

In Our Element – with Linda France

Episode 9: Consciousness

TRANSCRIPT

Linda France:

In Our Element, a poet's inquiry into climate change. Episode Nine: Consciousness.

Joshua Green:

[Singing]

Inside the cuckoo's call, the ear of Spring.

Inside the ear of Spring, the swaying reeds.

Inside the swaying reeds, the warbler's nest.

Inside the warbler's nest, the cuckoo's egg.

Inside the cuckoo's egg, the eye of gold.

Inside the eye of gold, the tug of the sun.

Inside the tug of the sun, the bird's wings.

Cuckoo-cuckoo calling over and over.

Inside the bird's wings, five thousand miles.

Inside five thousand miles, the vast Sahara.

Inside the vast Sahara, African sun.

Inside the African sun, the hunger for young.

Inside the hunger for young, earth greening.

Inside the earth greening, the heart's sap.

Inside the heart's sap, the cuckoo calling.

Cuckoo-cuckoo calling over and over.

Cuckoo-cuckoo calling over and over.

Linda France:

That's Joshua Green, singing a song he set from one of my poems about the cuckoo and her egg, and how, when we look closely, we see everything is nested inside everything else. We are aware because we have consciousness. In the Buddhist classification, this is also an element, allowing us to respond to every stray impression and thought and connect with everything around us.

Ajahn Sucitto:

We're in Cittaviveka, which means serene heart, pure heart. "Citta", very important word in Buddhism because it means heart awareness and that which can be enlightened or awakened. So it's also called "Chithurst Forest Monastery", because it's in Chithurst Hamlet, and it's a forest monastery, which basically means [laughs] well it's got a lot of trees in it. But the particular lifestyle we live is called forest monasticism which, still we try to... People often live in little huts in the woods, try to live as simply as possible.

Linda France:

Ajahn Sucitto is a senior monk in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. And we asked him to help us understand the element of consciousness. How what's going on inside affects our view of what's going on outside.

Ajahn Sucitto:

Big word in the Buddhists is practice. We're doers rather than believers. We practice, we practice purifying our heart. That's what we do. Buddha means awakened or enlightened. So you're purifying the hearts, as you're doing that, it's an awakening to qualities of peace and truth and profound harmony.

Linda France:

Many commentators are acknowledging that the climate crisis is a crisis of consciousness: A crisis of values, a crisis of imagination.

Ajahn Sucitto:

The Buddhas, we're not denying the fact there's a world to form them, but what it says is it's what you experience, it's how things strike you. Our consciousness, our consciousness is the receptor of what touches us. We don't experience anything without consciousness. One of the famous images of the Buddha's awakening was he touched the earth. He was in this very alone state, in a forest, terrific anguished forces circulating through his consciousness, and just touching the earth was like a sense of, "Hey, I'm grounded. This is the real place. This is here". And that kind of axis of firm resolve within the turbulent world was how his awakening arose on that firm earth. Consciousness is the quality of that which can span experience and comprehend it.

Linda France:

Keats' concept of negative capability, learning to exist in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts speaks to this moment where we find ourselves. Memory and imagination are our building materials, with our minds and our bodies and all the elements we live with, and that live in us. The constant flux and symbiosis of inner and outer, local and global, singular, plural, dynamic, reciprocal, everything that makes us present and alive.

Ajahn Sucitto:

One of the fundamental problems, particularly with dissonance with the natural world, is that we always conceive ourselves to be somehow separate from it because we have a mind and we have external senses that thinking mind is often relating to sound, sight, and such, as if it's separate from it. 'Therefore exists separate from the rest of the created world.' This body is an aspect of the natural world. It's a form of nature, like a tree or a beetle or something. Now, if you actually just stop the mental

interpretations, check those mental interpretations and directly notice what you experience. You experience a constant ebbing, multi-dimensional tide of impressions, mingling and merging, where is the separation? You create it! Once you stop creating it, you have to look at what brings the greatest sense of harmony within that. When it's not demanding, not frightened, not craving, not obstructing, not prejudice, not interpreting, but just open and calm. And then you find you're living in harmony with the world around you. Because, you are the world around you.

