

Also by the Author

War Porn
Learning to Die in the Anthropocene

We're Doomed. Now What?

Essays on War and

Climate Change

ROY SCRANTON

SOHO

2018

savages and beasts, the noble heart of darkness within ourselves to be mastered or freed, tortured or adored, depending on the needs of the day.

Perhaps the geological imagination of the Anthropocene will learn that humanity *is* the Earth, that the cell *is* the body, that any individual me or you is but a transient expression of dirt and electricity, energy and matter, a moment on a rock in space. Perhaps we will learn how hard it is to breathe methane and carbon. Perhaps we will learn nothing, become nothing, imagine nothing, and finally sink back into the earth from which we came.

In the end was rock and into rock sank rock, the end was rock slow light, rock sinking into light, heat, and the end was rock and into rock sank rock, a rock slowly spinning in space, heat, where life burns into rock, carbon to hydrogen to helium and back again, hydrogen to oxygen, silicon, aluminum, iron, calcium, sodium, and potassium, rocks shedding cool molecules, light, slow, burning across long eons. In the end there was rock and rock was rock and into rock sank rock, the end was rock in the end freezing water, rock and water burning sky, rock bleeding fire, rock breaking dead chains, molecule from molecule, and God was rock in the beginning and rock is rock and rock is dead and space is dead and light is dead and life is dead, life rock and water and God, dead, the living only a form of the dead and a very rare form at that, dead light, dead heat, dead rock, dead space, dead rock, dead God, and God was dead in the beginning, the end. Rock, light, space, paper, scissors. [2016]

Climate Change and the Dharma of Failure

I'm a bad Buddhist. I don't meditate every day, and some weeks, I feel lucky if I find the time to meditate at all. I go to zendo in rare spurts, a few weeks on, months off. I kill mosquitoes, flies, and moths. I drink, though no longer to excess. I've managed to rationalize continuing to eat meat. I'm often impatient and snarky with people, angry at them for blocking traffic, for being rude or thoughtless, for moving through the world in a haze, unconscious of the life flowing around them. I often want to shout: *Look out! Look up! Just look!* I am suspicious and proud and sometimes cruel, inconstant in my compassion. I don't steal and I don't lie, but I'm vain about that—honesty is one of my best qualities. And yet for all my vanity, I'm a hypocrite, too: I dissemble and misrepresent and omit.

And then there's the whole "I" problem. Not only do I fail in all these all-too-human ways, fumble the dharma, wander from the Buddha way, spread unnecessary suffering and sometimes even wallow in it, but I feel guilty and ashamed that I—marvelous "I," wonderful "I," oh-so-special "I"—have fallen so far below my image of myself, this ideal of a perfect Buddhist me, that beautiful butterfly "I" that will emerge, must emerge when I become a bodhisattva. And even more: I'm guilty about my lack of devotion. "I" have career plans, worldly ambitions, hopes for the future outside and beyond achieving spiritual enlightenment. I believe in this "I." I won't give it up. I want this "I" to succeed, in *this* world, in this particular cycle of pain and illusion, even if it means—as it does—making decisions

that I know full well contradict the dharma. The path is clear, but I do not take it. The light shines, but I turn my face away. I remain willful, ignorant, suffering, anxious, dissatisfied, every day tying myself again to the wheel of samsara. I know it. I keep doing it.

Another confession: I'm a bad environmentalist. I currently teach at a college in Connecticut, and I drive there from Brooklyn once a week, some two hours each way, adding my bit to the atmospheric carbon dioxide heating the planet. I fly all the time, too, for academic conferences, journalism, research, and book tours; this year alone I've flown to Greenland, Russia, Canada, and Ireland, in addition to less polluting trips to Oregon, California, Miami, Texas, and elsewhere. My partner composts her food scraps, dragging a bag of coffee grounds and onion skins to the park every week, but I don't bother. I recycle only when it's convenient. I buy coffee in cardboard cups and throw the cups away. Perhaps worst of all, I eat meat. Not just sometimes, not on rare occasions, not only expensive, "sustainable," organic, free-range meat, but almost every day, and from the worst places: tuna and salmon from the corner sushi restaurant, turkey sandwiches from the bodega, beef in my Pad See Ew from the neighborhood Thai place, a whole roast chicken from the grocery store. I imagine the chicken in its cage with its beak cut off, suffering, its whole life ugly suffering just to bring it here, to me, and I feel guilty and disgusted and I pay the cashier and go home and slather the roasted flesh in hot sauce. As with my failure to be a bodhisattva, I know it's wrong, but I do it anyway. There is absolutely no way that eating industrial meat is ethical, whether from a standpoint of compassion toward our fellow sentient beings, a perspective concerned with minimizing greenhouse gases, a point of view concerned with environmental and economic justice, or even the bare hope of sustaining human life on Earth.

This all strikes me as pretty ironic, since I wrote a book that tackles global warming as an ethical problem, and does so from a position that could be seen as more or less Buddhist (though I

consider my position less Buddhist than pantheist, in the tradition of the heretical Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza). That book, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, argues that we need to make a full ethical reckoning, in the deepest philosophical and existential sense, with the unavoidable fact of catastrophic climate change. "Anthropocene" is a term some scientists and thinkers have advanced suggesting that human beings have entered a new geological era, one characterized by the advent of human beings as a geological force. The problems we've created by transferring vast amounts of carbon from underground into the sky are going to affect life on Earth for millennia.

