

Integral Education in Light of Earthise

Craig Chalquist¹

Abstract: This article explores the relationship between integral education and the emerging terrestrial consciousness—a consciousness of interdependency, sovereignty, and earthly responsibility. It asserts that integral education is well positioned at this time when urgent environmental catastrophes threaten our planet, to help us recover an integral relation with the universe and our planet Earth, and contribute to restoration of a sense of earthly wonder and reverence.

Keywords: CIIS, Earthise, Ecology, Ecopsychology, Ecospirituality, Integral Education, Sri Lalita, Tripura Sundari.

In 1912, the supposedly unsinkable RMS *Titanic* sank, ending its career on the bottom of the sea, exactly where the gods of the Greeks had confined the Titans, those gigantic, inflated, world-offending powers whose acts of hubris against the natural order laid them low. Perhaps a useful question to ask as the oceans rise might be: How can integral education as we tend it at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) equip humanity to evolve beyond unsustainable, unjust, world-wrecking titanism?

"Integral" is a word with many meanings, but they all derive from a Latin word for "complete, whole." Here at CIIS we use it to mean forms of education that bring together wisdom traditions, fields of knowledge, and embodied practices into meaningful new combinations. How we teach here embraces not only the intellectual, but also the experiential and the applied, or to say it in shorthand: not only the mind, but the body and spirit. As a depth psychologist I would add *soul*, not as a metaphysical entity but as the felt sense of what is numinous, surprising, and enchanting. A root of "integral" is *tangere*, which means "to touch."

In 1968, the year CIIS was founded, astronauts from Apollo 8, the exploratory project whose mission patch bore an infinity sign joining the Earth and the Moon, saw our planet rise in beauty over the lunar horizon and were captivated—touched. Although they never fully emerged from their state of awe, they did take some marvelous pictures up there without fully realizing that the images announced a new era.

¹ **Craig Chalquist**, PhD., is the program chair of East-West Psychology at CIIS. Craig focuses his scholarly writing and teaching on depth psychology, ecopsychology, qualitative research, Systems Theory, ecotherapy, and mythology from a psychological perspective. He practices what he refers to as "Deep Education": the kind that invites the human relationship to nature, elements, creatures, and Earth to shift from mere utility to deep appreciation. He also trains psychotherapists in ecotherapy techniques, has presented at Bioneers, and gives local presentations on "Gardening and Mental Health." Craig is on the editorial board of the journal *Ecopsychology* and a member of the International Association for Ecotherapy.

cchalquist@ciis.edu



This conjunction of events strikes me as meaningful and anticipatory. A few years before the astronauts beamed the famous Earthrise photograph back home, Rachel Carson (1962) published *Silent Spring* to warn the world of the dangers of unregulated pesticides. As new CIIS students witnessed dialogues between depth psychology, shamanism, Buddhism, and tantra, as Earthrise spanned the gulf of scientific inquiry and soulful response between planets and within the hearts of appreciative spacefarers, as Dr. Martin Luther King lay in peace after giving his life for what he called the Beloved Community, as demonstrators marched for peace and equality in Chicago, Atlantic City, Mali, Mexico City, Paris, and Prague, and as bombs stopped falling in Vietnam, the world watched as a new terrestrial consciousness, a consciousness of interdependency, sovereignty, and earthly responsibility, began to melt away archaic dualisms of nation, gender, religion, and race. "You see the whole Earth," stated Joseph Campbell (1991) in the year of his death, "without any national divisions at all." (p.41). This dawn of Earthrise, and of what Sean Kelly (2010) refers to as the Planetary Era, also heralded the gradual rapprochement of self and world, culture and nature, inner and outer, celestial and terrestrial. As Earth rose up and shone in collective consciousness, humanity beheld a vision it had never seen, not in a million years of evolutionary and preevolutionary time: our homeworld glimpsed as a whole entity. "With our view of Earthrise," Campbell stated in an interview,

we could see that the Earth and the heavens were no longer divided but that the Earth is in the heavens. There is no division and all the theological notions based on the distinction between the heavens and the Earth collapse with that realization. (Joseph Campbell quoted in Marler, 1987, p. 61)

He also referred, as would the astronauts who came later, to "the opening of the heart and eyes to the wonder of the world we're in" (p. 61).