Linda France:

What we can learn from Ajahn Sucitto's Buddhist understanding, overlaps with Deborah McGregor's indigenous worldview about embodiment and interconnectedness.

Deborah McGregor:

How do you get people that connect to the natural world? Go out and try to be in it. Even when you're in a very highly urban environment, because in the Canadian context, anyway, it's becoming increasingly urban, not a lot of people have the privilege of being able to go to like "green spaces", but you can still see the moon. There's still aspects of the natural world that you can see and start trying to figure out how you relate to that. There's a lot that we can learn from our own senses and our own connection. And I refer to the natural world and my teaching as also being teachers and sources of knowledge, like what are you noticing? So both my parents are fluent language speakers. So they think in the Anishinaabemowin language. And somehow we got into the conversation of, there was no word for boredom and my dad explained it as, "because there's so much going on. If you're paying attention, it's not boring. It's just your capacity to be able to hear and understand and perceive". Before hunting, he could smell the weather. I have no idea how he did that. So there's something that's built in, or that you develop, that enables you to be able to interpret what it is that you're hearing and listening to.

Linda France:

Poet Jorie Graham shares her own insights into communication and reciprocity.

Jorie Graham:

If we add empathy to consciousness, that feeling that you feel me in order to know that I feel you and that we go back and forth in a kind of hum between each other. As we look in each other's faces nonstop, what we are doing is we are mirroring so that we understand each other. So much more is communicated in gazing than is communicated in speaking. Well, we do that with animals we love. If we've come to understand the nature of trees or plants, we can feel it in relation to if you stand under a large tree and you've downloaded the sensation, which we've had to now relearn, but which people's long before us knew innately that the tree is alive, that it has memory, that forests mourn the loss of large elder trees. They feed each other through root systems. You know, they have compassion. So if we feel all that, it's very hard to automatically, blindly, destroy. But what we've done is refuse to feel that.

Linda France:

Spending time with the more-than-human, we might catch a glimpse of a lighter way of being. And there's an intense relief in coming back to ourselves, waking up to what is so that we know from the ground up, what's being asked of us.

Linda France:

Dreaming the real, I'm lying down, looking at the color of sky, falling through trees, dreaming the real, tasting what it feels like to love it. Why did it take me so long to let go? Simply exhale, so day could breathe itself in and open without me standing in the way. How could I forget the grace of my own body strong as this blue tender as the white of the wild blossom, warm as midday light. Let me practice a patients bold enough to hold every weather, trusting the elements, the beauty of rain, all its notes of gray. I want whatever's real to be enough. At least it's a place to begin, and to master the art of loving it, feel it love me back under my skin.

Ajahn Sucitto:

Human beings have huge resources. If we concentrate on what we alone in this universe can produce: love, wisdom and morality. See, we can't make trees. We can't make cows. We can't make weather. We can't make water. If we just did what we alone can do, where our gifts are, and trust that, work on that. And the rest of it, shape it around it. So you turn the thing around instead of, we're endless consumer creatures, couldn't we be producer creatures, producing the true wealth of the human being and bring that forth and say, "well, let's just see, if we start with that, and maybe we don't need that much".

Deborah McGregor:

We have these original teachings, our seven grandfather, seven grandmother teachings, about how we're to try to behave. We strive for these ideals in the world. And love is one of them, along with humility and courage and generosity. Humans have the capacity to be very destructive, but also highly creative, beautiful thinkers, innovative, we have that capacity and it's actually kind of a choice. In a lot of stories the humans were the last to be created, but not in the same way Judeo-Christian, like you're top of the food chain, but in Anishinabek it's because as you were the least knowledgeable and skilled and you depended upon the others in order to be able to survive. So your job was to be able to learn from your relatives that came before, who were here longer. So the trees were here longer, the waters here longer, and they know how to live in this place and we're to learn from them. And you would try to take care of because you love your relative. That's my relative.

