Gregory Bateson has lived in more realms than most of us allow ourselves to imagine. In addition to anthropology (including the trance dances of Bali), he has investigated schizophrenia (the double-bind theory), cybernetics and William Blake. He was one of the first to grasp the importance of ecological thinking.

The particular realm he was inhabiting during this conversation was a house in the mountains just outside Boulder, looking out on hills covered with pine. Walking up the dirt road we picked up a bone (the scapula mentioned below), which we used as a microphone stand.

The interview began before we realized it, and we found ourselves discussing the arms race as a continuing way of life:

Bateson: Yes, the world repeats itself, such as it is.
Loka: The world repeats itself, could we relate that to samsara, not only as a circle, but also as a vicious circle?

So far as the world which I see and live in is concerned, I take it as samsara. Obviously every creature, or every species of creature, has to be able to multiply itself with positive gain. If it didn’t it would go out at the first epidemic. The epidemic would simply reduce it, it wouldn’t come back again. Now, that doesn’t mean that
on that hillside in the next fifty years the pine trees will have done so much positive gain that they will be solid on the hillside. There will be just about the same number on the hillside, believe me, other things being equal.

When does positive gain take effect?

It takes effect when you start kicking the thing down. If I remove 10 per cent of those pine trees, and give them twenty, thirty years to recover, the population will come back to its level. There are all sorts of troubles that arise because the population, to hold that level, requires woodpeckers. That brown pine tree across the way there, he's got the local pine beetle. If they don't get him out, there'll be another half dozen to ten trees with the pine beetle in them in a couple of years. It's infectious. Vicious circles are what biology lives on, but you've got to have a world in which that is all the time being held in control. The springs of the whole system is the presence of vicious circles.

In terms of...

In terms of reproduction first of all, Malthusian vicious circles. The more children you produce, the more children they have. That's a vicious circle.

Because sooner or later the population gets beyond what can be supported.

Theoretically the population, if left to itself, will become infinite. In very few generations it becomes larger than the total volume of the earth.

But there is the moon now.

The moon is not habitable for pine trees.

I wonder how that works with the notion of samsara?

In earlier Buddhist writings, they literally talk about escaping from birth and death. In the later writings there is the paradox, "Well, yes, it's escaping from birth and death, and no it's not. We're not going anywhere off this vicious circle, we're staying in it."

This is another sense of the phrase "vicious circle." This is the wheel in the samsaric sense. This is quite a different thing. By a vicious circle in my sense, I simply mean a tangle of interlocking variables in which the more of something, the more of something else; and the more of the other thing, the more of the first. As opposed to a system which tapers, where it can taper to a steady state equilibrium.

What has never been cigar to me about the steady state idea is that it only seems to exist where there is no consciousness in the sense of human consciousness. Where there is human consciousness that element seems to be anti-steady state, because it is always tinkering.

I'm afraid you're right. In that case I would consider it as the Buddhist wheel and say, "I want off!"

I think that is the sense that we may have been talking about. What then is a way out of the circle? We began talking about the arms race.

Which is a particular case. We ran a conference on this point, with my daughter, which is published under the title, Our Own Metaphor. The full title was We Are Our Own Metaphor. The original title was On the Role of Conscious Purpose in Human Adaptation. And the primary memorandum which I sent around to the conference members before we met asserted that the role of conscious purpose is almost entirely antithetical to human adaptation. For just the sort of reason that you were feeling your way towards, that if people would only be good Taoists and leave the cybernetic systems alone, they would run clean and settle to steady state.

After some trauma.

After how much trauma, who knows? The human beings of course can't stand the idea of the intervening trauma.

You could apply that to the idea of the ecology being in a seeming mess right now but in a thousand years, with or without human beings, it might not be in a mess; we could just let it run out.

And we may all be dead, if you call this all a mess. But would that matter to the eco-system?