Why is this sense of deep appreciation and wonder of our planet so important? Read the latest environmental news and you will see the grim results of their lack. We will not protect and cherish what we do not love. The environmental crisis now upon us presents, on many levels, a crisis of the capacity for reverence. My question has evolved somewhat: What can integral education contribute to this sense of earthly wonder and reverence? How (as I ask my students) might we feel truly at home on our homeworld?

Wonder and reverence for the beauty of nature and Earth have never been scarce at CIIS. In 1972, Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri, co-founder of CIIS, gave a speech here in San Francisco—the city, be it noted, where the United Nations Charter was signed—about the work of his teacher Aurobindo Ghosh. In that speech Dr. Chaudhuri spoke of bringing spiritual realization down into physical presence, an action with the potential of transforming our material lives into an expressive image of the Divine. Citing Sri Aurobindo, he described this as "a cosmic evolutionary process" that could lead to "the establishment of mankind's age-long dream of the kingdom of heaven on this planet." These ideals link the personal, the spiritual, the cultural, the cosmological, and the planetary (Chaudhuri, 1972, para. 12).

In 1975, Father Thomas Berry, who loved the natural world and called himself a geologist, held up Sri Aurobindo as an exemplar of meeting contemporary troubles with ancient spiritual practices and insights. Berry wrote, "He decisively answers those who say that Indian spirituality

has nothing to contribute to modern humanity and insists that Indian spiritual traditions are fully capable of entering into the modern world of science and historical development."(Quoted in Ohara, 2014, p. 86)

For Aurobindo, as for Berry (2009), "The political and economic, the scientific and technological, the artistic and the literary, the spiritual and the religious are all valid forms of human existence that must be preserved, developed, and integrated with one another." (p. 15). Sri Aurobindo's spiritual partner Mirra Alfassa, usually known as the Mother, was even more emphatic about the earthly base of deep spiritual work. Criticizing practices that take leave of planet and body in search of higher realms, she asked,

Why should life have begun at all if it is only to be climbed out of? ... Evolution is not a tortuous path which brings us back, somewhat battered, to the starting-point. It exists in order to teach the whole of creation the joy of being, the beauty of being, the grandeur of being, the majesty of a sublime life and the perpetual development, perpetually progressive, of this joy, this beauty, this grandeur... It is on earth that we progress. It is on earth that we can accomplish. It is in the body that the Victory is won. (Alfassa, 1977, p. 424)

The land stewardship at Auroville, which she founded, demonstrates the ecological dimension of her vision.

To emphasize the continuing Earth connection at CIIS I would draw your attention to the school's logo of interlocking triangles. These are the yantric emblem of the Indian deity affectionately known as Sri Lalita, "She Who Plays," Tripura Sundari and the Red Goddess. Ancient depictions associate her strongly with aspects of the natural world, from the pot of honey she holds to her lotus, her lion throne, and her arrows made of flowers. Her hair is said to smell like flowers, and in some tales she is herself symbolized by a red flower. She created fire and gods and stars, grew mountains from her breasts, and she wears the sun and moon for earrings. Yet she is also associated with cities and urban places, suggesting that in her eyes, nature and culture need not stand in opposition. She rode around on a chariot built of light.

Although Sri Lalita is as lovely and seductive as an idyllic landscape or a purely flowing river, she can be a demanding deity, for she asks us questions for which we find no ready answers. How shall we tend the natural world from within the urban heart of cities as towers rise all around us? How can we be responsive to Earth's needs from within a square building? How do we teach renewed nature access with so little of it to rely on here?

We take our cue from nature: we make do.

