

# What does it mean that all is aflame? Non-axial Buddhist inspiration for an Anthropocene ontology

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## Abstract

Bruno Latour’s “practical climatoscepticism” expresses our moral inhibition with respect to the climate crisis. In spite of Clive Hamilton’s claim that the Anthropocene condition requires us to be suspicious of all previous (i.e. Holocene) ontologies, we propose a threefold Anthropocene ontological structure inspired by non-axial Buddhist elements. In the ontological field, the overall domain in which meaning is searched for, the Buddhist relationalist view on existence can nurture post-humanist philosophies. For the ontological home, one’s specific position and responsibilities, the Buddhist concept “dharma-position” can feed into Hamilton’s “new anthropocentrism.” For the ontological path, the ideal qualities of our interactions, the Buddhist “brahmaviharas” can lend functional structure to the tensions between philosophies of radical acceptance and engaged action. We discuss how this threefold ontological structure provides partial answers to Latour’s “practical climatoscepticism” and Hamilton’s no-analogue world. We sketch avenues for investigation for various Anthropocene ontologies.

## Keywords

Anthropocene, axial age, Buddhism, Charles Taylor, Clive Hamilton, eco-modernism, ontology, post-humanism, Zen

Xiushan asked: “What can you do about the world?”

Dizang said: “What do you call the world?”

*The Book of Serenity*, case 12 (Cleary 2005:51)

In *War and Peace in an Age of Ecological Conflicts* Latour (2014: 54–55) discusses “practical climatoscepticism”: even when we accept the scientific reports on climate change, “probably the best-established fact in the whole of natural history,” we are inhibited from acting accordingly. In *Living in Denial* sociologist Norgaard (2010: ch 3) investigates a series of explanatory models for this problem. After dispelling information deficiency, cognitive dissonance, egocentrism,

indifference and naive trust in politics and technology, she lands on the fear to let the situation sink in, lest we lose all sense of meaning in life. This means that, as Binczyk (2019: 6) points out, one of the pressing Anthropocene issues is the reinterpretation of philosophical concepts, at least those that we use explicitly or implicitly to build or support our sense of the meaningful life. The Anthropocene invites us to find meaning in the world, but our usual ways of looking for meaning seem inadequate. Clive Hamilton goes so far as to state that “we must now be suspicious of all ideas developed in the last 10,000 years” (Lowenthal, 2016: 55), because they “assumed their characters in the distinctive conditions of the Holocene” (Hamilton, 2020: 116).

Yet to be suspicious of former ideas is not the same as to discard them a priori. This article investigates three ideas from core Buddhist philosophy—radical relationality, dharma-position and the brahmaviharas—and analyzes them for their Anthropocene ontological value. “Ontological” is understood here as referring to “modes of human relations with the natural world” (Hamilton, 2020: 116). Before we start, it is important to point out what we will *not* be doing. First of all, we will not present Buddhism as the only way out of our ontological predicament. Secondly, we will not claim that traditional Buddhism is an inherently ecological or Anthropocene philosophy. Even though forms of ecologically engaged Buddhism exist today, it is very doubtful that 25 centuries ago the Buddha installed a thinking that we only have to adopt to arrive at an Anthropocene ontology (Harris, 2000: 121–124). Thirdly we will not pretend to be presenting the “real” intent of Buddhism that Asian traditions have “failed” to see so far. None of these claims are required for our aim: to present a construct, a philosophical scheme inspired and informed by a number of early Buddhist teachings (as recorded in the Pali Canon) and Zen Buddhist concepts (in particular Dogen Kigen’s) that befit our contemporary “no-analogue world” (Binczyk, 2019: 10). We will do so in two steps. In the first section we discuss the Axial Age, cradle of the Holocene ontologies, as analyzed by Taylor (2012) into three basic traits, and of which we will discuss classical Buddhism as an example. Sections two to four form the second step, in which we make the reverse movement: starting from three markedly non-axial aspects of traditional Buddhism, we will construe a general non-axial ontology, in which already existing and at times conflicting Anthropocene philosophies can be related to each other. The obtained result is a possible blueprint for an Anthropocene ontology, based on the interwoven nature and distinction of its field (relationality), its home (humanity’s terrestrial position) and its path (porosity and radiance).

## Axial awakenings

### *An axial blueprint*

The Axial Age theory was developed by Jaspers (1953), based on similarities between various Eurasian philosophical and religious traditions that arose in the first millennium BC. Ancient Greek philosophers, Abrahamic prophets, Indian ascetics and Chinese thinkers seemed to share a blueprint that distinguished them from previous, “archaic” ontologies. In the following decades the theory has not been without its critics who point out that the search for universally axial characteristics at times covers up differences and contradictions between and within the actual thought systems. (Assmann, 2012; Mullins et al., 2018) Also the pre-axial “archaic” traditions have proven to be more varied and dynamic than the simple schemes imply. (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021) Keeping these qualms in mind, we will start from a view on axiality developed by the Canadian philosopher Taylor (2012) in his article *What was the Axial Revolution* (2012) Taylor portrays the axial outlook as a triple “disembedding” from society, from the cosmos and from reality. Even though Taylor opposes these axial traits to a fixed set of “archaic” traits, in this article we refrain from making any claims about pre-axial thinking. We will treat Taylor’s analysis in the first place as a self-image common to axial traditions. The result, a scheme of three disembeddings, is inevitably simplistic with respect to the varieties among and within the historical axial traditions, yet it does offer an interesting stepping stone for imagining a non-axial Anthropocene ontology.

