethical level, then retraining citizens in ecological values and ethics is a further key activity. Retraining is routinely applied in society as new practices enter educational, business and industrial spheres; when adapted for use in communities, it could also involve a practical and careful restoration of local ecosystems, which would help people experience more connectedness to Nature. Society’s day-to-day activities have long fostered a cultural and personal disconnectedness from the natural through the use of objectification, in which each person seems to be a subject who interprets the world as a space filled with useful objects. However, a deepened aesthetic experience would approach letting go of habitual objectifying behavior altogether, so that individuals can reengage their ecological awareness. Pairing this with training in contemplation and education in eco-literacy, would contribute to a *metanoic* shift toward ecosphere awareness.³

***Wu Wei*: A Non-Subject-Objectifying Approach**

Wei wu wei is a Chinese term from Daoism which is usually translated as *action-non-action* and indicates how the world’s activity ranges from very active to non-active, yet also

allows for agency. *Wu wei*, or *non-action*, is not entirely inactive, but rather makes the best use of agency in order to avoid activity that not only objectifies but does so energetically. *Wu-wei* involves intuitive understanding of how to go with the flow rather than tackle a matter head on and in an oppositional way. For example, one might walk uphill beside a stream rather than walking within it and against the flow of water. *Wu wei* has been called the way of water, which demonstrates how it can represent a powerful *natural* force, rather than a calculated, manufactured way of opposing. The Way itself in Daoism is the *Dao*. Yet it is not an activity of avoidance, but more a nuanced way of moving through and around the edges of circumstances (and currents) with graceful agency, rather than oppositional action. While taking up a stance of being the subject to a world of objects is the usual way of subject-objectifying, *wu-wei* side-steps this by engaging in fluid agency allowing one to move toward one's direction without crashing into whatever lies in the path. *Wu Wei* is a way to negotiate the ecosphere through skillful means.

Moving towards Personal Agency for Change, with *Wu Wei*

According to Chinese philosopher Laozi, when humans have lost their way, good is no longer found everywhere. And further, only “when *dao* is lost ... does the doctrine of virtue arise” (Laozi, *Dao De Jing*, Ch. 38). When one has the *Dao* (the Way) a doctrine of virtue is not needed, for one is naturally aware and absolutely good. It is only when this highest virtue has been forgotten that the world needs laws to enforce virtuous behavior, and education to teach virtue.

In relation to behavior, eco-philosopher Freya Mathews (2009) discusses a Daoist approach of *wu wei* with *strategia* as “the best way of negotiating the field of influences and conativities [volitions] in which one is immersed,” which is generally to adapt to them. *Adapting to* is seen as better than seeking “to force those influences into compliance with one's own will” (9). *Strategeia* relates to the ancient Roman use of strategy, as in a strategic approach. Thus, one would walk uphill beside the downhill-running stream, rather than forcing one's way through the resistance of the free-flowing water.

The Daoist *wu wei*, “the way of least resistance,” can be understood not simply as giving up one's own ends in deference to the ends of others, but *rather*, Mathews (2009) writes, as “tailoring one's ends to those already in train in one's environment,” and using the energies that are already in play, “to further one's goals” (9). Here the suggestion to use strategies reflects the use of an *askesis* relating to values of a deepened ethical system, in which adaptation might best occur through fitting in with the dynamic energies of Earth's life-field, through *wu wei*-inspired strategies that allow for agency. This could be

approached as an adaptation away from the objectifying and dualizing industrial model discussed in the previous section, an adaptation that moves human industry toward the goals of reengagement with Nature and nature-oriented living. The *wu wei* approach suggests that education and mediation would be more useful than force, in which the introduction of training courses and mediative ecological guidance in communities worldwide could be partnered with a mixture of new laws to both encourage engagement and deter resistance. The mediation would serve to assist movement away from anthropocentrism and toward nature-orientation and would be a way of assisting people to rejoin Nature and rediscover their youthful curiosity about how humans can participate harmlessly in the natural world. Mathews writes: “In *strategia* cognition remains in the service of agency,” yet she adds that it is not as though the sage “does not discover anything about the nature of reality. What is discovered is that *strategia* calls for accommodation” (Mathews 2009, 10). Accommodation is a form of adaptation, and it enables agency for a return to engaging with a wilder more natural Earth.

In Daoism, the wild is respected in its own right as life, and practitioners are closer to it with a naturalistic lifestyle and deep life-respecting ethic; we can all learn something from observing the natural world as it carries out its processes free from interference. Indeed, John Patterson has written that “when we follow *dao* rather than our desires, all is well. The *dao* that we should follow is the uncontrived *dao* of nature—*wu wei*.” He suggests that “we need to learn the spontaneous simplicity of nature, in which all beings evolve harmoniously.” Rather than imposing an unnatural order “by trying to separate natural items and events into the good and the not good, the desirable and the not desirable, we must simply let nature take its own course” (Patterson 1997, 122).