Our faculty include adventurous souls who have performed fieldwork in indigenous communities, taught dance in sacred sites and shrines, and gone outside to counsel the poor. We do art and photography in nature, at home, in the classroom, and in the streets. We have courses in ecopsychology and Earth-rooted spiritual practices and programs in Integral Ecology and Ecology, Spirituality, and Religion. Some of us have worked with Joanna Macy, a true elder and mentor in her a lifetime of dedication to the Great Turning away from an industrial growth model

of society toward urgent visions of a life-sustaining civilization. Our feminism courses include ecofeminism. As of last summer CIIS became a signatory of the Earth Charter, an international blueprint for a just, peaceful, and sustainable world community. The East-West Psychology department, has created a Certificate in Ecoresilience Leadership to train participants in how to guide groups of people frightened into helplessness by climate change news move beyond denial and paralysis into reflection and effective action.

One of the oldest dualisms challenged by the image of Earthrise, a dualism as old as writing, places everything pure and green outside in Nature and everything mechanical and degraded in the city, which we leave on excursions or vacations into still-verdant locales. But why not invite the greenery into the city? Our faculty, staff, and students quest for visions in the desert and the jungle, but they also bring back some of what they find out there. At CIIS we even make our own honey. The Red Goddess would like that—just don't tell her we named it after one of her sisters.

I am sometimes asked what relevance our integral learnings and psychospiritual practices still possess now that multiple environmental catastrophes have begun to sweep the entire planet surface. My reply is: "More than ever." In the words of Thomas Berry (1999),

To recover an integral relation with the universe, planet Earth, and North America needs to be a primary concern for the peoples of this continent. While a new alignment of our government and all our institutions and professions with the continent itself in its deep structure and functioning cannot be achieved immediately, a beginning can be made throughout our educational programs. (Para. 11)

Having briefly mentioned some of our many points of departure in this project of deep homecoming, I would like to suggest that Sri Lalita holds forth a strategic hint about how to proceed in an increasingly imperiled world in which icecaps melt and liberties vanish even faster.

The ancient stories tell us that when the demon Bhandasura was born of the ashes of destroyed love, Sri Lalita and her followers rode to battle with him on elephants, peacocks, horses, eagles, swans, and, in her case, on a chariot pulled by a lion. Music wafted forth from its turning wheels. When she appeared in the field, Bhandasura laughed at her. What was this soft, lovely creature doing here? How could she hope to stand against him, who had hurled even the powerful god-king Indra from his heavenly throne?

Sri Lalita did not deign to fight him on his own violent terms with his own destructive methods. Instead, she unleashed an arrow made of flowers. Its name was Kameshwari, an expression of sacred feminine power. Arcing unstoppably through the sky, it penetrated its target and dropped him with a mountain-shaking concussion. As she stood over her fallen opponent, Sri Lalita knew she could destroy him easily now, but she chose instead to revive him, but not in his ugly form as Bhandasura. No. Rather, she restored him to his original form, that of the divine being he had been before his decline to ashes and darkness: Kamadeva, the god of love and desire.

If you can't beat 'em, transform 'em.

Sri Lalita bears within one of her many names an emphasis on the number three. For example, she holds in her hands the sources of three capacities or powers: will, wisdom, and action. The documentary film *A Fierce Green Fire* showcases all three as the first major documentary on the environmental movement, one of the oldest and most successful movements for cultural transformation. The film takes us through five decades of environmental activism on a global scale. Drawing on interviews, archival footage, and the scientific expertise of biologist E.O. Wilson, among others, the film touches on the early conservation movement, the fight against pollution in the 1970s, the often risky work carried out by Greenpeace to protect endangered sea life, the struggle against rainforest-depleting globalization, and twenty-five years of uphill steps taken to halt the ravages of climate change, recently described by Bay Area activist Rebecca Solnit as a sustained act of unnamed violence.