According to Taylor, axial thinking is disembedded in the way in which humans look for meaningfulness in life. First of all axial meaningfulness is “disembedding from society” (2012), as a meaningful life is not looked for in collective customs or the community’s rituals—as supposedly is the case in archaic traditions—but in the individual’s inner life. This is not to say that the early axial individual already forms an end in itself, as it does in modern liberalism. In early axial thinking the inner self is rather a microcosmic entrance gate toward a universal macrocosmic truth: God/Archè/Brahma/Dao/Nirvana. . . (Taylor, 1989) Paradoxically, this universalism requires a dualism, to which Taylor (2012) refers as “the disembedding from the cosmos.” As our experiences in actual life are so unlike the proclaimed uncomplicated universal harmony, a distinction is made between two levels of existence: a relative level that is superficial, polymorphous, confusingly imperfect, painful, illusory and/or evil, and an absolute level that is deep, uniform, brightly perfect, peaceful, truthful, and good. The third axial trait presents an image of the path to be pursued. Taylor calls this the “disembedding from reality,” because the axial goal is soteriological, aiming at liberation from the usual human condition. Normal or natural goals like food, good weather, health, offspring, status or a reliable social order, are valued but only as superficial phenomena. The true goal is to find liberation through awaking to the deep truth: moksha, nirvana, harmony with the Dao, heaven, mystic union with God.

In order to facilitate the comparison of Taylor’s scheme with the Anthropocene ontological scheme that we will develop in this article, we will rename Taylor’s disembeddings by using three alternative images. Taylor’s “disembedding from society,” that is, the micro-macrocosmic matrix of the individual inner gaze into the universal deep truth, will be referred to as the axial *ontological field*. It is the overall realm in which meaningfulness is looked for. The second trait, Taylor’s “disembedding from the cosmos,” will be referred to as the axial *ontological home*. Axial sages are, as the dictum goes, “in the world but not of the world,” because their true home is the deep truth, to which they are always oriented. The third trait, Taylor’s “disembedding from reality,” will be referred to as the *ontological path*. It describes a specific walk of life, cultivating the qualities of our interactions that are required for residing in our ontological home within the ontological field.

Of course no three-fold scheme can do justice to the rich history of finding meaning in the last 30 centuries. In the actual historical axial traditions Taylor’s three traits vary in the degree in which they are implemented. But as a blueprint for axial ontology—with axiality still serving as an important source for finding meaning in life, in forms as varied as traditional Christianity, new age spirituality, humanism, and modern liberalism (Taylor, 1989)—this scheme can help clarify why the arrival of the Anthropocene is such a great challenge to our familiar ways of finding meaning and fulfillment in life. The Anthropocene condition does not fit well in the micro-macrocosmic matrix of axial ontologies, as the Anthropocene main protagonists, the Earth System, is fundamentally a mesostructure: that is, a domain in between the individual being and the cosmos entire. In axial ontology the Earth System is given a background role at most, whereas in the early Anthropocene it has become a hyper-agent. Therefore our ways of finding meaning in life will have to change as well, and will have to be focused on our relation with the mesocosmic Earth System.

Since the advent of the Earth sciences in the 1980s and 1990s, the Earth System has turned out to be inconceivably complex, (Brantley, 2020: 140–141) and so has our relation to the Earth System. The Anthropocene condition dwarfs humanity’s central position on Earth and at the same time expands the human position into one of a major force of nature. In early modern times Pascal (1958: 97) could still refer to the human being as a “thinking reed”: fragile as any other creature, but as it is uniquely aware of this, it is placed before the choice of succumbing to the awareness of fragility or to aim for axial transcendence. Today, as Sloterdijk (1991: 24) points out, we have become “a thinking avalanche”: “no longer brought in peril by the storm of life, but kicking loose the masses that might bury” us. We are cognitively aware of this and ethically blame ourselves for doing so. But

our ontological reflexes are, in spite of modern and postmodern philosophies, still axial and fail to offer a plausible and motivational basis for finding meaning in this condition. That is why we need to rethink the basics of our ontologies as a support for raising and cultivating the motivation for actually doing the tremendous work at hand and find meaning and dignity *in* doing so.

### *Axial Buddhism*

Buddhism is one of the early axial traditions, and when seen as such, it conforms to Taylor's three traits. The ontological field is structured by a micro-macrocosmic matrix: the awakening to the true universal nature of existence is to be realized by the practitioners' own individual ethical and meditative practices. Even though mutual help in the communities is praised and collective rituals flourish in the actual Buddhist schools, there is no such thing as collective nirvana. Secondly, the ontological home has a dualist character: the awakened person resides in nirvana, a transcendent state in which the illusions that cause the suffering of the human condition have been dissolved. And thirdly the Buddhist path is soteriological, imagined as the pursuit of the end of the cycle of reincarnation, in favor of detached, ineffable nirvana. Since its early days the Buddhist program is expressed by "the four noble truths": (1) we lead unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) lives, (2) because we are caught in our cravings. But (3) we can put a to stop to our suffering, (4) by following the Buddha's eightfold path, a compound of wisdom, ethics and meditation. In this way we can escape the tragic cycles of reincarnation and enter nirvana (Thanissaro, 1993a).

