

## Article

# The Personal and the Planetary: Buddhism, Climate Change, and Anthropocene Time

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**Abstract:** Dipesh Chakrabarty describes the problem of climate change as in part one of temporal incommensurability. For most of human history, we have enjoyed the primacy of anthropocentric “world-historical” time. But as climate change becomes an increasingly dominant preoccupation in our daily lives, we experience a rupture in everyday world-historical time and the incursion of a new timescale: the inconceivably vast and impersonal scale of “planetary-geologic” time. The incommensurability between the personal scale of human time and the vast planetary scale of climate change has produced an affective crisis, confronting us with the very limits of our imaginative capacity. In this essay, I argue that although the specifics of climate change may be new, human imaginative engagement with deep time is not. Animated by the conviction that Buddhist literature and thought contain robust theoretical and conceptual ideas that can enrich philosophical and ethical thinking, I bring select Buddhist concepts to bear on the problem of temporal incommensurability. Rather than suggest any general “Buddhist” way of thinking about time, I argue that Buddhist sources can offer new conceptual points of entry into the problem of temporal incommensurability itself, specifically addressing how we might differently conceptualize the relationship between the personal and the planetary in order to address the affective crisis identified by Chakrabarty.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; climate change; temporality; Anthropocene; Lotus Sūtra; Bodhicaryāvatāra; Śāntideva; Dipesh Chakrabarty



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Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What it changed was the way people read the night sky.

— John Berger, *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos* (Berger 1991)

## 1. Introduction

“The problem of time,” writes John Berger, “is like the darkness of the night sky” (Berger 1991, p. 8). By imagining lines through that darkness, we cluster stars into constellations, giving them a shape, a name, and a story. So, too, do we string together moments in time, giving them shape, duration, and relations to other moments in an otherwise undifferentiated temporal expanse. But as Berger reminds us, the stories we tell about the sky do not change the stars or the darkness; what they change is how we experience the night.

In an influential essay about the historiography of the Anthropocene entitled “Anthropocene Time” (2018), Dipesh Chakrabarty, too, evokes the question of time, describing the affective shock of climate change as in part a problem of temporal incommensurability. For most of human history, he explains, we have enjoyed the primacy of anthropocentric “world-historical” time: the normative, naturalized assumption that time unfolds to our human scale and measure. But as climate change becomes an increasingly dominant preoccupation in our daily lives, we experience a rupture in the primacy of everyday world-historical time and the incursion of a new timescale: the inconceivably vast and impersonal scale of “planetary-geologic” time. This is the timescale of the arising and extinction of life systems, unfolding in tens or even hundreds of millions of years.

This incommensurability—namely, between the personal scale of human time and the vast impersonal scale of planetary time—has produced an affective crisis. Now that the human narrative of world-historical time has “collided (in our thoughts) with the much longer-term geological history of the planet” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 23), we are faced with the challenge of trying to bring “within the grasp of the affective structures of human-historical time the vast scales of the times of geobiology that these structures do not usually engage” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 30). The problem before us, in other words, is how to epistemically and emotionally relate to the extraordinary planetary shifts now underway, given that our very cognitive and affective capacities are calibrated to the relatively narrow scale of human time. Unlike other sorts of calamities—wars, famines, pandemics—which, though devastating, nevertheless unfold on the personal scale of world-historical time, the planetary calamity of climate change, in the sheer magnitude of its scale, confronts us with the very limits of our affective reach and imaginative capacity.

It is, however, precisely with respect to this question of imaginative capacity that I suggest we might learn from Buddhist literature and thought. Writing about climate change, Rebecca Solnit describes the ecological crisis as in part a failure of imagination. Like the chassis of a car, the framing of a house, or the skeleton of our own body, the scope of our imaginative capacity both structures and limits the shape of what is possible (Powell 2023). This insight also animates much Buddhist literature and thought, which evinces a longstanding preoccupation with training the imagination as both a moral and epistemological exercise.

In this essay, I draw on well-known Buddhist sources, especially the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, bringing some of their ideas to bear on the core challenges that arise from a close reading of Chakrabarty’s “Anthropocene Time.” My approach is deliberately selective and by no means comprehensive; it does not presume to represent all of Buddhist thought, nor does it seek to articulate any general “Buddhist” way of thinking about time. Rather, I am interested in how Buddhist ways of thinking might offer new conceptual points of entry into the problem of temporal incommensurability itself, specifically how we might differently conceptualize the relationship between the personal and the planetary, in an effort to begin to address the affective crisis identified by Chakrabarty.

## 2. The Problem of Two Presents

While living at a Buddhist monastery in Taiwan, I frequently accompanied a group of nuns on their daily rounds gathering firewood from the surrounding forests. Although the monastic compound was of recent construction and equipped with the electricity and plumbing necessary to generate hot water, the nuns instead opted to warm their evening bath water exclusively using firewood. As I have described elsewhere (Verchery 2024), this process was painstaking, not merely because of the time and energy required to gather the fuel, dry the wood, and build and feed the fire, but also because before any piece could be burned it had to be meticulously inspected for tiny insects living therein, lest the nuns inadvertently violate the first precept against killing.

