

Welcome to Turning Conscience Into Action, the Earth Charter podcast. Join Mirian Vilela, Earth Charter International Executive Director, in her fascinating conversations with great thinkers, scholars and activists from around the world who are working in the fields of sustainability, ethics, education and social transformation. Our purpose is to generate new insights on how to face current global challenges and inspire informed action.

Welcome to our conversation today. Our podcast has the pleasure and the honor of receiving Jeremy Lent, he's an author and a speaker who is making a lot of noise about ecological civilization and whose work investigates the underlying causes of our civilization's existential crisis.

I'm quite interested to hear more and learn from Jeremy. He has been part of a series of our webinars and conversations. The good thing is that Jeremy is the author of the book, *The Web of Meaning*, integrating science and traditional wisdom to find our place in the universe. Thank you so much for joining us today, Jeremy. Oh, thank you so much, Mirian. I'm looking forward to this conversation. Thank you. And I hear you are joining us from Rarely, California. Yes, exactly. That's right. Okay. So can we start by hearing you share with us the key ideas that we can find in your book, the latest book, *The Web of Meaning*.

Yes. Yeah. Well, really, that book, *The Web of Meaning* lays out a different kind of worldview than the one that most of us just take for granted that you might say is the dominant worldview in the world today. And it's actually a worldview that could, if it were embraced by an increasing number of people, in a way, sort of form the foundation for an ecological civilization. So in a way, it's a good place to begin this conversation. And above all, it's what it does is it shows how our dominant worldview is one that is not only dangerous and one that as many people are aware, kind of leading us to really to their precipice, to a civilizational crisis.

But it's also wrong. Most people think that things we hear for granted, like, for example, humans are naturally competitive or nature is basically evolved through selfish genes. And that's how nature is. And so that's just how the world works. There are certain things we just take for granted that we think are scientifically valid, but actually, they've been superseded by what science tells us. So what this book does actually is it looks at every one of the kind of the big questions in life that maybe everyone at some point asks themselves at some point, like things like who am I?

Where am I? What am I? How should I live? Or even why am I? But in each of these cases, it shows how the dominant culture gives us answers that have been superseded by science. But what is so interesting is that what modern science leads us to is the same deep insights that different of the great wisdom traditions around the world have also led us to, whether it's indigenous wisdom from around the world, also Buddhism or Taoism, also a neo-confucianism, which specifically arising from China. But all of those different traditions point to that realization of our deep interconnectedness.

And what the web of meaning really does, and that's why it's called the web of meaning, is it shows how meaning itself arises from our interconnectedness, from our deep

connections with everything else around us. And in every one of those big questions I talked about, it shows how we can actually begin to answer those questions to lead us to a very, very different place, in a place that is consistent with some of the deeper principles of each of those great wisdom traditions, as well as with what modern system science tells us.

Things like evolutionary biology, cognitive science, network theory, complexity theory, all those different sciences are basically sciences of connection, of connectivity. And they actually show us the same insights. So one of the amazing things that then comes from that, once you begin to realize that, is we're told in our dominant culture that basically science and spirituality are two completely different domains. You can have your spiritual thing, do your science, and those things just don't connect.

And the same with science. Some people say that's true even of values in general, that science is just objectively true and is value free. And what this book shows is that actually those distinctions between those two domains are made up distinctions, just made up out of this dominant worldview. And when we begin to look at it in this different way, we realize that the actual, they're really just different ways, different mirrors, different sort of lenses, if you will, of exploring the same deep underlying reality of our deep interconnectedness.

It's beautiful. It's interesting to see that there's a convergence between what is being told and found in new modern science and in the world traditions or religious values. Part four of your book, you articulate three main points on how should I live. Can you comment on that and share with us what are your key ideas on this? Yes, sure. Yeah, absolutely. Well, let's maybe first off just thinking a little bit about that notion of flourishing as an integrated organism. That's the name of one of the chapters.

