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### ► **Indra's Net: Making Connections among Constant Change**

*Claudia Schippert*

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Common reactions to learning about the many aspects of the global ecological crisis are frustration, hopelessness, uncertainty and fear. But we also have important teachings about the many connections that define our lives.

Indra's net is a metaphor from Buddhist philosophy. It was originally developed in the Avatamsaka Sutra and later became important in the Huayan school. The story goes that Indra, the great cosmic force, has created an infinite net that stretches across the entire universe. At each intersection, at each knot of the net, hangs a multifaceted polished jewel that reflects all the other jewels in the net—and they, in turn, reflect all the other jewels, infinitely stretching over the entire universe. Indra's net is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of the universe.

Another example that illustrates interconnection is the theory of “six degrees of separation.” It is the idea that all living things and everything else in the world are six (or fewer) steps away from each other. A chain of “a friend of a friend” statements can be made to connect any two people in a maximum of six steps.

If we were to play this game right now, within just a few minutes, we'd see that we are connected through other people, in different places, sometimes across times. We will make more connections at this conference that again connect us to people who have their own networks and connections that they bring with them. So our connections grow and shift as our actions affect everything around us. Some of the intersecting threads that make up the ever more complex network in which we all exist include: people in different locations; food and resources we get from all kinds of places; information and technology; language, art and culture; and of course money and vari-

ous modes of production and exchange.

Living in globalization means it's a small world! Today we are connected to more people across the world than ever before. Just compare your life to your grandparents' lives. You probably travel more (and thus use more resources, meet more people, see more and different cultures), live longer, have a different work life and get food and entertainment in ways that are less local and more connected to other lives across the globe.

If we imagine the networks we live in as a big interconnected net, what happens when we pull a bit stronger on one string or let go of another? How does shifting one part of the web affect us socially, culturally, politically with our communities? Let's investigate this through the lens of a concrete example, what scholars and activists refer to as environmental racism or environmental (in)justice.

We all know that human beings use too many resources in unsustainable ways. We take too much for ourselves and we produce too much harm, trash and destruction. If we keep this up, the system cannot be sustained. Importantly, the *cost* of what we are doing to the planet is not being paid equally. People who analyze environmental racism study policies and practices through which less powerful groups are placed in more dangerous environmental situations such as increased pollution, safety hazards and other risks. Here is an example: If I only look at what is happening in my neighborhood, I may not know that other neighborhoods get their water from bad pipes or live next to landfills or large trash piles—which also contain *my* trash—filled with toxins that contaminate the earth and the water. Pollution and other effects of our “civilized,” “modern” lifestyles (especially in highly industrialized nations) often affect parts of the world's population that we don't know so well or that live *somewhere else*. For those who are affected, it can become “normal” to live with the worsening situations and pollution.

Most of us could point to many examples where governments have ignored existing problems. But it is not just governments. For many of us, part of our privilege is that we can choose to live our life in a way that ignores and doesn't encounter the realities of lives that we nonetheless influence. Much of it will come back to us, of course, because all of us are interconnected. But in some respects, many of us remain fairly oblivious to how we all influence each other.

If we think back to the metaphor of the net, we tend to understand that pulling on one string will have an effect on the many other connected knots and strings. But how exactly the net changes is difficult to predict, because the knots of interconnectedness create unforeseen shifts and changes. Similarly, one source of uncertainty for many people is that we do not always know how exactly our action will affect the world around us. Or how those effects will influence the world, or what the next effect of all that might be. This principle can be observed in all ecological

networks (including the social and political ones): while all actions have consequences, they also have many *unintended* consequences.

Here is another example, to illustrate the *unintended* consequences of actions: We know that it is a good idea to conserve resources and recycle plastic rather than produce more and more new stuff. But even recycling is complicated. It may seem like a good idea to recycle the plastic water bottle, but often, recycled plastic from rich countries is shipped to poorer countries, where it is processed, sometimes burned, and affects the people who live there. Currently, China is the world leader in processing recycled plastic. In fact, for a long time, lots of American plastic was (and some still is) shipped to China where people in many small businesses and some big factories sort and process it into reusable plastic resin. This is environmentally dangerous work, often without protective gear, so workers inhale the fumes and handle chemicals without gloves. As a result, entire communities breathe the polluted air or drink the contaminated water and the children grow up with respiratory illness and severe health problems.

Interestingly, however, burning recycled plastic from America in places such as China affects not only those in China, but it also ends up affecting the Americans who sent the plastic to China in the first place. For example, California has cleaned up some of its air through better regulations, but the increased air pollution in countries like China is so strong that it actually reaches California, erasing most of the gains in fighting smog.

It is difficult to say who *causes* the bad air, since it is the end result of many interconnected actions. We cannot really point to one individual or group that is responsible, because so many connected people and actions are part of producing it. It does become clear that even the best of intentions can become part of actions that have unintended (and at times undesirable) consequences.

This ironic cycle can plunge us into don't know, because confusion results when the responsibility is shared everywhere but unequally.

So what can be done? The serious problems in our current world cannot be solved by one person or one group of researchers. In order to develop sustainability in many different realms, we need to work together across many differences, drawing on many areas of expertise to work in teams. For researchers—and everyone else who is actively engaging their community—this teamwork requires new ways of doing things. Sometimes it requires going outside of our comfort zone, learning new skills and applying them with wisdom and creativity. Creativity, unconventional perspectives or new practical methods for engaging a situation—all these are necessary, but fully embracing the creativity and openness of this don't know is hard, as we have less and less of it as we get older and more caught in our social, political and behavioral patterns.



Photo: Allan Matthews

Facing the at times unpredictable effects our actions and interactions create highlights the importance of practicing don't know. Genuinely cultivating don't know can help us keep the mind open to recognize when and where new ideas, maybe unconventional or seemingly odd ideas and solutions, can help us gain insight and positively engage the interconnected web in which we live—and in which, just like Indra's net, we function as reflections of each other.

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### ► Like a Fish in Water: Five Ways Buddhist Sanghas Can Recognize the Societal Systems They Are Part of and Help to Make Them Just

Colin Beavan

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All over the world, people are faced with the same kong-ans about our suffering world. Everywhere people ask this question: Is there any hope, or is it game over? Or, why are some people in denial about climate change? Or why don't the politicians do something?

In fact, the other day I went into an interview with a kong-an teacher and he said, "Do you have any questions?" I said, "Yes, I have a kong-an for you. The world is falling apart. Why don't the politicians do something?" When he answered, he said, "*Oh, the politicians, oh, the politicians . . .*" and he shook his head and looked very sad. Then he lifted his head and he looked straight in my eyes and said, "How can I help?" Then he went back to what he was doing before: "Oh, the politicians . . ."

I like that answer because of course we're all grumbling and scared and worried, but, even when we have that, our