Hour after hour, the nuns and I scrupulously examined each branch, gently removing little bugs with utmost care and attention. One day, perhaps out of exasperation, I asked one of the nuns why they did not simply use the electric water heating system already in place instead of this inefficient and time-consuming method. The nun’s answer was twofold: not only was eschewing modern convenience aligned with the community’s commitment to asceticism, it also trained them in survival skills and self-sufficiency. Shifting to a surprisingly apocalyptic tone, the nun went on to describe the imminent and widespread degeneration of social, economic, and environmental systems. Everywhere one looks one finds poverty, conflict, disease, and suffering. It would be only a matter of time before the structures most people depend on to survive—the electrical grid, food security networks, financial institutions, and so on—collapse. Even scientists, she added, predict the end of the world as we know it due to the warming climate. Given this dire situation, the nuns chose to prepare by honing the practical skills required to care for themselves and others.

Following her grim prognosis, the nun matter-of-factly returned her attention to the log in her lap and with uncanny calm shooed a tiny fly out from between crevices in the bark. As it flew away to enjoy the remainder of its natural lifespan—perhaps another six or twelve hours—she grinned widely and flashed it a peace sign, accompanied by a protracted exclamation of childlike delight: “kuuuuuuuuu (coooooo!)!”

It is often said that we live our everyday lives on the scale of the weather, not on the scale of the climate. Even though climate change is unfolding all around us, the scale of these shifts is so vast compared to the short duration of our human lives that we sometimes have difficulty noticing them. “The reason we do not sense cataclysm,” writes Chakrabarty,

even though the geological record is certain to preserve it this way, is because of the difference in the time frame of our lives versus the time frame of the geological record. To us, 100 years is a long time. In the fossil record, 100,000 or even a million years can appear as an instant. (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 30)

This perceptual lacuna, however, is not only a matter of scale but also a matter of will. The problem is not merely that planetary-geologic time falls beyond the narrow scope of our everyday human perspective, but also the paucity of our ability to imagine and engage narratives that do not center on the human.

By definition, planetary-geologic deep time decenters the human. It should come as no surprise, then, that many have resisted this conceptual displacement, even in the scientific literature. As Chakrabarty notes, there are at least two prevalent definitions of the Anthropocene: a planet-centered definition and a human-centered definition. The planet-centered definition is an impersonal measure; it determines the beginning of the Anthropocene based on stratigraphic changes in the lithosphere that evince sufficient difference from the Holocene to justify the beginning of a new geologic epoch. There is also, however, a human-centered definition in circulation, which defines the Anthropocene “as a measure not of geological time but of the *extent* of human impact on the planet” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 7). While humans, like all forms of life, are of course part of the planetary system, Chakrabarty argues that we are—despite our perception of our own centrality—in fact a very tiny part of it. But by framing the new geologic epoch in anthropocentric terms, this definition returns human agency to the center of the planetary story, domesticating the impersonal deep time of geobiology into the anthropocentric narrative of world history.

In a sense, this attempt at domestication might be an understandable response to what Chakrabarty describes as a profound loss of ontic certainty. Like the paradigm shift of the Copernican revolution—which toppled the earth, and by extension the human, from its invisible pedestal as the center of the universe—trying to think beyond the familiar horizon of world-historical time is destabilizing. Drawing on Husserl, Chakrabarty describes the loss of ontic certainty as the loss of confidence, heretofore simply assumed, that we can depend on the world, that “to live is always to live-in-certainty-of-the-world” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 30).

Our *everyday thoughts* have begun to be oriented—thanks again to the current dissemination of geological terms such as the Anthropocene in public culture—by the geological fact that the Earth that Husserl took for granted as the stable and unshakable ground from which all human thoughts (even Copernican ones) arose actually has always been a fitful and restless entity in its long journey through the depths of geological time. (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 31)

Climate change now troubles this certainty, and the resultant disorientation is existentially threatening. Seen in this light, the attempt to subsume the stratigraphic definition of the Anthropocene under the anthropocentric discourse of human agency may be a sort of coping mechanism; a reaction—sometimes of conscious resistance, sometimes of unconscious denial—to the loss of ontic certainty and shattered sense of self that the planetary perspective can precipitate.

But this begs a question: can humans think beyond the human? Do we have, or might we develop, the capacity to meaningfully engage narratives in which we are not the central

character? To again recall Chakrabarty's diagnosis, the incursion of climate change into our everyday consciousness confronts us with the task of having to integrate the idea of planetary-geologic time into the much narrower horizon of our human lives. We must, in other words, learn to simultaneously live in two presents, living out the

everyday with the awareness that what seems "slow" in human and world-historical terms may indeed be "instantaneous" on the scale of Earth history, that living in the Anthropocene means inhabiting these two presents at the same time. (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 30)

Like the dexterity of the Buddhist nun, who seemed to effortlessly toggle from the prospect of large-scale social and environmental collapse to an undiminished presentist delight in saving the (exceptionally brief) life of a single fly, our task is to learn to live in two presents—the present of the world-historical and the present of the planetary-geologic—without one diminishing the importance of the other. In order to begin approaching such a task, I suggest we might turn to the Buddhist sources for inspiration.