Literally the word "nirvana" refers to the extinction of a flame. In his *Fire Sermon (Adittapariyaya Sutta)* the Buddha addresses his audience in the famous words: "Monks, all is aflame. What all is aflame?" (Thanissaro, 1993b) Whereas today the question would bring to mind forest fires and global heating, to the Buddha's audience 25 centuries ago the address is an obvious reference to the prestigious Brahmanic fire cult. The Buddha seems to announce a teaching on Brahmanic fire mysticism, but in the subsequent talk he alters the soteriological meaning of the word "aflame." His fire is not sacred wood fire, but a simile for the suffering fueled by the foolishness of our own emotional and cognitive patterns. The proper thing to do is to extinguish our ignoble fires, and live a noble life, free of the conditionings of our blinding habits. By recasting fire from a sacred soteriological tool to a symbol of self-induced existential misery the sermon is blatantly iconoclastic. Yet at the same time, by sticking to the soteriological rhetorics, the Buddha claims to be offering what the Brahmanical traditions promise but fail to deliver: liberation. (Gombrich, 2009: 111–114, 124–127, 203) That is what "all is aflame" means to the early Buddhist audience.

In this reading of Buddhism the natural world plays no significant part. The Buddha may have promoted a mendicant's life in the jungle, but nature remains a mere background for the real axial story: the awakening of human individuals to a universal truth, which in the end is to liberate us from worldly existence (Keown, 2007). But other core teachings of the Buddha can be thought of as so untypical of Taylor's scheme, that we could call them "non-axial." We will discuss three of those teachings—taken from early Pali texts attributed to the Buddha, and from the writings of the Japanese Zen Buddhist philosopher Dogen—in terms of their inspirational value for the development of an Anthropocene ontological field, home and path.

## **For an Anthropocene ontological field**

### *Buddhist interdependent origination and its challenges*

One of the most notorious aspects of early Buddhism is its teaching of "non-self" (Pali: *atta*, Sanskrit: *atman*). It is a reaction against late Brahmanical Upanishad mysticism, which conceived

of liberation in a typical axial way, as finding access to one's true self or soul (*atman*), which immediately leads to experiencing one's oneness with Brahma, the cosmic principle (Garfield, 2022b: 24). The Buddhist criticism against this view is expressed for example, in the *Brahmajala Sutta* (Thanissaro, s.d), where the Buddha mentions 62 examples of meditators who conclude from their ecstatic experiences that they have awakened to a divine level and that therefore they are liberated. To the Buddha these conclusions merely show that the meditators have fallen into a God trap (*brahma jala*) of their own thinking. After denouncing each of these views, he presents his own field of liberation, the proper object of the inner gaze: the interdependent origination (*paticca samupada*) of all experiences. In this way he offers an ontological field that is not structured by the micro-macrocosmic matrix.

*Paticca samupada* has been explained in notoriously complex and even incompatible ways (McMahan, 2008: 149–182). Here we can summarize the teaching as the observation that the qualities of our lives are highly dependent on our reactions to what happens to us. From the most banal to the most lofty experience, from the minutest thought-moment to our greatest project, all are heavily influenced by the feed-back loop between circumstances and our reactions to them. What we call our “existence” or “self” is in reality a cloud of interactions. Easy though this may be to summarize, the Buddha stressed how excruciatingly difficult it is to fully grasp its ontological consequences, let alone to embody that understanding in our actual lives (Thanissaro, 1997a). But those who do, are rightfully called “awakened.”

One way to do so is to be methodically mindful of “the three marks” (*tilakkana*) of any experience. It is (1) impermanent, (2) conditioned by circumstances, and (3) never fully satisfactory. This may seem like a mere derogatory attitude toward worldly phenomena in order to develop an attitude of detachment. But the *tilakkana* also show a more positive soteriological side when we compare them to three characteristics brahmanic philosophers attribute to Brahma: He is (1) eternal, (2) a fully autonomous Self and (3) ever blissful, which is why He is the proper object of those who look for liberation (Gombrich, 2009: 64–71) By advising his followers to be mindful of the explicitly non-Brahma-like character of any experience *as the domain in which liberation is to be found*, the Buddha offers an alternative ontological field: the fleeting experiential world that is uncovered by our cultivated attention, the non-self that shows itself when we look within.

Yet, as later Buddhist literature shows, the non-self teachings are prone to reaxialization. Reaxialized non-self philosophies agree that the ordinary sense of self is illusory, but go on to stress the importance of awakening to a true Self beyond it: our all-interconnectedness, emptiness, Buddha nature or even a cosmic Buddha. The historical irony of this brahmification of *paticca samupada* is most clear in the Sanskrit *Avatamsaka Sutra* (Cleary, 1993), written from the first to the fourth century CE, and highly influential in the development of East-Asian Buddhist schools. The text attributes an outspokenly positive role to another god's *jala*: Indra's net. The net is infinitely large and has a jewel embroidered in each knot. Each jewel is cut in such a way that it reflects all other jewels of the net. The sutra explicitly links Indra's net to *paticca samupada*: “All Buddhas [. . .] know all phenomena come from interdependent origination. They know all world systems exhaustively. They know all the different phenomena in all worlds, interrelated in Indra's net” (Cleary, 1993: 925).

