

Teilhard de Chardin

An Inquiry into Group and Organizational Presence

"The Next Buddha May Be A Sangha"

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"The Next Buddha May Be A Sangha" Thich Nhat Hanh¹

The above quote is the title of an article by the contemporary Buddhist monk and teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. The idea that the next Buddha may be a Sangha, a community, is directly in line with an aspect of reality that both fascinates me and is pointed to in the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. This is the power and cohesiveness of entities that are social constructions of humanity, collectives of humans and consequences of human thought that synthesize into a greater whole that contributes its own interiority and personhood to the noosphere. These might take the simple form of dynamics that occur in small or large groups, the more complex dynamics of an institution or organization, or on a broader plane, that of human systems such as corporations, the internet, or our global economic system and its subsystems. This paper will attempt to examine these systems that are, in effect, creations of human thought, whether they are a further stage of centration, and their relationship to the noosphere as Teilhard envisions it.

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Next Buddha May Be A Sangha" in *Inquiring Mind*, Vol 10, No. 2, Spring 1994.

There are many levels into which this inquiry can delve. Each level creates a focus for going into more depth in Teilhard's vision illuminating the area of inquiry and clarifying some of the aspects of Teilhard's thinking. Pertinent to look at is how Teilhard's concepts of complexity, radial energy, and tangential energy inform how we conceive of organisms or entities that engender a cohesive sense of being. Building on this we can look at whether these entities generate radial energies that contribute to the noosphere.

If we look at the progression from atoms, to molecules, cells, multi-celled organisms, to complex beings such as humans, and the way that centration occurs at each level, we can then see whether we can take a step beyond to identify complex systems that are formed either from multiple humans (such as a small group with a particular focus) or more complex systems that involve many humans, buildings, infrastructure, technology etc. (such as corporations or even systems such as the economy) and whether more complex centration (and deepening radial energy) is occurring there. My fascination with the level of consciousness at the group and organizational level has a long history, and is informed by my training as a Tavistock group relations consultant 40 years ago and continues to this day as I participate in dialogue groups based on the model of David Bohm.

As I peer into the various questions this inquiry raises for me, I find that I am intrigued by the relationship between physical manifestation and consciousness, the exterior/tangential and the interior/radial—and whether the radial or interior, which appears to be where consciousness manifests, ever exists on its own, separate from exterior/tangential manifestation. Do group dynamics, corporations, economies have an

existence separate from their myriad physical manifestations, including the individual (though not specific) humans, that have generated them? Or is the 'mind' of the group, corporation or societal structure a level of noosphere that develops from the radial energy of the increasing complexity of the relations of the entities and structures that make up the organization? Interiority goes all the way down to the first enfolding of what it is that manifests as matter in particles, and there is also a necessary relationship between the two (interiority or radial energy and exterior/tangential energy) that goes all the way up to the most complex and interrelated systems. Something as large as the economy, that appears to function autonomously from both the individual humans and the infrastructure that constitute it, would seem to demonstrate the inverse relationship that Teilhard describes between radial and tangential energy. The various 'atoms' and 'cells' that make up an entity such as the economy can change, each being more transient than the whole, but the centrated entity of the economy continues to function—yet the whole entity would collapse without the continued presence of multiple individual humans and infrastructure. And this is also perhaps true of us as individuals—if our organs give way, our bodies stop functioning, and perhaps our centrated sense of self dissipates, though according to Teilhard, our centrated interiority has contributed radial energy to the noosphere. This would then probably be true of collective human enterprises that develop centration as well.

In Teilhard's description of the universe, there seems a direct, and inverse, relation between tangential energy, which is manifested from the outside, the physicality of things, and radial energy, which manifests from the interiority or consciousness of things.

In their earliest form, the particles that group together to manifest atoms are not fully closed in on themselves, thereby having an incomplete interiority. The potential for interiority is there but not fully manifested.² As particles form atoms, atoms bond to form molecules, and molecules group to develop cells, there is a greater depth to the interiority. With more complex organization, more centration occurs and more radial energy is generated. Each of the substructures is integral in itself and, as it bonds with others, it becomes organized to create an entity for which the interiority is greater than the sum of its individual elements. In a substance that is an aggregate of elements, without the enfolding bonds that create more complex structures, the interiority would not appear to develop a centricity. Each element contains its own interiority but there is not a deeper synthesis of centricity.

Groups of humans, in relationship to each other, develop a greater centricity than the aggregation of their individual centers. This applies to many social structures of humanity: the family, the organization, and larger structures such as the economy that do not appear to have a center from where we, as individuals, perceive them. The individual human, himself, will not become necessarily more complex, but as humans group together into more complex social entities, those social entities develop their own 'proper character'. Teilhard writes, "...the large complex...cannot but have its own proper character....which the universe undergoes as it makes a further ascent, in the direction of extremely high complexes."³ The groups, the collectives, that humans form, develop a

² Teilhard *The Activation of Energy*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Harcourt 1976) p. 100

³ Teilhard *The Activation of Energy* (1978) p. 30

centricity of their own, whereby the individual human becomes as an atom or cell to the larger structure of an organism. With synthesis and centration these larger and more complex structures that arise out of collectives of humans, along with their infrastructures of aggregate matter, generate an intensification of radial energy and are an intermediary stage of complexity contributing to the noosphere. Teilhard points in this direction in *The Heart of Matter* when he writes: "...to understand that precisely because the individual human being represents a *corpuscular magnitude* he *must* be subject to the same development as every other species of corpuscles in the World: that means that he *must* coalesce into physical relationships and groupings that belong to a higher order than his." ⁴