### 3. Resisting the Ease of Infinity

Buddhist literature is brimming with images of immensity. As scholars have noted, the Mahāyāna texts "relish the breathless multiplication of immense figures" (Williams 2009, p. 157) and present the ability to hold such enormous numbers in mind as a virtuosic skill of the spiritually gifted.<sup>1</sup> In the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, for example, the young Buddha-to-be is challenged by the great mathematician Arjuna to calculate ten million to the hundredth power. To the amazement of all, Prince Siddhārtha calculates beyond this number, using the *ayuta* (one hundred times ten million) as his starting point, and proceeds to count up to a *niyuta* (one hundred times one billion), a *kaṅkara* (one hundred times one hundred billion or a quadrillion), a *vivara* (one hundred quadrillions or a sextillion), an *akṣobhya* (one hundred sextillions or a so-called nonillion), a *vivāha* (one hundred nonillions), an *utsaṅga* (one hundred *vivāhas*), and so on until he reaches a *tallakṣaṇa*, or one hundred sexdecillion (a one followed by fifty-three zeros). Or consider the thirtieth chapter of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*—aptly entitled "The Incalculable"—which opens with a discussion of "incalculable, measureless, boundless, incomparable, innumerable, unaccountable, unthinkable, immeasurable, unspeakable, untold numbers" (Cleary 1993, p. 889). The text goes on to name such an enormous super-exponent—specifically, ten to the power of 101,493,292,610,318,652,755,325,638,410,240—that simply describing how to calculate it takes three entire pages.

Such expressions of immensity are not limited to abstract numerical values; they frequently describe durations as well. The length of a standard *kalpa* ("eon" or "age") is memorably described in the *Samyutta Nikāya* as longer than the time it would take to wear away an enormous mountain by rubbing it just once every hundred years with a fine piece of silk. *Kalpas* can combine to create a *mahākalpa* (a "great *kalpa*"), equivalent to eighty intermediate *kalpas* (*antarakalpas*), which can, in turn, combine to create an *asamkhyeyakalpa* (literally, an "incalculable" eon), defined as a *mahākalpa* to the sixtieth power. In the *Abidharmakośa*, Vasubandhu divides the evolution of the cosmos into four distinct *asamkhyeyakalpas*. Though scholars have not decisively determined the phase of the *mahākalpa* in which we are thought to currently find ourselves, Jan Nattier notes (Nattier 1991, p. 26) that by most accounts the next cyclical peak (which would also mark the appearance of the next Buddha, Maitreya) is scheduled to occur in roughly 5.6 billion years.

The *Lotus Sūtra*, too, appeals to unimaginably vast lengths of time to describe the duration of the Tathāgata's enlightened activity in the world. Imagine the number of grains of dust that would be produced if one gathered "five hundred thousand billions of myriads of countless three-thousand great thousandfold worlds" (Reeves 2008, p. 291) and ground them up into a fine powder. Then, imagine the distance that would be traversed if one distributed every last one of those grains of dust by placing each spec "five hundred thousand billions of myriads of innumerable lands" (*ibid.*) apart. Then, imagine one were to assemble the entire expanse of lands thereby traversed and grind all *those* into dust. If

one were to multiply the resulting number of grains of dust by hundreds of thousands of billions of myriads of countless eons, the *Lotus Sūtra* tells us, we would have a duration that is still “hundreds of thousands of billions of myriads of countless eons” (Reeves 2008, p. 292) *shorter* than the duration of the Tathāgata’s enlightened activity in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Upon encountering these astounding timespans, a casual reader might assume they are simply infinite. But what is salient and surprising is that the text goes to some pains to specify that these durations, though inconceivably long, are nevertheless finite and situated *in* time. Unlike infinity—which is by definition unbounded, and thus beyond any temporal scope or duration—the timespans in the *Lotus Sūtra* have defined beginnings and endings, they increase and diminish, and can be multiplied and divided. Though they may exceed the bounds of human calculation, they do not exceed the bounds of time itself. As N. K. Singh observes, “the dust atoms in a mountain or even in a world system, the drops of water in a lake and the grains of sand in the river Ganga, however large in number, are nevertheless finite and knowable” (Singh 2004, p. 117). Although these timespans may differ in *scale* from the mundane time of everyday life, the text is clear they do not differ in *kind*; their time is our time.

This point becomes even more apparent when we consider the limit cases that are sometimes taken to signal atemporal infinitude or eternity.<sup>3</sup> Take, for instance, a passage where the *Lotus Sūtra* describes the Tathāgata’s lifespan as “ever enduring, never perishing” (Hurvitz 1976, p. 239). Such language might naturally be taken to denote a notion of atemporal eternity or transcendent infinitude. But a careful reader will notice that the lifespan of the Tathāgata is not *merely* ever enduring and never perishing, but is in fact *twice* that long!

Since my attainment of Buddhahood it has been a very great interval of time. My life-span is incalculable asaṃkhyeyakalpas, ever enduring, never perishing. O good men! The life-span I achieved in my former treading of the bodhisattva path even now is not exhausted, for it is *twice* the above number. (italics mine, *ibid.*)

Thus, even when the text flirts with the limits of finitude, we still find that such durations are treated as finite quantities that can be doubled, multiplied, and calculated.<sup>4</sup> This prompts Paul Williams to conclude that phrases like “ever enduring” and “never perishing” should

be taken as indicating an enormously long but still finite length to the Buddha’s life. His life as a Buddha both begins and ends in time, and references to its eternity are typical examples of sūtra hyperbole. (Williams 2009, p. 158)

Even in its most hyperbolic cases, therefore, the *Lotus Sūtra* still deals with finite time, but simply with a very great deal of it.