In contemporary green Buddhist literature, Indra's net is quite popular as an ecological icon (Kaza, 2019; Loy, 2018: 57; Stanley et al., 2009: 188;). Yet the image is problematic. For one, the very concept of interdependent origination has undergone an important change. In the early Buddhist Pali Canon *paticca samupada* advocates a view on phenomena as a nexus of causes that can be changed for better or worse, which can stimulate our efforts for creating conditions beneficial to a liberated life. But in the later teachings of interdependency phenomena are seen as a reflection of the mystical All in which they participate (Analayo, 2019: 42–45; Macy, 2021: 67, 257,



285; McMahan, 2008: 149–182). This reaxialization not only affects the originality of the Buddha's teachings, but also the chances of interdependent origination to serve as an inspiration for non-axial Anthropocene ontological field. For the interdependency can serve as a theodicy: "all is One" can come to mean that, in spite of all troubles, on an absolute level "all is Well." By contrast, the view of dependent origination implies the never ceasing need to create good conditions as of the essence.

Of course, the image of Indra's net can induce a sense of connection and widen the boundaries of the self. This can broaden the scope of our empathy, which is of the utmost importance in a relational existence. But an Anthropocene ontological field would benefit from radicalizing relationality and abandoning *all* references to any kind of self. What is to be awakened to then is not a Self, nor a not-self, a non-self, the World as Self (Macy, 2021), or any other micro-macrocosmic construction. Instead we are to awaken to our mesocosmic existence as an ever changing cloud of relations. I do not awaken, relations do. On the subject's side of the relation the main question is not so much "am I mindful?," but rather "am I mindfully related?" On the object's side the point is to avoid getting stuck in any kind of God-trap, which consists of the idea that we are to awaken to our true oneness. Instead of being one with *all*, we are to become mindful of *any* of our actual relations: with our breathing, our patterns, our communications, our co-planet-inhabitants, our societal structures, our tools, our resources, our ideologies, and the God or gods we might believe in. That is what a non-axial ontological field could look like and inspire an Anthropocene ontology.

### *Anthropocene relationality*

Partly in reaction to the scientific reports on ecological decline and climate change, the humanities have also been developing relational ontologies since the 1990s under various denominations: critical social theory, trans- or post-humanism, new materialism, dark ecology and others. A good deal of their energy and relevance comes from their being a frontal attack on modern anthropocentrism. Particularly the Cartesian dualist ego, splitting the self from its worldly surroundings, and Francis Bacon's imperialist self, dominating the natural world by means of technology, are objects of heavy criticism. Rephrased in axial terms, we could state that the various post-humanist ontologies deconstruct the story of the human individual that touches the highest cosmic truth as the way of finding meaning in life, varying from classical Theism, over Deism and Humanism to the neo-liberal producer/consumer's faith in the Invisible Hand. This axial field is replaced by a relationist field in which the protagonist is not humankind nor the individual self, but the multitude of living and non-living, natural and cultural "actants," to use Latour's phrase, distributing agency all over the networked world. For this perspective to be accessible at all, human importance or uniqueness needs to be downplayed, for as Anna Tsing (2012:144) states: "human exceptionalism blinds us") to our interdependency with other species. Likewise Philippe (2013: 52) speaks of the "tiny quantum by which we distinguish ourselves" and Haraway (2016: 99) estimates human impact as "as planetary terraformers" below that of bacteria.

However, just as in the case of Buddhist interdependent origination, this relationist field runs the risk of reaxialization, in particular when old-style anthropocentrism makes way for eco- or biocentrism. For pedagogical shock value it may be interesting to state for instance that "cereals domesticated humanity" (Hamilton, 2017: 92), yet as Hamilton (2017: 93) retorts, when taken too seriously, such a statement is a case of "anthropomorphism and therefore anthropocentrism by stealth." Rather than de-axialized, the ontological field is reaxialized: the macrocosmic truth is the networkedness of all, so that in that sense all is alike, and no species is more special or central than any other.

There are at least two ways to counter this reaxialization. A first one is to revert to something like the Buddhist three marks, which also served to counter Brahmanic axialism: that is, by stressing the factuality of impermanence, conditionality and suffering as markers of the ontological field. Climate change presents us with a far less stable and impermanent field than the Holocene cradle of traditional philosophies and religions. The Earth System is not a goddess taking care of all her children, but a planetary case of interdependent origination, that even though inconceivably complex is without any kind of Self at the steering wheel. And the dukkha of mass extinction and societal upheaval that come with climate change is so prevalent that Binczyk (2019: 9) needs little arguments to characterize our days as marked by “a novel type of unease.”

## For an Anthropocene ontological home

A second way to avoid or reduce reaxializing tendencies is to make a clear distinction between the Anthropocene ontological field and the Anthropocene ontological home. The axial ontological home, we saw, is marked by a dualist distinction between the superficial world of phenomena and the deep and true world in which the enlightened ones find their insight, freedom, fulfillment and meaningfulness. Looking for inspiration for an Anthropocene ontological home, we again start from a Buddhist passage.

### *Buddhist dharma-position*

The *Ayacana Sutta* (Thanissaro, 1997b), a mythological text in the Pali Canon, tells how right after his awakening the Buddha is visited by the god Brahma. Brahma has noticed that the Buddha suspects his new insights to be too strange for his contemporaries to be interested, and so he feels reluctant to spread them. Brahma descends from his heaven, kneels before the Buddha and begs him to at least try teaching, with the argument that “there are beings with little dust in their eyes.” The Buddha agrees and starts his mission. That is, at least according to legend, how Buddhism began.

