

Remaking Ourselves

“As human beings our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as in being able to remake ourselves.”

– Gandhi

We can suppose that Gandhi was not thinking about genetic engineering when he emphasized remaking ourselves. His point is, as usual, right on target. The problem with genetic engineering seems to be the same basic problem we have with everything else today: our tendency to objectify and commodify the whole world, according to the limits of our technology. The only thing new about genetic engineering, from that perspective, is that our technology now allows us to manipulate the genetic code of life.

But that is a description, not an explanation. What motivates those commodifications? Why do we do it? That question brings us to the root of the issue, which becomes an essentially religious or spiritual one. The core issue is what I would call the problem of our sense of lack—something that we attempt to resolve by remaking the world, but which is actually resolvable only by remaking ourselves, in Gandhi’s sense.

I begin with Gandhi because his contrast is more insightful than the one we more often make between “a world of made and a world of born.” As a moral evaluation of genetic engineering, such a distinction between natural and unnatural is inadequate—and not very Buddhist. Shakyamuni’s dharma did not distinguish them, and insofar as some such dualism may be read into his teachings, the Buddhist emphasis is more on the unnatural; for example, the celibacy of the sangha. (Perhaps the only place where naturalness may be seen as privileged in Buddhism is occasionally in those schools affected by Taoism or Shinto, such as Ch’an/Zen.)

In the same way, Buddhism provides no support for those who seek a return to some (pre-agricultural?) golden age in the distant past. The Buddha couldn’t find the beginning of our *dukkha* (dissatisfaction) and wasn’t much interested in that anyway; his sole concern was showing us how *dukkha* could be ended. In short, critiques that argue genetic engineering is unnatural are somewhat unnatural to Buddhism. The Buddhist angle is different, although no less acute.

Our preoccupation with the dualism between born and made may be traced back to the Greek distinction between *physis* and *nomos*, nature and convention (or culture). Much of the Western tradition can be understood in terms of increasing self-consciousness about their difference and the historical dialectic between them. Diderot, Rousseau, Herder, the Romantics, and others contrasted the organic and spontaneous with the artificiality and sterile rationality of convention; Kant, Hegel, Marx, Comte, and others were



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optimistic about our progressive capacity to understand and control the laws of our own development.

Those who yearn for nature usually evoke the past, while those who privilege culture have high hopes for the future. Nobody is satisfied with the present. But what does that dualism overlook? The nature/culture dialectic is our problem; it is not found in Asian Buddhism, and we should not superimpose it on Buddhist teachings. It is better for us to do the opposite and reflect on what Buddhist critiques of such dualities imply for the way we have been understanding (or misunderstanding) the challenge of genetic engineering.

The psychoanalyst Otto Rank divided our anxiety into two complementary fears. “Whereas the life fear is anxiety at going forward, becoming an individual, the death fear is anxiety at going backward, losing individuality. Between these two fear possibilities the individual is thrown back and forth all his life.” This can be expressed in terms of



freedom: we feel the need to be free, but becoming free makes us more anxious and therefore more inclined to sacrifice that freedom for security, at which time we again feel a need to be free.

In short, our two great needs, for freedom and security, conflict. With regard to the relationship between nature and culture, this issue is primarily a problem of meaning: to accept my culture as natural implies that the meaning of my life is decided for me, while the freedom to discover or construct my own meaning is to embrace a vertigo resulting from the lack of a “natural” foundation. Once culture has been recognized as convention, you can’t go home again, for an essential condition of those “closest to nature” is that they do not know they are close to nature.

Simmel noticed that one who lives in more direct contact with nature may enjoy its charms yet “lacks that distance from nature that is the basis for aesthetic contemplation and the root of that quiet sorrow, that feeling of yearning estrangement and of a lost paradise that characterizes the romantic response to nature.”

The only society that can gratify such an indulgence is one that has little to fear from nature because its technology has in fact tamed nature. To paraphrase Stanley Diamond, such a romantic response is “the bad faith of the conqueror, who has become secure enough to become a tourist.” Whether or not our technological genie should have been released from his bottle, he cannot be put back inside. Nor would we want to return (even if we could) to a “natural” premodern society such as Tokugawa Japan, where hierarchical and exploitative political structures were presented as perfect because they conformed to “the order found in the manifold natural phenomena of heaven and earth.”