How might these examples of resistance to temporal transcendence relate to the central question of this essay: namely, how we might better conceptualize the relation of personal and planetary time? Temporal transcendence—that is, atemporal notions like infinity or eternity—are radically *other* to our lived temporality. In a way, the absolute alterity of such transcendent notions brings a conceptual simplicity. Because transcendence, by definition, is completely other, it exceeds thought and imagination; it transcends—and therefore does not demand—sustained cognitive or affective engagement. I suggest, however, that it is precisely the comfort of this sort of conceptual simplicity that texts like the *Lotus Sūtra* resist, denying readers the ease of infinity. One conclusion we might draw from this resistance is that even when a scale seems unimaginably vast from our human point-of-view, it does not follow that it is completely *other* to our human situation, nor is it in principle inaccessible or unintelligible. In other words, the time of a Tathāgata is the same as our human time, just *more* of it. As Jan Zalasiewicz, upon whom Chakrabarty draws extensively, says about planetary time, a “peculiarity of geological time is that, at heart, it is *simply* time—albeit in very large amounts” (Zalasiewicz, cited in Chakrabarty 2018, p. 6).

By denying readers the simplicity of temporal transcendence, the *Lotus Sūtra* challenges readers to hold two timescales together: the time of the Tathāgata alongside their



own. This, by extension, might offer us a way of conceptualizing the relationship of human world-historical time and planetary-geologic time. Though these timescales remain incommensurate, it does not follow that they are mutually exclusive or unconnected. Instead of prioritizing one to the exclusion of the other—either world-historical time over the planetary-geologic, as in the human-centered definition of the Anthropocene, or planetary-geologic time over the world-historical, as in the stratigraphic definition—this model holds both at once. Though these times may be far apart, they still touch. To paraphrase Mayra Rivera, we might say the planetary touches the personal “as a tangent touches a circle” (Rivera 2007, p. 5)—that is, touching without touching.

Chakrabarty, too, evokes this possibility of intersection, asking whether and how we might learn to bring the planetary-geologic “into human modes of dwelling” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 29). Human thought, he writes, has

so far been human-centric, holding constant the “world” outside of human concerns or treating its eruptions into the time of human history as incursions from an “outside.” This “outside” no longer exists. (ibid.)

Beginning to engage the planetary-geologic, in other words, means that that which used to be an impersonal “outside” is increasingly becoming part of a personal “inside.” The question thus becomes: how should we now relate to this other inside?

#### 4. Bringing the Outside in

Eric Huntington opens his engrossing study of Buddhist cosmology, *Creating the Universe: Depictions of the Cosmos in Himalayan Buddhism*, with a discussion of the famous 1990 photograph, the “Pale Blue Dot,” a photo of the solar system taken by the Voyager I space probe from about 6.4 billion kilometers away. In it, the earth appears as a tiny blueish dot, less than a single pixel in size. This photograph, Huntington writes, inspires an “emotional recalibration of our sense of place within the cosmos. While we humans tend to focus on the immediate concerns of our own lives, this image illustrates the triviality of our ordinary cares in the cosmic arena” (Huntington 2018, p. 10). This image, and Huntington’s words, nicely capture what it might feel like to try to imagine a planetary perspective: when looking at the personal from the enormous scale of the planetary, we suddenly feel ourselves to be very small.

I suggest there is an additional dimension that makes this photograph uncanny—or, to use Huntington’s felicitous word, “recalibrative”—namely, that in the act of viewing we can feel ourselves momentarily inside and outside at the same time. The photograph is, after all, a photograph of *us*, but not in the way we generally see ourselves. As we gaze at it, we stand upon the very blue dot it depicts. If we were alive in 1990, at the exact instant of the shutter click, we were somewhere on that pixel, doing something. We are, in other words, *in* the image. And yet, through the image, we also catch a glimpse of ourselves from the outside. Consider Carl Sagan’s own commentary on the photograph:

Look again at that dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every “superstar,” every “supreme leader,” every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam. (Sagan 1994, p. 6)

Let us note a difference between Huntington’s and Sagan’s reactions. Both agree that this view from the outside inspires a recalibration of the human sense of place in the cosmos. For Huntington, it evokes the triviality of our ordinary cares; the vastness of the planetary perspective eclipses the primacy of the personal. Sagan, by contrast, holds both the per-

sonal and the planetary, and toggles between them. In one beat, Sagan foregrounds world-historical time—the rise and fall of civilizations, the vicissitudes of celebrities and politicians, the dramas of lovers, saints, and sinners—and in the next beat, he zooms out to the impersonal planetary scale, describing all of this as a mere “mote of dust.” His description does not prioritize one perspective over the other but instead dwells on their coincidence.

We could say that what space is for Sagan, time is for Chakrabarty. When Chakrabarty writes that planetary-geologic time no longer exists exclusively as an outside—that the “outside” of planetary-geologic deep time is beginning to infiltrate the “inside” of human consciousness—he tells us something that the “Pale Blue Dot” shows us: namely, that it is sometimes possible to catch a glimpse of ourselves from both the inside and the outside at once. Indeed, such questions of perspectival dexterity are a topic of longstanding interest in Buddhist contemplative practice and moral training. A particularly celebrated example of this is Śāntideva’s “exchange of self and other” (Skt. *parātmāparivartana*) in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, which involves imaginatively stepping into the perspective of another to look back at oneself from the outside. As we shall see, what is so compelling—and, indeed, surprising—about this practice is how it paradoxically embraces alterity and distance as the basis for connection.

