

## **07 Can Humanity Survive?**

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have been marked by dramatic and seemingly unpredictable events.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and of communism in Eastern Europe, the destruction of the Twin Towers, the Arab Spring uprisings, the financial and economic collapse of 2008, the rise of Facebook, Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, the covid pandemic, and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine; are some of the dramatic changes that have shaken our world.

Buddhism emphasises change and uncertainty. It teaches that everything in our experience is impermanent. 'Things' are not fixed and separate objects, but are processes that come into being, alter and cease in dependence on conditions. Each 'thing', or process, conditions and is conditioned by other processes. If we cling to 'things' as if they were permanent then, because they inevitably change, we experience suffering.

Intellectually this appears relatively straightforward to understand but emotionally, deep in our being, it's much harder to accept, especially when the change is unexpected.

For example, the emotional reactions of disbelief, despair and pain to some of the events of 2016, even among many Buddhists, have confirmed just how hard it is sometimes to maintain equanimity and a clear mind. Brexit, the British vote to leave the European Union, and the election of President Donald Trump in the United States, have proven particularly difficult for some Buddhists to deal with.

Underlying this pain and despair, is a strong sense of bewilderment, and a feeling that things are spinning out of control. There appears to be no narrative or story that explains what is happening.

Thomas Friedman, in his book "Thank You For Being Late" offers a lively and informative attempt at a narrative explanation of our situation.

He argues that the world is experiencing a 'supernova' of accelerating change that threatens to outpace humanity's capacity to adapt. Friedman locates the causes of this supernova of change in three interlinked accelerations; in technology, in globalisation and the economic market, and in climate change.

Friedman writes that this ‘age of accelerations’ is surely one of the great transformative moments in history. Nevertheless he is optimistic that humanity can adapt and cope with accelerating change.

But what if the age of accelerations is a symptom of a much more serious problem that requires something more than adaptation to change, and instead requires a fundamental shift or step-up in what it means to be human?

And what if the problem requires a dramatic shift in perspective to that of ‘deep time’, a period of not just millions but billions of years, a vista that looks at the complete history of the evolution of our planet and of life?

If what Friedman calls ‘the age of accelerations’ is one of the greatest transformative moments in human history, then from the perspective of ‘deep time’ we might be entering one of the most critical periods in the evolution of our planet and of life itself.

This is the crux of the argument put forward by David Grinspoon in his book “Earth In Human Hands: Shaping Our Planet’s Future”.

Grinspoon is a planetary astrobiologist, studying major transitions in planetary evolution, and the relationship between planets and life.

He reminds us that the idea is gaining ground in the scientific community that we have entered a new epoch in Earth history, the so-called ‘Anthropocene’, the age of humanity, where the activity of humans has become an agent of global change as important and as powerful as the natural forces of nature that shape continents and push forward the evolution of species.

He argues though that the recent discussion over the Anthropocene misses its central importance.

In response to the question ‘When did our world gain a quality that is uniquely human?’ he points out that we are not the first with the capacity to make changes in landscapes. Albeit on a much smaller scale than humans, beavers build dams, change the flow of streams, cut down forests and create new meadows.

Neither are we the first life form to change global climate and initiate mass extinctions. The emergence of photosynthetic bacteria managed that 2.5 billion years ago, all but wiping out anaerobic bacteria for whom oxygen is toxic.

What makes the Anthropocene unprecedented, he argues, is that we are becoming aware of what we are doing to this world. As he puts it, “We are the species that can change the world and come to see what we are doing”. Instead of *unconsciously* remaking the Earth, we are now aware and *conscious* of what we are doing. With our awareness we have lost our innocence.

Whilst some scientists view the concept of the Anthropocene epoch as overblown when seen against the vast background of Earth history, Grinspoon disagrees. On the contrary he believes we are thinking too small.

Focusing on the scale of aeons which represent the major biological events of our planet, Grinspoon describes how Earth has so far experienced only four aeons, each representing a completely different time of planetary history.

The first aeon can be called the Hadean aeon, lasting roughly the first half billion years of earth’s history, so named, because it was pure hell, with violent volcanoes, bombarding meteors, incredible heat, a ‘veritable world of fire and brimstone’.

Then the Archaeon began around 3.8 billion years ago with the first appearance of life.

The **Proterozoic** [check spelling] aeon began 2.5 billion years ago when oxygen from photosynthesis began building up in the atmosphere generating what is called ‘The Great Oxygenation Event’. As noted earlier this caused catastrophic consequences for the anaerobic bacteria that had previously dominated the planet, because for them oxygen is toxic.