No, it could be dead, too. The horrible thing about the god Eco, the gods of the eco-systems, is that they have no free will, no sentimentality, they can be insane (which most gods are supposed to be incapable of). In St. Paul's phrase, they "are not mocked." So if you stand against the eco-system, it's no good saying you didn't mean it, or you're sorry.

Which is the state many of us seem to be at now, saying we made a mistake, but we didn't mean it.

That's about as far as we've got towards ecological insight.

Is it too late?

Ask Eco — he knows, he knows!

To go back to that idea of Taoism — what you're suggesting is that conscious purpose...

That Taoism is the abrogation of conscious purpose, yes? This is a part of it. You're not going to worry about whether or not you have cream in your coffee, or indeed whether you have coffee at all. There is a paradox in the whole Taoist thing: are you prepared to say that of the
present 3 ½ billion population of the world, you are willing to let all go except three million?

That’s what you think the earth can support?

I don’t know what the actual figure can be, but a lot lower than it is now. You see that we can’t let other people do this, let alone do it ourselves. We can’t hear it that the Indonesians should have an epidemic. The Dutch, you see, doubled the population of Indonesia simply by introducing vaccination and ordinary quarantine rules.

And you don’t think that in the long run that was humanitarian?

I’m sure that in the long run it was not humanitarian. In the short run of course it is, and that’s the gimmick. If my little Nora comes down with a disease, I shall get medicine. Even though I don’t much believe even in short run medicine.

On the level of your situation you want to use certain things, but on the larger scale which you are aware of, you see that it’s a dead end. Penicillin in the Third World has done a lot to make the Third World unbelievable.

Penicillin and DDT, between them they have enormously increased the population.

And the paradox is living with these two though they simultaneously. It seems that once you have one, there is no way of getting rid of it.

There’s no earthly way to get rid of it. DDT they are beginning to get rid of. For one thing, most of the insects have become immune to DDT. Their immunity develops faster than ours.

At the same time that the earth can’t support the 3’A billion people, do you think there is something underlying it, some evolutionary growth or movement? Do you see us crashing for sure, or do you see some threshold to be reached, something new to happen?

Well, conceivably always, but what does crashing mean?

Crashing and jumping the threshold might mean the same thing.

Well obviously there are billions who are going to die, just like you and me. Therefore the problem is going to be solved within fifty years anyway. So the problem is going to shift from those 3 ’A billion to their offspring. We know they’re going to die.

You don’t think Buckminster Fuller’s idea that the problem is just one of mismanagement and lack of distribution and lack of intelligent use of the available energy makes sense?

I don’t really believe that, no. Because I don’t think the problem is primarily an energy problem. I think it is much more a minor constituents problem. All the other things you need in your food besides calories, practically every element in the table: vitamins, phosphorus, mineral components, so on. These are much more awkward than energy.

And that has to do with complexity.

Has very much to do with complexity, has to do with things being in a scattered state in the world. What we do is to comb the surface and concentrate them. Then having concentrated them, we put them in places where we will never be able to get them back again.

In that light, can you relate Buckminster Fuller to the notion of purpose?

I can relate Buckminster Fuller very easily to the notion of purpose. Have you ever worked on geodesic domes?

Yes, they leak.

They leak, that’s right. Why do they leak? Because they are much too purposive. Because they’ve got no tolerance. The only purpose of a dome is to be a dome.

The people who build them think their purpose is good residence.

I know all that, but Bucky doesn’t have any idea what living in something is like.

After all, he lives in airplanes, he says.

That’s probably right. But those bloody domes are a very good paradigm for the whole of engineering adaptation.

You might be interested to know that one of the fellows who developed the dome idea at first and who published a number of books, gave it up completely, and went through a long drawn-out ethnological survey of living quarters all over the world, and has decided that the whole approach was much too schematic.

Much too schematic. Straw is much better material to make houses with. Straw and mud make quite good houses.