According to Śāntideva, the exchange of self and other is an exercise of simultaneous familiarization and defamiliarization: it consists of imaginatively moving one’s sense of “self” into the place of another, and creating a “sense of other in oneself” (Śāntideva 1995, p. 100). Once this perspectival switch has taken place, Śāntideva walks the practitioner through a dramatic litany of attitudes and emotions to generate toward one’s former “self” from the newly adopted standpoint of the “other.” A notable feature of these attitudes and emotions is their manic intensity; they include, for instance, generating fierce jealousy toward one’s former self, bitterly thinking “he” (i.e., one’s original self) is superior to “me” (i.e., oneself from the standpoint of the other, with whom one now imaginatively identifies):

He is honoured, not I. I do not receive such alms as he. He is praised. I am criticized. I suffer. He is happy. I do chores while he remains at ease. He, it seems, is great in the world. I, it seems, am inferior, without virtues. (ibid.)

A mere few verses later, the emotional tenor is reversed and Śāntideva urges the practitioner to now imagine themselves (from the perspective of the other they imaginatively inhabit) as superior to “him” (their original self):

I am honoured while he is not.... He is crushed, the object of everyone’s ridicule, critiqued from all sides.... Hearing my own virtues being related on all sides in this way, tingling with delight, I shall drink from the fountain of happiness. (Śāntideva 1995, p. 101)

In this way, the exchange of self and other consists of generating a wide range of emotions—from resentment to jealousy—toward one’s own self from the imagined perspective of another.

As noted, Śāntideva’s language is striking for its emotional intensity. Though he is clear that the goal of this practice is the cultivation of bodhisattva compassion, the method is not primarily characterized by positive or even neutral affect. Instead, as Janet Gyatso has discussed, the practice combats the vice of egotism by deliberately generating a range of destructive emotions—jealousy, ill-will, even sadism<sup>5</sup>—and redirecting those emotions back toward oneself (Gyatso 2019, p. 102). Thus, the practice combats narcissistic self-cherishing and over-identification with the self not by stamping out the vices of narcissism and self-cherishing but, to the contrary, by *intensifying* them from a different perspective. Although the ultimate goal is compassion for others, the method does not prescribe facile empathy, unification, or sameness of self and other. Indeed, the practice relies on the fact that exchange *precludes* identity. While the latter would suggest the annihilation of difference, the former requires maintaining—even deliberately intensifying—the distance between subjects, in order to move between them.

I suggest we might glean from this another conceptual approach to the issue of incommensurability; one that involves movement *between* perspectives—between jealousy and aversion, between self and other, between inside and outside—without attempting overt unification. Subjects, in other words, remain incommensurate, and the practice hinges on calling focus to that difference. Contrary to what might often be assumed, the cultivation of compassion in Śāntideva’s vision is not the erasure of distance between subjects, but the capacity to transfer subjectivity *across* a distance. It does not reduce the other’s otherness, but identifies with the other by intensifying their alterity. Because we experience others as *other to us*, just as others presumably experience us as *other to them*, alterity itself paradoxically becomes the basis for a common ground that allows connection without erasing difference. Here, incommensurability is not an obstacle to be overcome but the basis for relationship.

While this notion of incommensurability as a gateway to connection is compelling, a critique might arise when we consider the scale of Śāntideva’s concerns against those of Chakrabarty. Śāntideva engages what we might call a lateral alterity: the exchange is between two human subjects who, though different in their specificity, both inhabit a personal subjectivity. This proximate other, so to speak, differs from the distant other of the planetary-geologic, which as we have seen is defined precisely by the fact that it transcends the narrow framework of personal subjectivity itself. If we can heuristically speak of a “protagonist” of the planetary story at all, it would not be an individual agent in the personal sense. Rather, the planetary story is “a narrative of many dispersed and networked actors, none acting with the sense of internal autonomy with which humanist historians suffuse the word ‘agency’” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 25). From the personal perspective, rooted in the anthropocentric paradigm of the individual agential subject, the planetary perspective appears as an agentless system. Thus, the planetary perspective—insofar as it can even be called a “perspective” at all—is not a personal view, as we find in Śāntideva, but a view without a viewer. As Chakrabarty puts it, the planetary perspective is a “view from nowhere” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 28).

This raises a question. As we have discussed, the challenge of living in the Anthropocene is learning to live in two presents; learning how to relate to the impersonal scale of planetary geobiology that has begun to infiltrate our personal consciousness. While the planetary may be a “view from nowhere,” that *nowhere* is increasingly part of our subjective awareness. In Chakrabarty’s words, we “now cognitively inhabit this nowhere” (ibid.). While the question for Śāntideva was about moving between different personal subjectivities, the planetary question for Chakrabarty is about moving beyond subjectivity itself.

## 5. The View from Nowhere

From the planetary perspective, the Earth-system is “all process without a subject” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 25). This confounds ordinary understandings of agency and casts doubt on the concept of “perspective” itself, insofar as the notion of perspective—with its implicit subject-position and ocularcentrism—is contingent on the presence of a perceiving agent. As noted, this might limit the usefulness of Śāntideva’s exchange of self and other for our discussion; insofar as that practice remains within the scope of personal subjectivity, it might not help us engage a planetary system that transcends subjectivity itself.