The film takes its name from a transformational moment in the life of Aldo Leopold. In his book *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold (2001/1949) describes how, having just shot a wolf,

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (p.11)

As a result of this encounter Leopold became a lifelong advocate of what he called the land ethic: “The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land” (p. 171).

That land is a community, is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of land. We can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in. (Leopold, 2001/1949, p. 171)

Thomas Berry (1999) would agree. When he was a boy, his family moved near a creek flowing by a meadow:

It was an early afternoon in May when I first looked down over the scene and saw the meadow. The field was covered with lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something, I know not what, that seems to explain my life at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember (Para. 1).

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; what is opposed to this meadow or negates it is not good. My life

orientation is that simple. It is also that pervasive. It applies in economics and political orientation as well as in education and religion and whatever (para. 3).

He adds:

We might think of a viable future for the planet less as the result of some scientific insight or as dependent on some socio-economic arrangement than as participation in a symphony or as renewed presence to the vast cosmic liturgy. This insight was perhaps something that I vaguely experienced in that first view of the lilies blooming in the meadow across the creek (para. 22).

"Cosmic liturgy" recalls the scientific-poetic teachings of Brian Swimme, of course, who knew Berry and whose demonstrations of the mystery and beauty of the universe not only win awards but invite us to feel at home in the starry cosmos

The reverential tone of Leopold and Berry and Swimme remind me of Alice Walker's. In an essay she wrote:

What I have noticed in my small world is that if I praise the wild flowers growing on the hill in front of my house, the following year they double in profusion and brilliance. If I admire the squirrel that swings from branch to branch outside my window, pretty soon I have three or four squirrels to admire...And then, too, there are the deer, who know they need never, ever fear me (Walker, 1988, p.189).

All these voices represent a legacy of love for a world in decline, a world that cannot recover without a foundational change in collective consciousness away from numbness and disregard toward a deeper recognition of our innate caring for the things around, below, and above us. As Annie Dillard expressed this caring in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*:

In the deeps are the violence and terror of which psychology has warned us. But if you ride these monsters deeper down, if you drop with them farther over the world's rim, you find what our sciences cannot locate or name, the substrate, the ocean or matrix or ether which buoys the rest, which gives goodness its power for good, and evil its power for evil, the unified field: our complex and inexplicable caring for each other, and for our life together here. (Dillard, 1982, pp. 19-20)

And so we gather to consider reverence for life and planet in the rising light of Earthrise, the anticipatory mythic image, perhaps, of a just, peaceful, and nature-loving civilization to be assembled from the ground up out of many soulful centers, one of which, perhaps, is here.

References

Alfassa, M. (1977). *Questions and answers (1957-1958). Collected works of The Mother* (Vol. 9). Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

- Berry, T. (1999). *The great work: Our way into the future*. New York, NY: Crown Publishing (retrieved from:<http://www.commondreams.org/views/2009/06/02/meadow-across-creek>)
- Berry, T. (2009). *The sacred universe: Earth, spirituality, and religion in the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Campbell, J. & Moyers, B. (1991). *The power of myth*. New York, NY: Anchor Press.
- Carson, R. (1962). *Silent spring*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Chaudhuri, H. (1972). *Supramental meditation*. Retrieved from:
<http://www.culturalintegrationfellowship.org/article2.html>
- Dillard, A. (1982) *Teaching a stone to talk: Expeditions and encounters*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Kelly, S. (2010). *Coming home: The birth and transformation of the planetary era*. Great Barrington, MA: Lindisfarne Books.
- Leopold, A. (2001/1949). *A sand county almanac (outdoor essays & reflections)*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Marler, J. (1987). Joseph Campbell: The mythic journey. *Yoga Journal*, Nov./Dec., 6.
- Ohara, D.P. (2014). Hinduism and Sri Aurobindo Ghose. In Eaton, H. (Ed.), *The intellectual journey of Thomas Berry: Imagining the earth community*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Walker, A. (1988). *Living by the word*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.