The story is again an obvious stab at Brahmanism, for even though this particular Brahma is not the all-encompassing cosmic principle Brahma, but a god called Brahma Sahampati, having a god kneel before a human being is a strong statement. Yet iconoclasm may not be the main point here, for Brahma actually teaches the young Buddha two valuable things that will form the gist of the Buddha’s ontological home. First Brahma points at the differences among people and their capacities, and to the fact that this is relevant to an enlightened life. This in itself is already an important complement to relationality, which if taken to an extreme, says that, as all is related, all things are essentially the same. In practice though we need to give credit to the particularities of a given situation, a certain moment, a concrete sentient being. To awaken to this, we need to acknowledge that the world is not only radically relational, but also spectacularly spectral: things appear in a spectrum of differences, and these differences matter. Even though in English “spectral” has been associated with ghostliness since the early modern age, here we use it in accordance with its Latin origin *spectrum*, or “apparition.” Or even with its Proto-Indo-European root *spek* or “to observe” (Spectral | Search Online Etymology Dictionary (n.d.)). Spectrality as a mark of the ontological home refers to the need for careful observation of the specific and unique ways in which phenomena appear to us, and of the ways in which we appear in their midst. That is the way to make an awakened way of living, an ontological home.

An interesting Zen Buddhist term for this aspect is “dharma-position” (Jap. *ho-i*). *Dharma* is a Sanskrit term that (amongst other things) means “reality,” but also “phenomenon,” as well as “the responsibilities that come with a particular societal status.” Dharma-position refers to “the totality

of the present circumstances, including the multiplicity of effects of previous causes and conditions” (Leighton, 2007: 70). The Japanese Zen monk Dogen Kigen (1200–1253) made ample use of the term in his writings, perhaps most famously in his *Genjokoan*: (Okumura, 2018: 64)

Firewood becomes ash. Ash cannot become firewood again. However, we should not view ash as after and firewood as before. We should know that firewood dwells in the dharma-position of firewood and has its own before and after. Although before and after exist, past and future are cut off. Ash stays in the position of ash, with its own before and after.

The dharma-position of firewood and ash are not the same. Obviously, fire and ash are related, but just as obviously they differ and their differences are of real concern in actual life. As today the differences between non-burning forests and burnt forests are crucial to our Earth System. To deny or even relativize this spectrality in the name of an absolute universal emptiness or interdependence would not only be close to nihilistic, but quiet irrelevant to an Anthropocene ontology.

This brings us to Brahma’s second lesson for the young Buddha: an actual awakened lifestyle is marked by active compassion. Enlightened beings do not take up solitary residence in a blissful higher realm of oneness. They rather live *in* the world of phenomena, open to be touched by its differences, conflicts and sufferings (*dukkha*), resolved to help alleviate this suffering in accordance with the specifics of the situation, and with the possibilities that are at hand within the specifics of our condition. Dharma-position is the ontological home, the specific place where one is to live within the ontological field of relationality.

An ontological field is not an ontological home, nor vice versa. Therefore waking up to radical relationality has to differ from waking up to spectrality. We might argue that they come in a specific order. First we need to wake up to relationality (*paticca samupada*) to get rid of axial essentialism, and then we need to engage with our specific and constantly varying dharma-position to avoid bringing essentialism in through the back door.

The spectrality of dharma-position adds a messiness to the sage’s ontological home. In a widely differing world compassion’s scope is never caught in one point of view. Practical compassion is much more work than the ecstatic experience of feeling one with all. In an ever changing world compassionate action is never complete. Nonetheless it was this very aspect of Brahma’s appeal that motivated the young Buddha to start teaching. In his 45-year career, he would grow out to be renowned for his ability to fine-tune his teachings to the widely differing ears of his audience, each residing in their own dharma-positions. That was what the Buddha did with his life. That was his home.

### *Terrestrial position*

Apart from messiness, dharma-position also brings in a temporal element into the ontological home. Like Dogen’s fire and ashes, the “dharma-positions” of Holocene (Axial) and Anthropocene humans are causally related, yet quite different. Human influences on the landscape may go back to the Pleistocene (Ellis, 2018: 75), but the rupture in the Earth System is as young as the Industrial Revolution or even the post-war Great Acceleration (Hamilton, 2016). Keeping in mind that in Sanskrit “dharma” also refers to the duties that come with a particular social position, we can realize with Latour that our climate conditions cannot escape having a moral and political dimension (Latour and Weibel, 2020: 18). For this particular dimension Latour (2019) suggests we’d use the adjective “terrestrial,” (p. 40). So maybe the term “terrestrial position” could be a viable candidate for substituting the all too explicitly Buddhist dharma-position. It refers to the responsibilities that



come with assuming the position we now appear to have in our present discovered Earth System. This requires a willingness to be mindful of spectrality within the relational field.

Here the work of Clive Hamilton is of particular relevance. As fiercely as post-humanists attack anthropocentrism, Hamilton (2017: 50–58) criticizes post-humanist authors for denying the particularity of the Anthropocene *human* position. Polemically he pleads for more rather than less anthropocentrism. Not in the axial sense, in which humanity is the apex of creation and thus entitled to dominate the world. Nor in an ecomodernist sense, which in its unwavering belief in technology is a secular heir to the axial faith in divinely ordained soteriology. But rather as the acknowledgment that we cannot escape standing in the center of our responsibility. And that this responsibility is related to humanity's particular and unique place in our present networked existence. When we ask ourselves what ontological home we should adopt as human beings, the post-humanist answer—that is, in distributed agency there really is no such thing as a human being—may be true in an important way, but irrelevant to this particular question, for it mistakes an ontological home with an ontological field.