And yet, as we also noted, the exchange of self and other is a two-pronged process: it moves the self into another—*externalizing* one’s subjectivity—but also aspires to bring otherness into the self—*internalizing* alterity. While that alterity, for Śāntideva, is a proximate other, there is nevertheless a salient parallel between this internalization of alterity and the way Chakrabarty describes the incursion of the planetary into the personal consciousness of everyday life. That is, now that the “outside” of the planetary-geologic has increasingly begun to come “inside,” engaging with the planetary is no longer just about looking outward, but also about looking inward. This produces a curious telescoping effect:

The act of folding back into the world-historical time of humans the geological time of the planet’s history effects another fascinating shift. It is as if the Earth



system were saying to the conscious part of its constituents, humans, “you never look at me from the place from which I see you.” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 29)

Simply articulated, the concern is that we cannot engage a “planetary perspective” because perspective itself only operates within the limited scope of personal subjectivity. Perspective is always a view *from somewhere*. But what is striking here is that, even in Chakrabarty’s telling, the planetary is not absolutely transcendent. Indeed, it *speaks* to the personal, to the “conscious part of its constituents” (ibid.). Even when the message it conveys is one of non-reciprocal difference—you never look at me from the place from which I see you—that message of nonreciprocal difference is itself a point of contact. To borrow a phrase from Giorgio Agamben’s celebrated essay on the work of zoologist Jakob von Uexküll—who described an infinite variety of perceptual lifeworlds that, though “reciprocally exclusive, are all... linked together as if in a gigantic musical score” (Agamben 2004, p. 40)—the personal and the planetary might be reciprocally exclusive, yet both voices in a shared conversation.

One of the most famous passages of Mahāyāna Buddhist scripture, the eleventh chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, proposes an arresting image of how such reciprocally exclusive incommensurabilities might, quite literally, sit side-by-side and converse. In that chapter we encounter the famous motif of two Buddhas—Śākyamuni, the historical buddha of our world, and the long-departed Prabhūtaratna—seated together inside Prabhūtaratna’s stūpa, defying the doctrinal convention that there can only ever be one buddha in the world at a time.<sup>6</sup> As the chapter opens, Prabhūtaratna’s extraordinary reliquary, made of the “seven precious materials, five hundred leagues high and two hundred and fifty leagues wide and deep” (Reeves 2008, p. 235), suddenly erupts forth from inside the earth and floats up into the sky. As Donald S. Lopez and Jacqueline Stone remark,

the Buddhist mind is boggled by this scene. A huge stūpa appears, not flying down from another universe above, but breaking out from below the surface of our own world, coming up out of the earth like a fossil emerging from some prehistoric stratum, to then hover in the air. (Lopez and Stone 2019, p. 142)

Not only does Śākyamuni cause the entire assembly to levitate into the air so they might get a better look at this floating architectural marvel, he also opens the stūpa to reveal, to the airborne audience’s amazement, that Prabhūtaratna is inside and very much alive, despite having passed away “innumerable tens of millions of billions of eons” ago (Reeves 2008, p. 239).

As scholars have noted, this extraordinary scene depicts the intersection of two different temporalities. “Śākyamuni, the buddha of the present, goes and sits down beside Prabhūtaratna, a buddha of the past, and both buddhas are alive in the present” (Lopez and Stone 2019, p. 143). Natalie Gummer also dwells on the scene’s temporal dimensions, describing it as the moment that “past, present, and future meet and transform one another” (Gummer 2021, p. 310). The image of these two Buddhas seated side-by-side thus captures the impossible coincidence of several incommensurabilities: the dead are alive, two buddhas are in the same world, the unthinkable distant past erupts into the present, the transcendent comes not from above but from below.

I suggest we might read Prabhūtaratna as an embodiment of deep time. Unlike the life course of Śākyamuni, which through skillful means unfolds at the familiar pace of human time, Prabhūtaratna’s lifespan unfolds on a scale beyond human imagination, over innumerable tens of millions of billions of eons. The meeting of these two Buddhas is thus, among other things, the intersection of two temporal paradigms: *our* time (the time of our personal familiar Buddha, Śākyamuni) and *another* time (the unimaginable timescale of Prabhūtaratna). And yet even as the text luxuriates in the mind-boggling immensity of Prabhūtaratna’s lifespan, it resists—as we saw above—the notion of absolute transcendence. Prabhūtaratna, though obviously extraordinary, is not *completely* other. Indeed, the fact that the text dwells so explicitly on Prabhūtaratna’s bodily presence—his living and breathing materiality, which reflects that of his mirror image, Śākyamuni—foregrounds precisely this point: Prabhūtaratna’s presence is not a transcendent transcendence, but an *immanent* transcendence. The other time enters this time from *within*, not from without.

The emergence of Prabhūtaratna's stūpa illustrates this point very literally. That is, the stūpa does not descend from above; it is not *higher than*, as in the conventional definition of transcendence. Rather, it erupts from *below*. As Melissa Curley writes, the stūpa enters the "*saha* world from below.... This works to literalize the notion that the Buddha's pure land lies immanent within and concealed beneath this world of suffering" (Curley 2014, p. 102). The key point is that the "other"—which here is polysemic, at once denoting the other *Buddha* (Prabhūtaratna), the other *place* (the pure land), and the other *time* (innumerable tens of millions of billions of eons)—remains irreducibly other, but is also inside and intimate.