I’d like to get back to the idea that consciousness itself seems to be a problem, as you’re presenting it.
The problem is this: we will imagine a steady state process going along on that hillside of Ponderosa pines, and the pines are balancing out with the deer and the cactuses and all the rest of the living things there. What are they called? “Sentient beings.” Now in come you and I, and of the various variables on that hillside, we decide to maximize one. We want more deer scapulas that we can pick up off the surface. Well, obviously, we do that.

To make jewelry with.

Yes, to make jewelry with, it’s as nonsensical as that! The first thing is to kill as many deer as you can so the scapulas get around. Well, when we’re a little more sophisticated than that, we say, “Well it won’t really last, the deer are not so numerous anymore, so if we kill them, we’d better not kill them all.” Well, what do deer live on? Deer live on the prickly pear or something. So that leads us to multiply the prickly pear. And if you multiply the prickly pear you disturb everything else. You multiplied it probably by feeding it some special food, or one of those chemical messengers. And then the rest of the balance goes, and so on. Now what happened? What happened was that the human beings identified a variable, looked at the immediate predecessors of that variable in the general train, and started with what sophistication they could to maximize these in order to maximize the one they wanted. But they have totally ignored three quarters of the whole circle, you see. All the other things that go together. They go around thinking that the way to explain things is either like that a series of causal arrows, or it branches in or it branches out . You make trains of those things and that is called scientific explanation, understanding. And obviously, if you want more of something here, you make more of what goes into it. But, the fact is that, really, the world looks at least like that , with then, of course, other branches, and other kinds of feed-ins, from other places .

And if you do what you first thought of, you are going to wreck the balances. And that is all you’re going to do, sure as new apples. And that’s what that book is all about, Our Own Metaphor.

One of the points you made in the Sunday night talk is that we’ve come to this sort of impasse in psychotherapy, changing a man’s “I” to suit a therapist.

This is the schizophrenic’s diagnosis of what was wrong with the therapy people were giving him. “A contrivance to change the color of a man’s eye to please a psychologist is too much. And you’re all psychologists, though some of you turn and become medical doctors, for that part of you which hurts. Never thinking of the man who is so sick he has to munch on his own.” That’s a hell of a statement.

How do you proceed in psychotherapy then?

Did I tell you his first words when he gave up talking poetry, and started talking prose? They were, “Bateson, you want me to come and live in your world. I lived in it from 1920 to 1943, and I don’t like it.” He was born in 1920, hospitalized in ’43, this was ’57. So when Frieda Fromm Reichmann came through Palo Alto, I asked her what she would have said, and she replied, “Yes, I once had a patient who said something like that, and I said, ‘But I never promised you a rose garden.’”
versus the environment." And that cut is a fictitious cut. It cuts across the trains of causation.

How is it that we have the insight to get away from that?

Do we?

Offhand, you proposed Taoism, whatever that might be.

Well, what I really said was that I don't know anybody who could really work Taoism.

It is interesting that when the early form of Buddhism came to China, it melded with Taoism, but there were differences. The early Buddhism in China was called Mahayana Taoism. So there were the Taoists and the Mahayana Taoists at that point. The problem with Taoism, as we conceive it, seems to be that it has absolutely no method, no upaya. Because that is considered to be interfering in a sense.

That's right. Totally un-American.

Very much like Krishnamurti's approach. Perhaps Buddhism seems to take, if not philosophically at least methodologically, a more formal approach, in that instructions are given on how to meditate, which is a paradoxical kind of thing.

'A contrivance to please,' not a psychologist but a Buddhist, 'to change the color of a man's eye.'

The three ways out that I've experienced in my life so far have been, one, political action and analysis; two, psychedelic action and analysis; and three, most recently, meditation and studying Buddhism or the Dharma. Do any of these seem like they will lead to a workable situation?

I have more faith in the second or third than I do in the first. Political action is always more or less self-negating.

Why should that be? What do you think of what is going on in China, for example?

I don't know what is going on in China, but what little I've seen of their arts and drama, which is all that really comes out that I've had a chance to see, fills me with absolute horror and terror.

Because of...?