Relationally speaking all earthly creatures are thoroughly alike. They are for example, all characterized by the *tilakkana*. Spectrally though, humanity has become a terrestrial force of nature with very specific characteristics. Therefore Hamilton (2017: 76) suggests that, rather than thinking in the post-humanism terms of evenly distributed agency, we'd better observe the "lumped distribution of agency." For it so happens that Anthropocene humans occupy a particularly large lump: "We can influence the course of the Earth and we have the ability to do otherwise. Now that is agency." One of our lump's most outstanding characteristics is that we are a conscious force of nature. We will our actions. We may not will all of their consequences, but we can abstain from obeying our impulses if we want to avoid unnecessary suffering. That is where Hamilton (2017: 43–44) draws the line between us and other terrestrials: there is "an unbridgeable gap that separates us from all other beings, it is the gulf of responsibility. We have it, they don't."

At this point *dukkha*—suffering—shows its central importance again. This time not as the third of the *tilakkana*, but as the first of the four noble truths. As we saw above, the Buddhist path of liberation starts by acknowledging suffering (first truth) as interlocked with our proclivity for foolish reactions (second truth). This fits well with Hamilton's (2017) suggestion (p. 37) that "a sensibility of human folly and vulnerability would be a helpful start." A sense of dread is to be a core aspect of our ontology. Coincidentally but appropriately Hamilton touches upon the modern ghostly meaning of spectral: "The Earth System continues to haunt us, following us around like a wailing apparition" (Hamilton, 2017: 9). It is a gloomy, but realistic approach and we can take pride in being courageous enough to face the terrifying facts.

But that in itself is obviously not enough. After the first two noble truths of understanding, proper action is required. The third truth admonishes us to stop obeying our habits that harm our awareness of the ontological field, and experience a glimpse of an alternative way of being. And in order for that glimpse to grow more sustainable, we have to build a path to live accordingly (fourth truth). From outspoken climate denial we move to awareness (first and second truth), and from practical climatoscepticism we develop the motivation for precisely chosen proper action (third and fourth truth).

What those actions can or should be, depend on the actual terrestrial positions of the agencies in question. In this very short section of this article we have simplistically taken humanity to be a unified form of agency. In reality humanity's terrestrial position is a spectral matter as well: not all individuals, organizations, classes, countries or institutes have the same power, knowledge, leverage, responsibility etc., and therefore not all humans occupy the same terrestrial position. The point of this paragraph is that, when trying to define an Anthropocene ontology, we need to distinguish the field (relationality, or taking into consideration the field of interactions as our primal reality)

from our home (the terrestrial position, or the particular niche in which we reside as human beings), in order to resist the temptations of reaxialization. Therefore we can distinguish the roles of for example, post-humanist writings and for example, Hamilton's new anthropocentrism, without having to think of them as conflicting standpoints. They belong to two different aspects of one potential Anthropocene ontological blueprint.

## For an Anthropocene ontological path

After defining an Anthropocene ontological field and home, we now turn to the question how to replace Taylor's third aspect of the axial tradition—the image of an ideal path—with an image more befitting of the Anthropocene condition. And again we start from a non-axial passage in early Buddhist texts, in which the Buddha confronts and transforms an axial Brahmanical image of the ideal life.

### *The Buddhist Brahmaviharas*

In the *Tevijja Sutta* (De Breet and Janssen, 2001: 237–50) a couple of young brahmins ask the Buddha how to reach heaven, the abode of Brahma (*Brahmavihara*). Rather than dismissing their question as being off the mark, the Buddha answers it by changing its terminology. He offers the brahmins a meditation technique in which they are to evoke four positive values: kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. When these four are fully embodied and visualized as radiating in all directions and toward all beings, the Buddha concludes: “this is what we call the Brahma abode.” (Thanissaro, 2004) So instead of teaching them how to move toward a divine space, he advises the brahmins to become such spaces themselves, qualified in terms of pursuing warm and caring relations with their environments. In Buddhism the meditation technique remained known as the brahmaviharas.

So here again the Buddha recycles a number of aspects associated with Brahma—the God with four heads, the Lord of all directions, penetrating all space, and as the goal of spiritual life—in order to recast them in an alternative ideal that lacks any sense of a soul touching the All (Gombrich, 2009: 80–85). But the remarkable thing here is that the Buddha also offers an alternative spatial imagery for his *own* path. Whereas the Buddhist nirvanic ideal is expressed as a disappearance from the cycle of reincarnation, the brahmaviharas offer an image of expansion, of becoming a specifically qualified boundless space. In most meditation techniques the Buddha teaches a focus on detached observation, but here meditation consists of a highly engaged arousal of caring interactions. Instead of the usual nirvanic image of “snuffing out” the flame, the brahmaviharas rather convey an image of the sun or a star, radiating its light in all directions, to the benefit of all creatures. The English word “stellar” works well here, as it happens to mean both “like a star” and “excellent.” The excellent life is conveyed as a cultivation of stellar interactions, of being an embodied caring influence in the world.