Within a few generations we will almost certainly face average temperatures seven degrees Fahrenheit warmer than today, rising seas at least three to ten feet higher than they are now, and worldwide shifts in crop belts, growing seasons, and population centers. Within a couple hundred years, humans will be living in a climate the Earth hasn't seen since the Pliocene, three million years ago, when oceans were seventy-five feet higher than they are now. Once the methane hydrates under the oceans and permafrost begin to melt, we may soon find ourselves living in a hothouse climate closer to that of the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum, approximately fifty-six million years ago, when the planet was ice free and tropical at the poles. We face the imminent collapse of the agricultural, shipping, and energy networks upon which the global economy depends, a large-scale die-off in the biosphere that's already well underway, and our own possible extinction as a species.

What's even more shocking is that it's probably already too late to stop it, even if the world's political and economic elites were willing and able to radically transform our global fossil-fueled economy, which they're not. Scientists and environmental organizations have been working to alert politicians to the problem of global warming and to decrease carbon emissions for more than three decades, and emissions have only increased. According to the World Bank, 2.7

degrees Fahrenheit of warming is now inevitable no matter what, even if we stopped emitting carbon dioxide worldwide today. For reasons I discuss in *Learning to Die*, none of the political or technological solutions on the table—a carbon tax, cap-and-trade schemes, carbon capture and sequestration, decarbonizing the atmosphere, renewable energy, nuclear power, and geoengineering—are likely to work, and almost certainly not quickly enough to preserve global capitalist civilization as we know it. The next several decades are likely going to be grim, brutish, and bloody.

The situation in which we find ourselves today is more dire than any other moment in human history, and we simply cannot wait until we become perfect bodhisattvas or perfect environmentalists before we respond. We must act *now*, as flawed, failed, flailing selves. At the same time, the situation we find ourselves in is beyond our power to change. The planet *will* get warmer. The ice caps *will* melt. The seas *will* rise. The global, fossil-fueled, consumer capitalist civilization we live in *will* come to an end.

It's precisely in recognizing this paradoxical situation that the insights of Buddhism can help us. If the bad news we must confront is that we're all gonna die, then the wisdom that might help us deal with that news arises from the realization that it was going to happen anyway. This self, this existence, this "I" was already dying, already dead, already passing from moment to moment in the flux of consciousness, matter, and energy, already nothing more than the trace of a breath. And if I can understand my own self as impermanent, transient, and insubstantial, how much more insubstantial is a civilization, a "way of life," a set of habits and structures and prejudices built and believed in and sustained by oh-so-many insubstantial selves?

Breathe in, breathe out. Watch it come. Watch it go.

Buddhism articulates the riddle posed by human mortality to human consciousness in a way that shows us that the riddle's answer lies not in evading the terrifying void, but in accepting the truth

that our great ending is merely another iteration of the innumerable endings we live through each day. This insight is taught in the Four Noble Truths and in countless koans and dharma talks, and it is experienced in the practice of meditation, whether you practice every day or once a week or once a month. Meditation interrupts the endless feedback loops between consciousness and language, between consciousness and being, not disrupting them, as one might with ecstasies, drugs, and frenzy, but interrupting, opening a space, a pause that allows a higher-order function of attentive compassion. In practice one learns to accept finitude, mortality, and the great ending, and in practice one learns to cultivate the patience, compassion, and peace that lead to freedom.

I'm a bad Buddhist and a bad environmentalist, stuck in a world that promises nothing but suffering and death, heat waves, resource wars, and rising seas. The odds that I have enough time to attain Buddhahood in this life, to become the perfect environmentally conscious bodhisattva, are basically zero. The odds are also basically zero that I, personally, will ever be able to do anything to stop or even slow down global climate change. It's almost certain that I will spend my life failing at the most important things I can imagine doing—failing my friends, my family, my society, and myself. And then I'll die.

The question I face, the question we all face, the ethical question at the heart of human life and the ethical question Buddhism helps us see at the heart of any possible response to the global climate crisis, is not whether we will succeed or fail, but rather: how will we choose to live out our inevitable failure? Bad Buddhist, bad environmentalist, flawed person, struggling, mortal, confused human ape—now what?

The first thing I need to recognize is that this isn't just my condition but the human condition, and the second is that having a choice at all is a privilege. Only very few of us have the freedom to choose how we fail. The rest have our failures forced on us, and so

long as the freedom of the few requires the oppression of the many, freedom itself remains an illusion. When the exercise of my freedom demands my complicity in denying that same freedom to others, I am forced to take on behaviors and beliefs that support enslavement and oppression, and I lose my freedom in the very moment I think I gain it. Thus we arrive at the paradoxical truth of the Buddha way: the only free choice we can make is to work for the freedom of all sentient beings. Failure may be inevitable, but recognizing that is the first step in becoming free. [2015]

The Precipice

Again and again and yet again we imagine ourselves at the precipice: we must change our ways, today, this very hour, or else we'll really have to face the consequences. We see ourselves at the cliff's edge, trembling with anxiety, our toes kicking stones into the abyss. We summon all our inner resources. We will ourselves to action. This is it, we say. It's now or never.

Then something catches our attention. Dinner. Twitter. Soccer. Trump. Before we know it, life pulls us back into its comforting ebb and flow. We recognize a missed opportunity, in some vague sense, the nagging tingle of having passed a decision by, but tell ourselves "next time." The sun will rise again tomorrow and then, refreshed, we can begin our struggle anew. We may not have fully faced the crisis, it's true, but of course that can only mean that the real crisis hasn't yet arrived, because if it had, we would face it. We still have a chance. The fight goes on.

In 1988, Dr. James Hansen, then director of NASA's Institute for Space Studies, testified before the United States Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, telling them, with all the qualifications empiricism makes for its claims, that evidence of anthropogenic global warming was very strong and, furthermore, warning them that continuing to emit greenhouse gases by burning fossil fuels at then current rates would lead to significant and dangerous changes in the Earth's climate, including rising sea levels, increased temperatures, and drought.¹ Hansen was not the first to warn of the danger, but his warning was clear and reported widely.