One reason *wu wei* is considered a suitable approach to a more nature-oriented worldview is that it can free us from “inappropriate values.” Patterson suggests that we can try not to be too attached to conceptual distinctions as these tend to drive us to “contrived action.” *Wu wei* would direct us to seek “the sort of good we can achieve with ease,” which is uncontrived and closer to the natural environment (Patterson 1997, 16).

Such might involve, in Mathews’ words, “adapting our ends to those of others in our immediate environment and harnessing processes already under way to achieve our ends” (Mathews 2009, 11). This might involve such solutions as “free-riding on winds, rains, solar radiation and natural geometries and topographies, for instance” (11). But it could also point toward “more subtle strategies, shaping ourselves to our environment in ways that involve a reciprocal effect” (Mathews 2009, 11).⁴

Ecospheric Thinking: An Approach to Living on Earth

While Earth's ecosphere consists of the geosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere, and biosphere, these are not separate spheres but are engaged in a dynamic interaction between systems and currents that operate in perpetual motion. In effect, the ecosphere is the whole-Earth, and its multiple interactions are the flow by which it maintains its functions. Ecospheric thinking, therefore, arises from an understanding that human beings, like all species on Earth, are participants in the fluid movements of Earth's ecosphere, and are non-separate from it. J. Stan Rowe's writings introducing ecosphere thinking, encouraging people to think about Earth's ecospheric balance and offering suggestions for change. Unfortunately, the industrial and technological operations of the twenty-first century have tended to consist of activity that opposes ecospheric balance, going more often against the flow rather than with the natural circulation of energy in the usual functioning of Earth's systems, currents, and cycles.

Although imbalances are increasing due to forceful extractive and divisive actions by industries, individuals can have their own agency and encourage changes in their local communities. But it will be the task of industries to respond to reports based on the latest research findings and swiftly initiate more harmonious ways to cooperate with the overall community effort toward change. One approach for individuals might be to begin restoration work in local ecosystems, where they and their communities will be free to shift their behavior and encourage a gentler, more respectful engagement with Earth. Unfortunately, the quest to finalize agreements between businesses, appropriate levels of governments and community bodies represents an immense challenge due to viewpoints. Ecological change comes person by person. The challenge of recontextualizing societal values to reflect greater concern with the balance and health of the whole-Earth environment remains reliant on educational interventions. The gentle introduction of *wu wei*-based philosophy through Qigong, Tai Chi, and the martial arts has made a difference, but a wider inclusion in educational programs would be needed to have a more general effect on world culture. For it engages with a deeper aspect of reality by either transcending viewpoints or by not engaging with them at all.

Ecosphere thinking itself would involve an awareness that humans are participating in the ecosphere along with all other life-forms, an approach which knows Earth's interconnected systems and processes to be naturally interrelated and always interacting. However, it seems as if the industrializing culture which engages with Nature through technology has somehow become distant from this natural relationship. This indicates a worldview that is out of touch with the authentic reality.

Viewpoints are an important determinant of how people think about Nature, and these are connected with worldviews which relate more to overarching views about reality. If a person's point of view represents the world conceptually by objectifying it, then the habit of dualizing by perceiving divisions can be reduced through practicing mindfulness, refreshing the mind and the imagination. Traditionally, specific *askesis* techniques have been used in philosophical and religious contexts to reach experiences of deeper awareness in the present moment, and even approaching nondual awareness by temporarily letting go of objectifying so that the world can be engaged with, just as it is, free from judgement.⁵ Relating to the world in this way, one no longer feels separate, and gradually comes to experience Nature as home. One can free oneself from subject-objectifying behavior, and from habitually dividing oneself off from the rest of the world. Practicing traditional contemplation can also reconnect one with an innate relationship with the natural, by engaging in an ongoing sense of mindful interconnectedness.

The difference here is between adopting a viewpoint about reality and knowing reality directly. The human viewpoint based on industrial conceptualizations of *nature as resources* is not an innate worldview, but an artificially constructed view. It does not respect the natural order of the physical planet. Human beings have simply become practiced at adopting selective views and then interfacing with the world through the resulting viewpoints. These then tend to merge with a generalized worldview which has its own system of self-supportive values. It is hard for a materialistic society such as that of the West, which functions through dualistic human/non-human concepts about life, to ever be aligned with the survival of Earth's ecosphere, since it places humankind in a privileged position above the rest of the world. Yet this is a *conventional* view, and not a reality of an *ultimate* kind. It is unsustainable because it involves exploitation, which uses up elements of the environment for the sake of producing artefacts for consumption; it creates dissonance when taken as the prevailing worldview. This worldview has been undermining the civilization's mental health, because it is not adapted to change to suit the needs of the era. This unsustainable worldview is undermining the civilization's mental health, so that people see only a bleak future ahead. It would be better to publicize an understanding of the authentic value of Earth as a living planet and to begin a new type of career path that tends to Earth's need for respect and protection and educates the public to this effect. This could begin to reduce the obstacles to carrying out effective policies toward a civil, peaceful, and Earth-respecting society.