The brahmaviharas are also interesting in that they do not offer one single image for the ideal path, but four. Contemplating their qualities, it is possible to regroup them in two subsets. The obviously warm and caring “kindness,” “compassion” and “sympathetic joy” form one group, the somewhat different “equanimity” forms the second. Staying with the stellar metaphor, we can imagine equanimity as a mode in which a practitioner embodies the porosity of a galactic nebula, whereas in the former three the practitioner condenses into a warm and radiant starlike presence. In the porous mode Buddhists train themselves in becoming a receptive space in which phenomena arise and pass. In the radiant mode, they actively exert kindness and compassion toward all beings. In order to once more resist the temptations of reaxialization, it needs stressing that the detached

porous, equanimous mode is not deeper or more true than the charged and engaged radiance. This reactualizing temptation shows at times in contemporary green Buddhist literature. For instance in the pioneering book *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Crisis* (2009) the Tibetan teacher Rinpoche Tulku Rinpoche writes: “I experience [the world’s] interdependent appearance-emptiness. Whatever happens, I let it be and relax. Nothing appears ‘wrong’ anymore and ultimately nothing [. . .] can overwhelm me” (Stanley et al., 2009: 133). For sure, the importance of poise cannot be overstated in times of turmoil. But here the word “ultimately” reactualizes porosity as a contemplation of absolute truth, in which the practitioner has guaranteed his personal safety. Taken at face value, this rather supports a quietist attitude than a sense of urgency. In a similar vein the French Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard states that

seeing that all beings are interrelated, and all want to avoid suffering and achieve happiness, this understanding becomes the basis for altruism and compassion. This in turn naturally leads to the attitude and practice of non-violence toward human beings, animals and the environment. (Stanley et al., 2009: 203)

Even though the desired outcome would be of ecological value, one could wonder whether the effect really stems from seeing all things interrelated. Neoliberal market-ideology also sees the market as a network of interrelations, with all participants aiming for happiness and freedom, but it has hardly led to a world of altruism and compassion. In this respect it is interesting to notice the contrast with the way the American engaged Buddhist monk Bhikkhu Bodhi redefines equanimity as “being unable *not* to be affected by inequity and suffering” (Garfield, 2022a: 195, italics added).

### *Anthropocene porosity and radiance*

In Section 3.2. we emphasized the need to distinguish the ontological field (relationality) from the ontological home (our terrestrial position). When imagining an Anthropocene ontological path, (the desired quality of interaction) we need to make as clear a distinction between porosity and radiance in order to avoid unnecessary philosophical conflicts or doubts. Porosity would stand for the ideal of deep adaptation to our Anthropocene condition. It is the practice of opening up to our situation, especially when we feel tempted not to. Porosity’s first function would be to calm down a frantic mind, in order for our attention to land on earth, to become terrestrial. Porosity has to be cultivated in order to deal with two difficulties: the terrifying sight of the Earth’s condition (Analayo, 2019: 29) and the constant temptations of consumerism that presents easy and immediate satisfaction as a token of the good life. The Dark Mountain Project of former environmental activist Paul Kingsnorth would be an example of this (Anfinson, 2018; Frame and Cradock-Henry, 2022: 7–8; Kingsnorth, 2017: 213–15). Yet this resistance, this going against the stream of natural and ingrained cultural impulses, is not only a matter of abstention, of arousing a sense of dumb-foundedness in the face of the defiant Earth (Hamilton, 2017) or of the inconceivable complexities of our Earthly home (Kingsnorth, 2017). For if we were to stop at that, reactualization would lurk again: accepting the all-encompassing catastrophe can easily turn into a complacent attitude of superior defeatism, felt to be more awakened than the foolish attempt to fight the most horrible aspects of climate change. In this respect Macy (2021: 95–111) Zen and System Theory based pioneering “despair work” has been breaking important ground, as she aims for a practice of thorough grief structured in such a way as to come out of the process with a strong sense of active compassion. Porosity—impartially allowing any experience to arise and pass—thus becomes a way of clearing space for the second stellar mode: radiance, the active embodiment and spreading of the motivation to enter into positive action. To live up to the awareness, as the eco-Buddhist

philosopher Kaza (2019: 22) puts in the plainest of words, “that our actions matter too and that they can spread.” In popular parlance this spreading influence is properly called stardom.

Radiance is about action and gaining influence, and about distinguishing foolishness from wisdom. On the one hand it requires trust in our capacities—as ecomodernists rightly call on us to do (Asafu-Adjay et al., 2015)—to defend ourselves against petrifying and therefore self-fulfilling prophecies of doom. On the other hand it requires an intimate understanding of our infinite ability to act foolishly—as eco-alarmists rightly do—to defend ourselves against soothing and therefore self-denying prophecies of guaranteed success. It is interesting to note that both extremist parties accuse each other of paying lip service to environmental action while actually promoting paralysis. Alarmists are reproached for preaching inescapable doom and thus taking away the impetus for swift action. Ecomodernists are reproached for shushing us by their unwavering faith in technological fixes, so we do not feel the urgency to change our ways. Yet both anxieties express the need for the propagation of appropriate action (radiance) not to be drowned in a sense of complacency.