Then finally we have the **Phanerozoic** aeon that began around 540 million years ago with what’s called the Cambrian explosion, when life which had previously existed almost entirely as single-celled organisms, gave birth to a world crawling with multicellular animals and plants.

This knowledge of the aeons dominating Earth’s history informs the astrobiologist’s search for evidence of life on other planetary systems circulating distant stars. Can we discover evidence for a Great Oxygenation event on a different planet? Might such planets have had the equivalent of a Cambrian Explosion?

And beyond this, as Grinspoon puts it, “The biggest question of all is whether we can find intelligent, technological aliens.”

Just as humanity is now remaking our planet, might something similar occur elsewhere in the universe?

Grinspoon then reflects that we are very unlikely to find intelligent life elsewhere if intelligent life is only a brief phase before alien civilisations destroy themselves or otherwise lose their technological capabilities. For civilisations to find each other across the vast expanses of time and space requires that technologically advanced civilisations have great longevity.

Crucially, Grinspoon argues, “If we find other civilisations, it will be the ones who have made it through the bottleneck of technological adolescence”.

There is no guarantee that emerging civilisations survive technological breakthroughs.

From the perspective of deep time and astrobiology Grinspoon believes that the beginning of a time when cognitive processes become a key part of the way a planet functions is just as significant as the dramatic planetary changes marking the shift from one aeon to another in Earth’s history.

Grinspoon writes:

“The moment when cognitive processes become a dominant mechanism of change is easily as significant as the oxygenation of the atmosphere or the advent of multicellular animal life. If global intelligence becomes a lasting planetary force, then I believe it is appropriate to regard this as the beginning of Earth’s fifth aeon.”

And he goes on,

“What should we call it? I propose the *Sapiezoic aeon*.”

In inventing the adjective ‘sapiezoic’ Grinspoon is following Carl Linnaeus, the eighteenth century Swedish botanist. Linnaeus chose the name ‘homo sapiens’ for human beings to distinguish us from other animals within the genus ‘homo’. ‘Sapiens’ was taken from the Latin ‘sapientia’ meaning wisdom.

But how does Grinspoon define wisdom?

He points out that wisdom differs from intelligence because it is not just a cognitive skill, but includes the ability to act with judgement born of experience.

Whilst individual human beings and teams of human beings may have developed wisdom, Grinspoon questions whether humanity can collectively gain wisdom, such that its actions arise out of full awareness of the interconnectedness of humanity and our planet.

He speculates that if we fail to make the leap to collective wisdom, other species could develop that ability in the future. As he puts it, “Earth might have a Sapiezoic aeon that does not begin with us.”

To fully live up to the label ‘sapiens’ that Linnaeus gave us, Grinspoon argues, then we need to wake up to our full potential, if we are to create a ‘Terra Sapiens’, a Wise Earth.

But can humanity wake up and create a Wise Earth?

A Buddha is one who has woken up.

Buddhist practitioner and scholar Andrew Olendzki, like David Grinspoon, is aware of the need now for humanity to follow the Buddha and wake up. For Olendzki the choice is stark. Either we evolve or we die.

Olendzki points out that our most basic evolutionary instincts are for individual survival at any cost. He writes, “Greed ensures that *I will take what I need, at the expense of all others*, while hatred provides the impetus to destroy anyone who threatens me or stands in my way. Both forms of desire create and support a sense of self, the one who must survive and reproduce no matter at what cost”.

The problem we now face is that greed and hatred, which have served us well in an earlier primitive, competitive environment, are counterproductive in the interdependent world we now inhabit. The greed and hatred that have kept us alive are now killing us. The adaptation required for human survival is thus an inner one.

We can view the Buddha as the next step in human evolution. The Buddha demonstrated that greed, hatred, and delusion can be removed from the human psyche. He showed that these instincts, though deep, are not essential. From evolution we have also inherited a set of cooperative impulses that encourage moving from simple concern for the self to selfless concern for the group or community.

Generosity, kindness, and wisdom can save us from ourselves.

For the Buddha, wisdom requires us to fully see the impermanent, interdependent nature of all things, to understand that nothing exists in

its own right, including ourselves. Failing to understand this causes suffering for ourselves, others, and the world around us, (and ultimately could result in our self-destruction).

Gaining wisdom means we see beyond our selfish concerns and instead act with kindness and generosity.

Reflecting on humanity's place in evolution Charles Darwin wrote; "Of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important ... It is the most noble of all attributes of man."

If we are to evolve then we must as a species find a way to combine morality and wisdom.

We must aim high.

Paraphrasing the Buddha:

"Just as one hand washes the other, wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom. The moral one has wisdom and the wise one has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world."

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Add for further reflection and additional parts to the talk:

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