The image that comes to mind is of a subcutaneous syringe injecting virtue in large quantities, and over-inflating the whole balloon with propagandistic crap of one kind or another. Now I've not been to China; for all I know they may select the over-inflated items for export.

The arms race seems to be an inevitable outcome of this.

Yes, "Mutual fear breeds peace."

Going back to the ways we have of dealing with this muddle, this vicious circle we're in, we talked about politics and the other two, psychedelics and . . .

. . . and controlled adventures in meditation the third, yes? Well you know psychedelics are very much related to the journey. And I think if you went with Stanislav Grof, you would find that the journey was right there. You would be doing much the same as in meditation. Now what does this do? Suppose that a civilization were predominantly controlled by, and composed of, people who had taken parts of the journey. Individual greed, certainly, would be enormously reduced. You could do this with psychedelics or with ordered Buddhism, ordered, controlled meditation, even mass controlled meditation of various kinds.

But that begins to sound rather . . . how about Chaotic Buddhism?

Ah, but it ain't chaotic, you see. When you begin to talk about a civilization based upon it, then you have meditation halls containing several hundred people. And don't forget that Zen was the backbone of the Japanese army. That can be just as destructive and vicious, and perhaps more so, than at the individual level. But all right, suppose you can avoid that. It all comes back to the arts, you know. Consider the Balinese. They see their land with quite different eyes from ours. They are enormously urban, for one thing. A mass of people close to lots of people, lots of people, all the time. No sense of privacy, withdrawal, no sense of the wild uncivilized nature. If they go for two minutes into the little bit of forest they have left, they squeal like suburban children. "Centipede!" You know, that sort of thing. Now I don't know how that goes in, say, Tibet. It has masses of wild country, whereas Bali has eaten up most of its wild country.

But the question I wanted to ask is, will any of
these things allow us to be part of a steady state system? Rather than being what we seem to be, a sort of virus which destroys its host?

Very much like a virus. The virus destroys the host by self-multiplication. And missionary endeavor. When you kill the host, the viruses are scattered. Ready to infect another. But you persuade the host to make the same sort of proteins as you are. This is missionary endeavor.

Possibly the whole space program is a virus preparing to...

Very much so, very metastatic. What was the question about that? Can we somehow not be metastatic?

Can we be an organism that lives in harmony with all sentient beings, realizing that non-organic substances are necessary for sentient beings equally? Or is it still your premise that consciousness itself is the destructive agent?

No. Consciousness becomes the destructive agent by virtue of the other side of the coin. By the fact that it renders unconscious a very large number of considerations. Makes them unavailable, not only unconscious, but rules them out altogether.

Why does it do that?

Attending to x means not attending to y. Attention is perhaps a better word than consciousness. Unconsciousness is inattention.

Then we are trying to say that attention in itself is the problem, in that it must select one thing to pay attention to, to pay attention.

Now we come again to our old friends the EEG’s, the yogis and the Zens. As I understand it, the yogis increase their “in”-attention, which is to say they increase their concentration; the opposite side of the thing is non-attention to those things you don’t concentrate on. Whereas the Zens learn to avoid concentration, to avoid inner tension by a sort of universal attention.

More than the EEG thing, it seems to dovetail with what Suzuki Roshi and Trungpa are teaching as coming from some common meditation tradition, where’ there has to be a certain amount of concentration, but you are not trying to get yourself into a particular state by concentration, just choiceless awareness.

Suppose we argue this way: in 1974 we have a certain amount of knowledge of cybernetic subjects, steady states, ecology, but damn little knowledge of the interchanges happening on that hillside. But in principle we have some idea what it is all about, in an abstract way. Now we say, “You eco-cyberneticians, will you please recommend for the world what should be done?” Suppose they say, “We think the cybernetic things are very important, but there is also the aesthetic determinations of what is happening on that hillside.” This is a set of regularities in the world of which we have no knowledge. Enough only to say, rather hesitantly, that from the smell of things, it may be so. Now would they be wise to make any recommendations to the world on what to do, when they know there > are orders of causation, orders of regularity, about which there is no knowledge? Biological detail, biological principle, patterns. With our little knowledge of cybernetic systems, they can say, “For Christ’s sake, don’t throw the steering wheel over the side of the car.” But as to which road to take when steering, that is something different altogether.