And well, I guess the first thing to realize is what is that, what's an integrated organism anyway? And so what an integrated organism refers to is this realization that actually as human beings, we're not just our minds, if you will. There's this incredibly dominant quote, almost pretty much the most famous quote in all philosophy that almost everybody knows from Descartes that says, I think therefore I am, cogito ergo sum. And that is sort of the foundation to the dominant way of thinking, this dominant worldview, which thinks that our thinking capacity is what actually makes us our identity.

Descartes believed because of that, like that there's some sort of mind or soul that we have, which is separate from the body. And the body is just this machine or like this mind is imprisoned in, if you will. And that all animals out there also just machines. And we could just figure out how they work by cutting them out, cutting them down to their little parts. Well, what we now know from modern cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience in particular is that actually we're integrated mind-body organisms that our minds are basically they arise from the way our nervous systems basically have these incredibly complex interconnections, which themselves happen from our interactions with what's going on around us and from the rest of other aspects of our embodied life.

So we begin to realize that as humans, we don't just have what's called conceptual consciousness, but we actually have an animate consciousness or an animate intelligence

that we share with all of life. So that's what it means to be an integrated organism. And once we realize that, we get to see that even the way modern medicine thinks is like it's very much part of that dominant culture, thinking that something's wrong with somebody, you sort of fix it by looking mechanistically like, oh, you've got, you know, you got this wrong, let's give you an antibiotic or let's give you this drug, it'll fix that.

But you can actually begin to look at our health as not just mental health or physical health, but integrated health and take an integrated not just an integrated health approach to that, but then approach to the whole notion of flourishing, because that leads to this question of, well, what is it to actually really flourish as that integrated organism in this world? And this is where actually Aristotle, in fact, had some really great ideas around that, which connect a lot with ideas from East Asian thought too, which is what's so interesting.

So Aristotle had this idea, what he called eudaimonia. And what the word eudaimonia refers to is a sense of basically a true well-being that an organism can have. And in his idea, and that organism can achieve true well-being when it's truly pursuing what it was meant to do, what it was evolved essentially to do on this earth. And so you will like, like when you're pursuing your true nature. And he made that distinction between what he called hedonia, which is doing the stuff like, you know, not just kind of having fun or hedonic activities, but more material pleasures or pleasures we get from superficial or transitory things.

And he was saying eudaimonia is more like this deep well-being that arises when you're really pursuing your fullness of who you could be on this earth. And so similarly, you see in Buddhism, for example, they have a similar distinction where they have this concept of dukkha, which is essentially what happens when you're just trying to pursue some short use of fear, I need this, I need that. And as soon as you get something, then your essentially dukkha translates as like suffering. Because as soon as you get something, then you want the next thing.

And you want the next thing. And you get caught on what they call in modern psychology, the hedonic treadmill. It's never ending thing, you know, specifically in this material life. But then we get into emptiness. That's right. Exactly. And it's not just possessions, but then it's also, oh, if only I had so much, so more status, if only I was promoted to this next thing, or I really want to achieve this. And then you spend your life always wanting that next thing rather than really being present with the fullness of who you are, which is a concept in Buddhism called sukkha, like true well-being.

But what is so crucial to understand is that the way our dominant society works right now is it doesn't try to encourage that well-being or that eudaimonia, the way Aristotle described it. What it actually does is it tries to keep us in that hedonic treadmill. Our consumer capitalist society is designed to keep everybody always wanting more. If it didn't, if they didn't, then the whole system would basically come to a halt. So it's like every, you have to keep people totally dissatisfied, advertised to let them feel they need more status here or there, and always want more, like with food also.

Make them give them the kind of taste that makes them want the next thing right away in our technology, the same thing. And have these little dings that say you've got a thumbs up to just give you enough pleasure. So then you want to go back to your social media to say something else, to get more thumbs up. So it kind of shows how well-being actually comes from a very different source than what our modern dominant society tells us it comes from.

