THE ULTIMATE VALUE of any spiritual path, at least according to Buddhists, is measured by the degree to which the confusion and suffering generated by ego have been subdued. The great Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, Dilgo Khyentse, who taught in North America on several occasions, emphasized that all mind-training has a single goal—the subjugation of ego-clinging. The extent to which we have been able to overcome self-attachment is, he says, the only way to judge the progress in one’s spiritual practices.

There is, in fact, a dangerous tendency for spiritual practices to have a reverse effect. Spirituality can often reinforce ego-clinging and self-importance. It can create spiritual materialism. The way in which we use spiritual practices and label to make ourselves seem more important was thoroughly described in Trungpa Rinpoche’s book.

CUTTING THROUGH SPIRITUAL MATERIALISM

Here in Louisiana, my cens are annoyed when I watch the religious channels on the satellite television, but the harangues and appeals to be found therein often remind me of what to regard in a place where one is as much right to a place there as you and me. What is the most important group of organisms on earth? It is not humans, with their petty self-centered ego. Biologists have learned that the most diverse group of organisms is—beetles. There are apparently more kinds of beetles than of any other group or life form, and possibly more kinds of beetles on earth than all other forms of life put together. (I don’t recall the book of Genesis having much to say about beetles ...). It is said that when a theologian asked the famous biologist J.B.S. Haldane what he had deduced about the Creator from the study of His Creation, Haldane replied, “An inordinate fondness for beetles.” There is another group of living creatures favored by nature. In terms of sheer mass, the most abundant organisms are plants—99.9 percent of all the living material on earth is plant tissue.

So what is the purpose of this Nature of which we are all a part? It would seem to be the proliferation of beetles and plants.

So much, then, for the human ego, which would place ourselves, our families, our nations and our civilizations at the center of something we call history. Why bother with knowledge of human trivia such as sports, or literature, or photo albums, or music? Let us focus on the important things in life. How many kinds of beetles can you name? How many kinds of plants?

THE EGO DESIRES TO BE AT THE CENTER OF SPECIAL CREATION

Much of the vested anti-evolution activity in the United States is a manifestation of one basic fear: if evolution is accepted, it removes humanity from the center of God’s creation. There is no greater insult to the human ego than to accept that the cockroach, the tapeworm, the elephant and the human are all of equivalent value to the great scheme of Nature. If there is a heaven, Nature says that ants and parrots and arachnids have just as much right to a place there as you and me.

(Own paraphrase here in Louisiana, with one of the worst education records in the United States, was recently spending its budget not on better salaries for teachers or on new books, but on court appeals. Their objective was to force teachers to read a disclaimer before biology classes stating, in so many words, that the study of biology is not intended to challenge the view that God created man in His own image in six days. Of course. How important it makes each of us see the one. The one loves special creation.)

LINEAGE IN BUDHISM AND BIOLOGY

When Buddhists do morning chants and recite the
Paul Keddy offers a perspective on scientific materialism as a spiritual path

Lineage of great teachers back to the Buddha, we review
a few thousand years of history. In contrast, the gymnosperms (the ancient
plants that include the pine that carpet both Louisiana and the hills of Karmi, Chilling) have a lineage that goes back over a billion years.
Gymnosperms saw the dinosaurs come, they saw them go. Those same gymnosperms now have to endure these pesky things called humans, humans who cut gymnosperms down to make paper to write their self-importance
tale. We are the age of the conifer and the cone has returned.

NATURE STUDY AS AN ANTIDOTE TO EGO

The personal study of Nature is a peaceful spiritual
practice. There is nothing more humbling to the ego that
trying to learn all of the more than a thousand species
of plants found in one small state. If we cannot even
grasp the different types of plants in one tiny region,
how limited our minds must be. Similarly, an early
morning walk with binoculars challenges us to identify
perhaps a dozen different species migrating spring
warblers, among the most colorful birds that live in
North America. What is the purpose of a Black-throated
Green Warbler? Why is there another called the Black-throated
Blue Warbler?

Most humans, and their egocentric minds, remain
blindly unaware of the birds live in our forests.
Even when we become aware of such birds, we usually
cannot recognize them. Warblers evolved, they diversified,
they migrate each year to the north to breed, and each fall they return to the tropics, and they care not a whit for whether humans are conscious, whether humans can identify birds, or whether humans participate in spiritual paths or genocide.

In the excellence and diversity of life forms, Nature
offers us one of the greatest insights to ego-clinging that
reality can offer. Every time we see something we cannot
name, it is like a Zen monk striking us to wake us up.
“Look,” Nature seems to prod, “look at how irrelevant
you are, look at how your spiritual path matters less to me than a bark beetle or an oak tree.”

Nature makes all human endeavors seem trivial.
We cannot be aware of the diversity of living creatures (billions of non-human beings), and the long history of their evolution (billions of years), without feeling small. That is one of the central teachings of biology—we are merely small pieces of meat on a rock circling a minor sun. That is what is—there is no need to be ashamed of what we are. It is perfectly fine as it is. Gymnosperms do not apologize for growing their seeds in cones, beetles do not apologize for having wing covers and Black-throated Green Warblers do not apologize for migrating each year. We do not have to apologize for being a short-lived speck of conscious meat (albeit with opposable thumbs) in a vast Cosmos.

But we can turn away from such vanity and the
fear of our insignificance. The more we can wrap our
selves in our personal dramas and those of our families
and friends, the more we can inflate our ego. That is why we practice mindfulness and awareness of life. That is why we return our mind again and again to our place
in the Cosmos. Learning to identify and appreciate the
millions of life forms around us is, then, a powerful tool
for spiritual practice.

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