In short, I am suggesting that our discomfort with genetic engineering needs to be articulated in a different way than simply privileging the nature side of the nature/culture split—and Buddhism offers us one such way. According to Buddhism, we are unhappy, and make each other unhappy, because of the three roots of evil: greed, ill-will (or fear), and delusion. This suggests that we focus on the motivations behind our collective obsession with genetic engineering today. We shouldn’t pursue it if our motivations are wrong, because that will increase our dukkha, not reduce it.

Needless to say, it is not difficult to find the three roots of evil operative in genetic engineering today. The most obvious is greed, in the form of corporate and personal desire for profit. Since this problem has been so well exposed, there is no need to go into it in detail, except to emphasize that this obsession is short-sighted and works to circumvent the kind of slow, long-term evaluation necessary for even the most innocuous and benign types of

genetic engineering. This makes us all into laboratory rats.

The role of ill-will/fear is less obvious, but such motivations are present in the competitive pressures that drive researchers eager for Nobel Prizes and corporations eager for lucrative patents.

The least obvious factor, however, is perhaps the most dangerous one: ignorance or delusion. Insofar as our obsession with genetic engineering is motivated by something unconscious, which we do not understand, it is likely to lead to disaster. The law of repression, with the return of the repressed in distorted form, applies collectively as well as personally. This requires a digression into the

broader issue of what motivates our obsession with technology generally.

From a Buddhist perspective, what is most striking about our nature/culture problem is how much it resembles the central problem of the individual self: the sense-of-self’s anxiety due to dimly intuited awareness that it is not self-existing or “natural” but a mental construct.

Contemporary psychology makes the Buddhist denial of the self (*anatta*) seem less perverse to us

today, and I think Buddhism anticipated the reluctant conclusions of psychoanalysis: that guilt and anxiety are not adventitious but intrinsic to the ego. This is because our dissatisfaction with life (our dukkha) derives from a repression even more immediate than death-fear: the suspicion that “I” am not real. For Buddhism, the ego is not a self-existing consciousness but a mental construction, a fragile sense-of-self suspecting and dreading its own no-thingness. Our problem arises because this conditioned consciousness wants to ground itself—that is, to make itself real. If the sense-of-self is a construct, however, it can realize itself only by objectifying itself in the world. The ego-self is this never-ending project to objectify oneself in some way, something consciousness can no more do than a hand can grasp itself or an eye see itself.

The consequence of this perpetual failure is that the sense-of-self has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense-of-lack, which it always tries to escape. What Freud called “the return of the repressed” in the distorted form of a symptom shows us how to link this basic yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real in the world. We experience this deep sense of lack as the feeling that “there is something wrong with me,” and the feeling manifests, and we respond to it, in many different ways: I’m not rich enough, not loved enough, not published/read enough, and so on. Such anxiety is eager to objectify into fear of something, because we have particular ways to defend ourselves against particular feared things. The problem with objectifications, however, is that no object can ever satisfy if it’s not really an object we want. For

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Buddhism, the only genuine solution to this situation is a spiritual one: my “letting go” of my self in order to realize my interconnectedness with all things.

The value of this for understanding genetic engineering is the light it sheds on modern technology generally. If our dread of no-thing-ness motivates us to try to ground ourselves in reality, we can try to make ourselves real by objectifying and commodifying the whole world.

“Technology is not applied science. It is the expression of a deep longing, an original longing that is present in modern science from its beginning. This is the desire of the self to seek its own truth through the mastery of the object. . . .The power of technique is not to connect thought effectively to nature; it alters nature to its own purpose. Its aim is to master its being; to own it.” (Donald Verene, *Research in Philosophy and Technology*)

Today we tend to think of scientific and technological progress as natural, which in this case means something that does not need to be explained. But in what sense is it natural to “progress” from the Wright brothers’ biplane to a moon landing during one lifetime? I think we cannot understand our preoccupation with technology until we realize that it is our collective effort to create the ultimate security for our self-constructed (and therefore ungrounded) civilization by transforming the entire world into our own self-ground. In response to our anxious alienation from nature, we try to make ourselves real by reorganizing the whole environment (into “resources”) until we can see our own image reflected in everything “natural.” This is why we can dispense with the consolations of traditional religions (or how we cope with the fact that those consolations have been wrested from us): now we have other ways to control our fate, or to try to.

Another way to put it is that technology has become our attempt to own the universe, an attempt that is always frustrated because, for reasons we do not quite understand, we never possess it fully enough to feel secure in our ownership. For many of us, nature has taken the place of God because both fulfill our need to be grounded in something greater than we are, which may be called mystery; technology cannot take God’s place because it is motivated by the opposite response, attempting to banish that mystery by extending our control, as if the security we

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crave can be attained by transforming nature into something like us. Our success in “improving” nature means we can no longer rest peacefully in its bosom.