Let's talk a bit about ecological civilization. What is that from your perspective and why is so important for the current times that we build a narrative around ecological civilization? Well, in a way, it's a great segue from what we were just talking about because we were just talking about how that pursuit of true well-being is something that our dominant, our civilization right now has no interest in. In fact, it's designed to keep us basically always wanting more, always needing more.

And we can sort of think of an ecological civilization as if we're setting the conditions to actually give all humans and also all our other non-human cousins that we share the world with, to give them the conditions to truly have that flourishing, to really be able to have that, like what Aristotle called eudaimonia, or that true deep well-being, and trying to envisage what would our civilization look like if it were designed on that basis rather than the basis of our dominant civilization, which is really all around wealth accumulation.

Like our dominant civilization essentially comes from the worldview that I was describing earlier, our dominant worldview, which sees everyone as separate, which sees nature as being just a resource just for exploitation, having no intrinsic value of its own. And our dominant civilization is based on principles of extraction from the rest of nature and exploitation of other people, that those who exploit others are the ones who are most successful, and are being the billionaires or the ones who, you know, the sort of icons of capitalism or whatever.

And so what we're thinking about when we're talking about an ecological civilization is beginning to visualize what it would look like if we actually essentially changed the underlying operating system of our entire civilization from one that was starting out from extraction and exploitation to one that began by saying, let's set the conditions for all beings to flourish on a regenerated earth. And then what would that look like? And what I love about this term ecological civilization is that the word civilization captures the notion that we're not just talking about changing one aspect, you know, you'll come across terms like ecological economics or whatever, which is great. But then it's focused on one discipline, like thinking about economics, whatever it might be.

The idea of an ecological civilization is realizing everything has got to change if we're going to have that life affirming future. It definitely changed economics, but also things like how we conduct business and things like our education, how we approach agriculture, how we approach urban design, technology, and basically our culture and how we relate to each other. Every aspect of our civilization would look different if it began by asking that question, how can we set those conditions for all beings to flourish? Well, we could even argue if we could be called a civilization if you are generating the amount of waste that we are generating, there's solid waste or waste in the oceans. We could even argue that we are not civilized precisely because of that.

Yes, I think that's right in the sense if we think of civilized as being more advanced or we take the word civil and we take that literally sort of being civil to each other, like caring and compassionate to each other, then it's completely true. Civilization is the opposite of all of those things. Some people ask the question, it's kind of a deep question. Well, is there even such thing as an advanced civilization that is regenerative, that is life affirming? Because isn't that what civilization is all about as extracting and exploiting? You can look historically and see how other civilizations collapsed through over exploiting their lands, whether Mesopotamia or Egyptian or other or Roman civilization or whatever.

This is why it's such a radical thought because what I find so inspiring is that having done the research now over the last couple of years, I've researched quite deeply looking at every aspect, as I said, of civilization, looking at what the leading thinkers are saying is possible in each area. What we see is that there are the best ideas and actually ideas that are now in practice in each aspect of these different domains around the world, where we can see it is possible for each aspect of society to be done on life affirming ways.

The point is that they are so different and at so fundamental ways from what is currently being done that they need to really begin to work together to identify there's actually a very different possibility out there and it doesn't look like what we're used to seeing in the world right now. Now you have written about core principles of ecological civilization. I like to think of ingredients like we're making a cake and what are the key ingredients that we need to ensure we move towards ecological civilization. Can you share with us which are these or what are these ingredients or principles that could lead us towards ecological civilization?

That sounds great, sure. Well, you know, one of the most inspiring things to do is to when we think of an ecological civilization, what we can do is actually get ideas from life itself, because if we look at ecologists and ecosystems, what we find when we study them is that they can last for millions of years, literally millions and millions of years in a healthy way in spite of all the things that might happen to them and changes in climate or just a big shift that might happen, but they stay resilient. Wouldn't it be amazing if we could learn some of those principles from ecosystems themselves and apply them to our human society?