Jorie Graham:

Sometimes I say to myself, you know, if I'm sitting in front of a beautiful ocean view. You're watching the sun go down. The ocean is blue. The sky is gorgeous. And I think to myself of the hundreds of millions, billions of life forms in that water, coextensive with my sitting there on a porch, staring out. And then I think to myself, "if everything were dead in there and we were still okay up here on the porch, how would I feel in my humanity?". Because the view would look the same. The sunset would be just as beautiful. The ocean front property would probably be just as valuable. So what is it that I would feel? And what I would feel is that I had been cut adrift from the only thing I actually belonged to, in time, in my living time, and that is the rest of creation. I belong with the living things. I don't belong with the columns on the porch. I belong with the creatures in the sea, but if they were all gone, what kind of grief or numbing or silencing of the human soul would occur? And so as an ecological activist, if you can transmit to young people, the mystery and the wonder of the absolutely coextensive, more powerful than us, life out there. If you can find a way to take young people and wake them up to it, they might fight. They might sacrifice.

Ajahn Sucitto:

This kind of incredible self-obsession human beings are prone to, which makes them think that they're the most important creatures on the world, and they've got the right to do whatever to anything else.

And that starts on a very fundamental level with the biosphere. And it begins to come into the society: cut down a forest so you can feed your cat on it. Never mind, all the rest of the creatures who live on that, on that forest, never mind the fact that forest is actually generating oxygen, because we want some more money. You know, a couple centuries ago, people would go out in ships, British Navy goes, some merchant kind of ships, sail round a piece of land and say "I'm claiming that for the crown". [Laughs] Nevermind the people who live there, but how can you claim land? Who gave it to you? You can't create it. How can you claim it? You can't create an ant. It goes right through our experience. This sense of, I call it "the domination exploitation paradigm", and it occurs between people, people dominate and exploit each other, dominate and exploit other creatures.

You see the thing that's almost always - when you go to talk about climate change and taking measures against it - the backstop is always, the economy. "We can't because of the economy, we'll lose jobs". Okay. The economy is more important than the planet. You know, how did that happen? The idea, maybe you could change the economy, because you can't really change the planet. The economy's a human construction of relationships and trade and currencies. And if humans created it, sure we could change it. You try and create another planet. Now, this is economics, what has this got to do with Buddhism. Well basically you could say if we start practicing things like morality in a very deep morality, say let's not be looking at sainthood, but at least make an effort in that direction. And start to look at maybe, maybe letting go of things you don't really need. Do we need that much?

Linda France:

Perhaps the most radical way to approach the challenge of the climate crisis is much closer to home than we think it is. Too close for comfort. Who among us is ready, like the Buddha, to stay still a while and to touch the earth?

Ajahn Sucitto:

Nature is rather messy, and really in order to be with nature, we have to be able to embrace the mess, what appears to be a mess, including their own mess. With all its kind of rough edges and that's called compassion. Yeah. So this then compassion, rises out of the recognizing the nature of things to rise and break up, including our own mind states.

Autumn

Summer rests its soaring wings. Glories fold
under old gold, russets and lived-out brown.
Crab-apples crumble; like fire, their ochres fade
and darken – from ripeness to a breakdown
in which whatever's seeded, like soft grenades,
lies ready to explode in spring's uprising.

Here's our ground; among the flight and the falling.
And that's a fruition ... to know we get wiser
only as our triumphs, tangles, and petty brawling

are digested.

Compassion's an Earth-opened heart;
and it wraps round every season. So, home:
it's here, where birth, growth and falling apart
go deep. Trust that; and the warmth that blooms –
courtesy of your wormed-through loams.

Linda France:

Ajahn Sucitto ending the consciousness episode. This series is presented by me, Linda France. It's a Sonderbug production with New Writing North, in association with Newcastle University, supported by the Audio Content Fund and Arts Council England.

Joshua Green:

[Singing] Cuckoo-cuckoo calling over and over. Cuckoo-cuckoo calling over and over.

Linda France:

Thank you for listening.