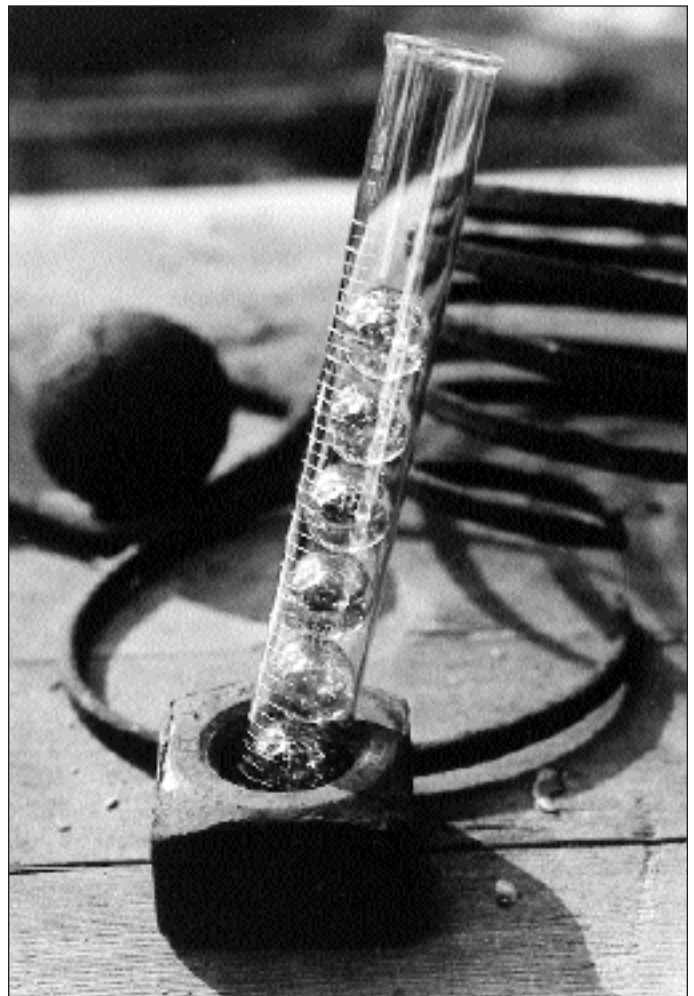
We cannot manipulate the natural world in a collective attempt to self-ground ourselves and also hope to find in it a ground greater than ourselves. That, in a nutshell, is the source of our conflict between a world of made and a world of born. The problem with technological objectification and commodification is an extreme version of the problem with all objectification: since we and the world are not a duality, but an inseparable whole, to objectify the world is to be objectified by it and in it. As the earth becomes reduced to a collection of resources to be managed, the material and social structures created to do this do the same to us, and we find ourselves increasingly subjected to them.

From this perspective, the ecological crisis is the ultimate irony: our collective project to secure ourselves is what threatens to destroy us.

If this is right, our problem with genetic engineering is our problem with modern technology generally: we are trying to resolve our perceived lack by remaking the world, whereas what we need to do is to remake ourselves spiritually.

More concretely, what does this imply about genetic engineering? From my Buddhist perspective, there is no way to escape the conclusion that genetic engineering as it

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is presently being done should be indefinitely suspended, while we engage in a thorough and wide-ranging democratic discussion of what we collectively want from it. The greed, competition, and delusion that motivate genetic engineering research and application today are a recipe for disaster. Needless to say, we should have no further delusions of our own that such a full public debate will happen unless we fight for it. The economic and political powers that be have too much of a stake in pushing genetic engineering.

Nevertheless, there is another implication to this perspective that should not be overlooked. None of the above implies that all genetic engineering is intrinsically bad. It does not deny the possibility that sometime in the future we may have economic and political conditions that enable us to engage in genetic engineering with different, more conscious and humble, motivation: to reduce human (and perhaps other species') dukkha.

That is because the essential point of Buddhism is not to return to nature but to reduce our dukkha. Despite all the obvious dangers, there is the possibility that genetic engineering may do that—for example (and most obviously) by treating inherited genetic diseases. Today we cannot expect to find bodhisattvas in Monsanto Corporation, but we can hope that we may someday live in a world where a much more cautious approach to genetic engineering may improve the human condition, rather than endanger it. That, however, is unlikely to occur unless we also learn that it is more important to remake ourselves spiritually than to remake the world.



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