This, I suggest, might help us think about the intersection of the personal and the planetary. As Curley notes, even Prabhūtaratna himself—who embodies the oxymoron of being a *living relic*—represents the intersection of life and death, of presence and absence (Curley 2014, p. 102). The two Buddhas both mirror and oppose each other. While each embodies something incommensurate to the other, they simultaneously sit side-by-side on the same level. The rhetorical force of this image lies in its vision of relational alterity, not as transcendent-and-distant but, paradoxically, as transcendent-and-near. The "other" is

neither strictly separate from this world... nor strictly identical with it; rather, it is folded into this world in such a way as to produce a chiasm: the supernatural site where the transcendent opens up within the natural.... Then the human audience should find itself in two places at once: both in the world of suffering *and* in the Buddha's pure land. Here the bad place is not abjected by the good place but momentarily cathected by it. (Curley 2014, p. 103)

Though cosmological categories like the *saha* world and the pure land enfold doctrinal and devotional attitudes that do not directly apply to the personal and the planetary, we can nevertheless identify a structural parallel between these dyadic pairs. Like the lifespan of Prabhūtaratna, the scale of the planetary grazes the very limits of our human temporal imagination. And yet, like Prabhūtaratna's stūpa, the planetary is also *materially* underfoot. After all, the earth under our feet *is* quite literally the planet. Like the other time of Prabhūtaratna, which speaks through the mouthpiece of the present, the planetary sometimes speaks through the mouthpiece of the personal. When we experience extreme weather,<sup>7</sup> when a species goes extinct, when we touch a fossil, or when we look at starlight, we are in fact glimpsing nodes of temporal intersection in which human world-historical time is touching planetary-geologic deep time. The vastness of planetary deep time is, thus, both distant and proximate. Like Prabhūtaratna's living relic body, which has flesh as vital and animate as Śākyamuni's, the planetary can also erupt from within our personal world, taking on its flesh and its voice. Learning to see these moments of intersection—which, as I have tried to argue in this piece, begins with reconceptualizing our own notions of transcendence, alterity, and relationship—might be a first step toward learning how to live in two presents.

## 6. Conclusion: How We Experience the Night

The English language includes a class of words called contronyms. These are words that also mean their opposite. To *cleave* means to hold fast to something, as well as to separate and hold apart. Cleaving—simultaneously holding together and holding apart—is one way we might conceptualize the complex new ways in which we must now learn to integrate the planetary into our daily personal lives. Confronting climate change is painful; it involves irrevocable personal suffering and loss. The question before us now, then, is not how to avoid pain but whether there are better or worse ways to move through pain. In the spirit of this question, I would like to conclude with a few reflections on why the exercise of reconceptualizing our relationship to planetary time matters, and what it might offer us as we confront this moment of ecological transformation.

A conviction of this essay has been that our conceptual paradigms are like the stories we tell about the stars; they help create our understanding—and thus our experience—of reality. As such, these stories hold the potential to shape new horizons of possibility. In

this essay, I have proposed that Buddhist literature and thought can inspire different and more capacious stories about our relationship to time. In this, I take a leaf from Natalie Gummer, who warns against the modern secular framework of time that is so “thoroughly naturalized and universalized for most contemporary readers (perhaps especially secular academics) that it can too easily disappear from view, as though it were an unmediated experience of time as it is” (Gummer 2021, p. 296). Instead, Gummer urges us to take seriously the alternative conceptions set forth in Buddhist literature, insisting that “we have something crucial to learn from other ways of making and inhabiting time” (Gummer 2021, p. 297). Engaging such alternative conceptions is not always easy; as Gyatso says about the exchange of self and other, for instance, seeing oneself from the outside “often requires fortitude to take in, since it can be surprising, if not shattering to our ego” (Gyatso 2019, p. 99). But such challenges to our ordinary habits of seeing are also, I suggest, a potential source of resilience. As Berger reminds us, though our stories about the stars do not change the night sky, they can help us orient ourselves in the darkness.

This also raises an epistemic consideration. While it may perhaps be more comfortable to cling to the familiar scale of the human, Chakrabarty notes that ignoring the planetary-geologic “extracts an intellectual price, for if we do not take into account Earth-history processes that outscale our very human sense of time, we do not quite see the depth of the predicament that confronts humans today” (Chakrabarty 2018, p. 6). While this is indeed shattering to our ego, it resonates with the Buddhist conviction that one should try to see reality as comprehensively as possible, even—and perhaps especially—when it challenges our self-centeredness. Anthropocentrism, then, can be an epistemic obstacle that prevents us from ascertaining the full reality of the situation in which we find ourselves.

I have also argued, however, that challenging anthropocentrism does not mean that human personal concerns do not matter. Indeed, the assumption that the planetary and the personal are mutually exclusive can give rise to unproductive reactionary responses. Consider, on one hand, the willful blindness of climate change deniers, who so strongly cling to presentist human comfort that they ignore larger-scale planetary realities. A converse but equally troubling response is the nihilism of climate change “doomers”—a relatively new movement that Solnit (2023) considers even more problematic than climate deniers—who so focus on the inevitability of planetary collapse that it robs the personal present of value and meaning, resulting in a posture of apathy and defeatism. The two sides of this coin—the naive hedonism of the deniers and the defeatist nihilism of the doomers—treat the personal and the planetary as mutually exclusive, privileging one at the expense of the other. I have argued, however, that the task before us is to develop a different story, one capacious enough to recognize the personal and the planetary as incommensurate yet coincident and equally important. Our capacity to discern their coincidence depends on how we understand notions like time, finitude, transcendence, and immanence. Although Buddhist literature is but one of many potential places where we might seek out richer understandings of these concepts, I have suggested it presents fruitful resources for generating new ways to relate them to our emerging planetary reality.