This aspect of group formation developing centration of its own has been apparent to me in both Tavistock study groups and Bohmian dialogue groups in which I have participated. On rare occasions one becomes aware that one is simply a corpuscle in a larger consciousness, each individual a cell contributing just a small piece to a greater synthesis. This also applies at the level of corporations. The individuals and infrastructure that make up the corporation become cells and organs of a greater synthesized whole that seems to hold its own consciousness and intentions beyond any individual involved. As such these organizations become interested in their own survival as a whole, while not needing any particular individual 'cell'. And similarly to the way that the individual atoms, cells, and most of the organs of our body, cannot perceive our

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, P. *The Heart of Matter*, trans. Rene Hague. (New York: Harcourt 1978) p. 3

total selves, neither do we, as individual humans, perceive the face or personality of the larger entity. Teilhard experienced awareness of being a 'cell' in a larger whole on the front lines of the Verdun: "I do not hesitate to say that this special dis-individuation which enables the fighting man to attain some human essence higher than himself is the ultimate secret of the incomparable feeling of freedom that he experiences and that he will never forget."⁵ The heightened awareness of being on the frontlines of war brought forth the sense of being part of a greater whole, of being 'dis-individuated.'

Though the emphasis in Teilhard's works seems to be the progression from the individual human directly to hominization, or the full centration of humanity as a whole into the noosphere, many of his observations point to a midlevel of collectivization that can contain its own centration. This is reminiscent of the levels of organs, in between individual cells, and an individuated living being such as a human. The following observation supports this concept: "Everything, rather, goes to show that, in and through mankind, the cosmos is still continuing in its arduous drift towards increasing states of complexity: of centration, in consequence, and, as a further consequence, of consciousness."⁶ In recognition that human enterprise can, through complexities such as corporations take the form of a centered entity, Teilhard speaks of the production of an aircraft, Leica or radio: "In their conception and manufacture, these familiar objects presuppose nothing less than a *complex reflexive organism*, acting *per modum unius*, as a single agent."⁷ Though he does not speak directly to the intersection of the infrastructure

⁵ Teilhard de Chardin, P. *The Heart of Matter* (1978) p. 176

⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, P. *The Activation of Energy* (1978) p. 35

⁷ *ibid.* p. 37

and its human components in a complex organization, one would presuppose that there is both tangential energy, particularly from the aggregate components, and deepening radial energy from centration present in these systems. When Teilhard visits the cyclotron in Berkeley, California he experiences a vision that reveals this centration that occurs with the combined influence of the human's working and his work: "...it gradually appeared to me to be dotted with luminous points, each one of those 'stars' corresponding to some laboratory or apparatus around which the human, through its charge of energy and its union, was here and now being transformed into some neo-human 'isotope'".⁸

In his book, *The Global Brain*, the futurist Peter Russell anticipated the power and centration of the human initiated system of the internet.⁹ First published in 1982, this book foresaw the complex interconnectedness of the interiority of individual humans, heightened through technological connectivity, creating a living system of its own. The title itself recognizes the creation of a synthesized whole from the many individual contributions of humans and of their collective enterprises to a single, globe-encircling entity that we know as the internet or the World Wide Web. Here we have a further level of the "arduous drift towards increasing states of complexity: of centration, in consequence, and, as a further consequence, of consciousness." Russell takes the vision a step further in viewing the minds of connected humanity as forming an organ, a nervous system that is subsystem of the larger whole of the planet, of Gaia.

⁸ Teilhard de Chardin, P. *The Activation of Energy* (1978) pp. 352-353

⁹ Russell, P. *The Global Brain* New York; Tarcher 1983

In conclusion, the groupings of individual humans, along with infrastructure, into more complex systems is another stage in the development of the noosphere. Each of these systems, from the very small atom of a family through the organs of corporations and economic and political systems, to the developing nervous system of the *Global Brain*, speak to the continued centration of radial energy and interiority in ever more complex, synthesized forms. In *Activation of Energy*, Teilhard writes:

The human ‘species’, like any other piece of living matter, has an organic tendency to multiply itself to the maximum. However, unlike what happens in a shoal of fish or a colony of bacteria (for a number of reasons which will become apparent later), this multiplication does more than simply increase the number of elements that make up the population: in addition, it produces a system of ever more closely linked and more fully centred structures in the totality of the group that is in a state of expansion.¹⁰

As individual atoms or cells of these systems, we, individually, are not necessarily capable of seeing the ‘face’ of the larger entity, or of understanding its actions and purposes. Our own centration, synthesizing with others in a more complex system, becomes part of a larger and deeper interiority that contributes to the noosphere.

This paper has examined, in brief, various structures of collectives of human individuals, inquiring into how they appear as individual entities of their own with centration and interiority that ultimately contribute to the noosphere at a more profound level than the individuals and infrastructures from which they are

¹⁰ Teilhard de Chardin, P. *The Activation of Energy* (1978) p. 321

formed. We can occasionally get a glimpse of that greater interiority as Teilhard did during the intensity of the war front at Verdun, or when we are open to group process beyond our own personal experience. The Thich Naht Hanh quote that this inquiry starts with points directly to this sense of deepened interiority with the greater complexity of a collective or community. Buddha no longer may reside in an individual but may be the synthesis of a larger centralized system of individuals.

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