What’s your reaction to the Taoist statement that it only takes respect for the intelligence that
enables the grass seed to grow grass, for the cherry tree to grow cherries?

You obviously can't afford to look at the universe and forget that there are such things as kinds. There is a very strong tendency in America to believe that the universe is not made up of discontinuous, separate kinds.

This seems to be a spiritual semi-truth which can turn into almost cosmic soup.

But a pine tree is a pine tree, and an oak is an oak, damn it.

Obviously we began as a part of a steady state system ecology, before we gathered the cybernetic know-how to begin thinking we were controlling it. I wonder if that hunger for sameness is behind our hunger to control things. What is it that leads us to...

There is another thing that I think is very important about the human species: that less than a million years ago, man was the low one on the totem pole. He was not an ecological dominant. He was an ecological freak. We were an endangered species. Now we still behave as if we were an endangered species.

It's almost like the youngest child in the family always having that psychological sense...

Going around with a chip on his shoulder for the rest of his life. Now this is another whole set of problems: How do you alter the pathway, of say, the house of Atreus? The house of Atreus is the Greek tragedy with the family in which the brother screws the other brother's wife, who then replies by getting the children of that family and cooking them and serving them. All the way down the line to Orestes. We commit these gross things, the Treaty of Versailles, for example. This was a swindle about war, not itself a part of war. If you're going to swindle at the peace table you're in trouble. You can do what you like in war, use all the tricks, but you can't get the other side to surrender, and then put your heel on them. That's cheating, and that's what we did. And we (and they) are going to suffer for that for two hundred years, certainly. The whole international crash is part of that. So we've set one of these trains of distrust, feuding and vengeance going, and we have no idea what the mechanisms are for stopping it. How do you eat up bad karma? And if our Buddhist friends have any real idea how to burn up bad karma on an international level, I'm anxious for it, any day.

The metaphor might be to define a space in which the thing can work its way out, as opposed to being in the middle of where it is being worked out. You set a context, an arena where it can happen. It would be lovely if you can.

Meditation is the context on the personal level.

I agree.

I don't think the Olympics is the context on the international level.

You may build up a tiny bit, but it usually reverses, and the Olympics blows up in a scandal. Someone cheats on the high jump.

Or a team is kidnapped. And that seems to be the situation we are in, where one part of the eco-system is warring on the other part. In Buddhism the human realm is considered the best place to, become Buddha, to become enlightened. Maybe it is inevitable that consciousness has developed in human beings as opposed to other species, save perhaps dolphins or who knows what, to a much greater extent...

I wouldn't agree with you, but people say that. I think that's a purely racial attitude towards the other animals, in saying they're unconscious. This justifies us in killing them, eating them, frying them.

Yet you're not a vegetarian.

No, but I don't require that justification.

It seems that human beings are the only ones that consciously create this thing which we call art. Am I being human-centric?

The other species are not going to write art criticism for you. So when you say "consciously," that's one of the things you mean, of course.

No, making a painting, or...

Oh, well, that's another thing. What about the actual designs of anatomy? I mean why are centipedes beautiful? Whether or not they are beautiful to each other is a question, whether they are somehow internally beautiful, which would not necessarily imply consciousness. To infer that embryology is some sort of harmony, a tune...

But whose embryology isn't?

But I say, whose isn't? You wanted to confine these things to ratiocinating humans. Most ratiocinations are mainly ugly anyway.

You begin to paint a bleak picture.

I? They're all right, these people . . . God, they are fools.

The conversation continued throughout a lunch that was shared with a family of yellow-jackets. Bateson watched with keen interest as they began nibbling at his chicken and he began speculating on their diet and nesting instincts.

— Rick Fields
— Richard Greene