A recurring question, however, has been whether—and to what extent—we are able to move beyond the limitations of our human subject position. While we might work to stretch our imaginative scope, our abilities are still ultimately limited by our human perception and subjectivity. Yet, despite the impossibility of ever fully accessing the subject position of another, Gyatso remarks that “what may be most crucial are the effects merely of *trying* to see oneself from the perspective of that larger world, rather than the exact content of what is thereby seen as such” (Gyatso 2019, p. 100). Though we may never slough off the limits of our personal subjectivity to experience a “view from nowhere,” the attempt to stretch in this direction—even incompletely and imperfectly—is nevertheless morally edifying. Gyatso continues, “the more we are able to cultivate and incorporate external vantages into our way of seeing ourselves, the more we render ourselves available to an expanded and more ethical way of being in the world” (Gyatso 2019, p. 99).

Lastly, our turn to premodern Buddhist literature in response to present ecological questions illustrates that although the specifics of climate change may be new, human imaginative engagement with deep time is not. As Gummer has argued, since the time of their composition, the Buddhist sūtras have radically challenged the conventional configurations of their readers' space and time—what she calls the reader's "historicity" (Gummer 2021, p. 295)—and intervened in the time-space of their audiences "through the narrative manipulation of time... radically reframing it in relation to the other times and places they articulate into being" (ibid.). This essay has been animated by the conviction that Buddhist literature and thought—even when produced, circulated, and popularized in devotional contexts—contain robust theoretical and conceptual ideas that can enrich our philosophical and ethical thinking more broadly. In this approach, I draw inspiration from Francisca Cho, editor of this volume, who turns to Buddhism as a "source of my theory making" rather than as a mere "object of ideological clarification" (italics added, Cho 1999, p. 180). If our experience of time is a story we tell, then in this moment of acute ecological precarity—which is forcing us with unprecedented urgency to see ourselves anew through the eyes of the planetary—it is imperative that we learn to question our received narratives and seek out more nuanced and capacious stories, since these determine the scope of our knowledge, ethics, and action.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This reflects the proclivities of the wider premodern South Asian intellectual milieu in which Buddhism was situated, where we find a widespread Indian philosophical interest in large numbers and enormities of scale. See, for instance, the work of Kloetzli and González-Reimann (Kloetzli 2013; González-Reimann 2002, 2009).
- <sup>2</sup> It is salient here to note the interplay of the macroscopic and microscopic as a literary motif, where immensity is often paradoxically conveyed through the infinitesimal. We find the enormity of the universe, for instance, ubiquitously described through imagery of the very, very small: specs of dust, grains of sand, and so forth. See also the work of Kloetzli (Kloetzli 1983).
- <sup>3</sup> Some prominent Buddhist schools have of course interpreted the *Lotus Sūtra*—often along with the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*—as the *locus classicus* for the idea of an atemporal and eternal cosmic Buddha. As Williams notes, however, this is in part connected to historically situated ways the Buddhist teachings were interpreted and systematized, especially through the lens of East Asian Tiantai 天台 (Williams 2009, p. 154). While such interpretations have been profoundly influential, we should be vigilant not to allow these received traditions of interpretation to foreclose additional interpretations that arise from a close reading of the text itself.
- <sup>4</sup> There is also a soteriological argument for the temporal finitude of Buddhahood; namely, "if the Buddha is eternal then no one who is not already a Buddha could attain Buddhahood" (Williams 2009, p. 157). The path toward awakening, even for Śākyamuni Buddha himself, was karmically determined and dependent on merit accumulated over many (finite) lifetimes. This is the doctrinal basis for the central premise that all beings have the potential to reach awakening by following the Buddha's path.
- <sup>5</sup> Consider, for instance, the following passages: "Delighted we shall watch while at last he is crushed, the object of everyone's ridicule, criticized from all sides" (Śāntideva 1995, p. 101) and "We must make him fall from happiness and involve him in continual pain" (Śāntideva 1995, p. 102).
- <sup>6</sup> "The appearance of a buddha," Lopez and Stone explain, paraphrasing Nāgasena's explanation in the *Milindapañha*, "is such a rare and momentous event in the history of the universe that the cosmos is stretched to its limit by his majesty" (Lopez and Stone 2019, p. 141). Should a second Buddha appear, the cosmos "could not sustain him; it would tremble, shake, bend, bow down, twist, disperse, dissolve, scatter, it would disappear" (ibid.).
- <sup>7</sup> As Sippel et al. (2020) have shown in their study, "Climate Change Now Detectable from Any Single Day of Weather at Global Scale," despite the longstanding distinction between weather and climate—which frames climate change as a slow and distant process unfolding over decades and even centuries—data now confirm that the fingerprint of externally driven climate change can be detected in any single day of globally observed weather.

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