Clearly a consistent, logical and specific education would help in changing some behavior, by offering values grounded in respectful, nature-oriented wisdom. This would be based on the reality of the ecological crisis. Informed by science and armed with

nature-wisdom values, citizens and governments could support laws to achieve real change. Virtue ethics offers one such relevant approach, and the agency toward making that change is a matter of personal and societal responsibility, requiring education and cultivation. This need is not a viewpoint, but a reality.

A Deepening Aesthetic Experience

Although many in society tend to feel disconnected from the understanding that we live in a natural world, when one is out of doors it is clear that one is situated within it, on the ground and beneath the sky. The sensation of *not* belonging arises through a focus on thinking or planning when outdoors, rather than simply walking and feeling connected with the surroundings.⁶ Yet to look toward the sky and notice the colors in trees, plants, leaves and flowers, one can see their life and beauty. Allowing the senses to engage with the land and its life is a natural response. A focus on feeling instead of thinking lets the attention rest on the world in which one is walking; the feeling might reorient to a sense of presence in the world surrounded by sky, earth, plants, and trees. One then realizes one is always connected with these natural elements by simply being alive and sharing organic existence with all Earth-life, under one sky. Yet somehow, many still misperceive the world (Loy 1988, 39).

This misperception might occur because attentional focus provides a way of viewing the world as if one is separated from it, as when focusing on positive/negative space in a drawing, one can choose between two standpoints: either the positive forms, or the spaces between the forms. In reality, all that is animate and inanimate is fully immersed in Earth's ecosphere, within the atmospheric envelope. The deepened aesthetic experience is a real whole-Earth encounter, felt with one's entire being.

What Is Earth's Original Face?

The Zen sages have a practice of awakening to their original face; perhaps humanity might first awaken to its original Earth, in its own original state of being, to participate in Earth's unique planetary sphere. This undeniably requires a shift in the general worldview, which can occur as a natural deep insight, sometimes while contemplating philosophical, poetic, naturalistic and spiritual ideas. It might also occur as humanity together reengages with Earth through a sense of *awe* at the beauty of the natural world: a sunrise, a flower, a starry sky, a large healthy forest that offers shelter and maintains complex ecosystems. There is truth in this natural beauty and a generosity able to transform human awareness, so individuals can see beyond inherited limitations to where Nature is both real and good in the Socratic sense. Then the more profound *inner* self can be revealed within one's very awareness. Ancient Greece called this process

metanoia, and in recent decades many thinkers have stated that *metanoia* is the best option, if humankind is to continue on Earth and undo the damage caused to Earth's life-supportive systems. Although humanity has been living through a conceptual and physical re-surfacing of the ecosphere under the influence of a materialistic worldview, this view's superimposed conceptual constraints can be transcended, one concept at a time.

Humanity might now choose to move into an opening flower-like, perhaps *wu-wei*-like (or Zen-like) awareness: of being actual participants in Earth's living ecosphere. The task now is to cease using harmful practices, to restore damaged ecosystems and rewild as many areas as possible, while being more deeply aware, and maintaining precautions to avoid recurrence of the kinds of infection that led to the pandemic. In the words of the ancient sage Prajnatara: "A flower opens, And the world arises."⁷

Notes

¹ We have traditionally relied on religious and philosophical values, in alignment with the law of the land, to restrain human behavior to maintain a civil society.

² J. Hawkins' PhD (2021) research suggested establishment of a philosophical eco-chaplaincy as a way to work in this area, providing education and mediation to assist communities in re-engaging with Nature and understanding climate change, while offering an avenue for agency and meaning for those experiencing climate anxiety and eco-distress. It has been offered since late 2022 as an eco-philosophy-based program, and is currently being delivered online to students internationally. Additionally, it is noted that the University of New England and the Australian Government's post-graduate scholarship program partly supported the PhD candidature and the dissertation that underpins this further research.

³ The Greek word *metanoia* was translated into English as *repentance* but means to go beyond normal ways of thinking. A complete change of mind and redirection of consciousness is implied, indicating an urgent change in philosophical and sociological directions.

⁴ References from Freya Mathews' book chapter "Why Has the West Failed to Embrace Panpsychism?" are taken from the copy available on the author's website which has page numbers 1–23. The address is <https://www.freymathews.net/downloads/CH18-why-has-the-west-failed-to-embrace-panpsychism.pdf>

⁵ *Askesis* is an ancient Greek term for exercise, referring to philosophical/spiritual exercises used to strengthen the mind, and undo negative habits to confirm virtues while counteracting vices with antidotes.

⁶ This might generate an undercurrent of eco-anxiety. People going outdoors are aware that the environment is damaged, that weather systems are growing unpredictable and potentially dangerous. Discussed often in the media, this has become a subliminal message.

⁷ The Buddhist teacher Prajnatara gave Bodhidharma a transmission verse before he left for China, also worded as "when the flower blooms, the world arises," from *Chingde Chuandenglü* 1, "The Transmission of the Lamp" Taisho vol. 51 (no. 2076) compiled by Tao-yuan and published in 1004 CE. A partial English translation can be found in Chang Chung-yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism* (New York, 1969). It is translated by Randolph S. Whitfield in "The Transmission of the Lamp."

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