This indirectly leads to another important question when it comes to radiance: whether there should be one unified Anthropocene ontology for all. This article does not claim to provide an answer to that question, as its aim is merely to offer a general threefold framework for concrete ontologies to be filled in. This being said, as climate change is an event happening to the Earth System in its entirety, it begs for ontologies that open up to a more than local perspective. When Wirth (2022: 6) quotes the Canadian native Coulthard, who stresses the need for re-establishing an intimate sensual relation with our environment, as do indigenous animist traditions, surely many invaluable and urgent lessons are to be learnt in this way. But at the same time an Anthropocene ontology has to arouse a motivation to take care of the entire Earth System, which nobody can have any direct sensual experience of. In this respect it is interesting to note that the early Buddhist brahmaviharas were also called the *apanama*, “immeasurables,” reminiscent of a star spreading its light in all directions, boundlessly toward all beings. Anthropocene stellerity needs similar visualization techniques and imagery to stretch our intimacy and emotional allegiance far beyond our natural or even sensory awareness and affectivity. In the most literal sense of the word it is a practice of going beyond the boundaries of our usual spheres of empathy, beyond that which is normally to be expected of human care.

Yet Judith Lichtenberg also makes an excellent point when she remarks that in the fire of our missionary zeal, we must be aware of “what is reasonable to expect of people to understand with respect to how their actions may affect others.” (Schmidt et al., 2016: 5) That is where institutes show themselves to be of crucial importance. For even though we have defined an Anthropocene ontology by construing it with equivalents of the three axial traits of the ideal individual, this does not mean that they are first and foremost individual practices. That would in fact be an axial presumption, not an Anthropocene one, for which mesocosmic interdependency is the starting point. Socially speaking the mesocosmos is comprised of group customs, organizations, and institutes. It is this level that needs to be redirected most urgently toward opening up to radical relationality, to the responsibility of our terrestrial position and to the double ideal of porosity and radiance. Even though the task seems impossibly huge, there has been a time in which our societal structures were transformed from archaic to axial relations. It should be possible to do so again for an Anthropocene setting, for waking up from our practical climatocritical slumber, and stand in awe for the meaningful, fulfilling and liberating work that is at hand.

## Conclusion

All is aflame. What all is aflame? Our Earth System. What does that mean to us, inhabitants of the early Anthropocene? When Wirth (2022) asks the question “who is the anthropos in the

Anthropocene?” he does so in order to define the culprit of the Earth System’s disruption. His conclusion is that it is “a certain way of being human,” that is, the techno-capitalist homo faber. In this article we have asked the same question but with a different object: to define the good Anthropocene human, to describe a certain way of being human that responds adequately to the new condition. As Norgaard pointed out, the ability and motivation to deal with climate change are related to our having access to an ontology that can conceive of a meaningful life that encompasses our responding to the Anthropocene challenges. This article made a two-step attempt to construe an Anthropocene ontology by opposing it to the axial ontology, which forms the implicit basis of our ways of looking for meaning in life. First we used Charles Taylor’s threefold scheme for defining an axial ontological blueprint and discussed basic Buddhist philosophy as a case. Secondly we distinguished a number of non-axial aspects in Buddhism, and used them to construe a parallel threefold scheme that could serve as a blueprint for an Anthropocene ontology.

Instead of the axial micro-macrocosmic matrix, the Anthropocene condition rather requires radical mesocosmic relationality as a starting point, a field in which the search for a meaningful life is conducted. The main matter here is: are we mindfully related? Instead of looking for a transcendent safe truth as our ontological home, what is aimed for is the realization of our particular terrestrial position. The main question is: do we land in the middle of the responsibilities that come with our agency within the ontological field? And a double stellar ideal of porosity and radiance takes the place of a soteriological path. Here the main matter is to qualify our interactions in terms of radical acceptance as well as of engaged brilliance. In this threefold scheme, the difference between field and home is a crucial one, and by filling in the former with post-humanist philosophies and the latter with Clive Hamilton’s new anthropocentrism, the antagonism between the two can be alleviated, and re-axializing tendencies can be avoided. Similarly the bi-modality of the ontological path serves to avoid unnecessary philosophical conflicts between acceptance and resistance in the current predicament.

This article started with the question of what kind of ontology would befit the Anthropocene condition and it has stayed within that scope. In offering our scheme, we have not arrived at conclusions on how to respond to climate change in practical terms. A next step for research in this respect would therefore consist of translating what we have offered as the general threefold outline of Anthropocene ontology in more practical terms of policy making, business ethics, the ethics of persuasive technologies (Bombaerts et al, in press) and economical philosophy.

Even though we have based the construction of an Anthropocene ontological scheme on a construction of non-axial Buddhism, this does mean that the scheme is to be filled with Buddhist material. It would for instance be interesting to see how this would work with Paul Kingsnorth’s recent turn to Orthodox Christianity (Carman, 2022), Latour’s Catholicism (Heinich, 2007), Timothy Morton’s Object Oriented Ontology (Morton, 2018), Graham Harvey’s animism (Harvey, 2012), Maori philosophy (Kennedy et al., 2020) and many others. Clive Hamilton’s claim that we need to drop all ontologies of the previous 10,000 years may be expressing a truthful sense of the novelty of our no-analogue world. But the case of non-axial Buddhism—a construction rather than a historical fact—may show that we need not necessarily start from scratch to develop an Anthropocene ontology. Especially when enough flexibility and context-awareness is present in traditional sources, they might be of great support to bridge the gap of what Latour called our practical climatoscepticism.

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