There are some key principles that arise from that that I'll go into, which when we apply them to human society, we can see they're fundamental to a different way of organizing ourselves. So probably the most important one is that, you know, we're told that nature is all about competition and selfish genes, right? But in fact, what evolutionary biologists now know when they've looked back over the billions of years since life began on earth, there have only been a few times that life got to be more complex to get to the richness and abundance that we enjoy today. Every one of those steps up in the complexity of life came about not from some species learning to outcompete the other, but quite the opposite from what's what biologists call mutually beneficial symbiosis.

And that means basically where one species and another species began to learn that if they work together and apply their specific expertise in doing one thing or another, something bigger could arise. And then they went from that. So rather than one taking advantage of the other, they worked together. And we see that in just if you just walk

through a forest right now, you see the trees are really good at taking energy from the sun and photosynthesis, but they have trouble in propagating themselves by themselves. So they create fruits and nuts that other animals take and then enjoy the sustenance, the nutrition from the tree, and then they go and propagate the seeds elsewhere. And meanwhile, animals die.

And then the fungus takes those the basically the dead bodies and that's nutrition for the fungus, which then creates these incredible mycelial webs under the ground. And then they relate to the trees. So they actually take an energy like carbon from the trees, and the trees take certain minerals from the mycorrhizal fungal networks, who even have now been discovered to transmit different elements of the trees right under the ground to other trees in the forest. So they kind of work together in this incredibly symbiotic way. That's what we mean by mutual symbiosis.

Now, if we apply that to human society, then you get away from this kind of zero sum game of competition being, you know, like you got to outcompete the other party, but you actually start to look at other ways in which we can organize ourselves where different groups that have expertise can work together for the mutual benefit of the entire entity, rather than say, owners against workers or things like that.

So a key principle then work the ingredient is cooperation. Yes, it's specific principle to lead us towards ecological civilization is to learn how to work based on cooperation. Exactly. Exactly. And what is so interesting about that too is we think that humans are, well, you know, just again, our dominant culture tells us, well, we're just not very cooperative. We're always trying to live selfish and we're always looking out for ourselves. Well, it turns out that actually humans evolve to be one of the most cooperative species ever. In fact, when we evolved millions of years ago in the savannah, there was a dangerous time and those communities that learned to work together very tightly were the ones that were most successful.

So we actually evolved what are known as moral emotions. We feel a sense of like shame or embarrassment if we act in a screwed up way, or we love people who we see a generous and we have a sense of fair play, we're even willing to take risks ourselves if we see something going wrong that we feel is not right. These come from our deeply felt moral emotions. And as humans, we actually developed ways of working together that are called the commons basically, and ways that are called pro social, where the actual activities that benefit the group as a whole get rewarded the best.

So what it means is that we can use some of the key principles of human flourishing, human actual evolved way of being and discover both from historical approaches as well as theoretical approaches. Now, how we can set the conditions for people to work together to encourage the very things we want to be, which is actually to be valued by our community around us to actually give to people to actually we actually feel happier when we are giving to our community, rather than where than when we're exploiting them. What is the kind of education we should be vision the kind of education we need to get there, or to help us move towards ecological civilization? Sure, that's that's crucially important.

And I think the first thing we need to recognize is that just like other aspects of our civilization, education itself was not designed to promote that well being that that real deep flourishing. It was actually designed right from the outset hundreds of years ago in Europe to turn people into basically good soldiers and then ultimately with industrialization, good workers. It was designed really to sort of drive people's sense of creativity and flourishing out of their minds and instill obedience and and yeah, essentially take away people's sense of free will, make them do what basically militaristic nation states wanted to make them do.

So I mean so many of the things we just take for granted in just in a school right now, like children being forced to sit down in front of behind the desks and rows and put your hand up if you wanted to ask a question or go out of the room for something. These are actual elements of instilling obedience in into the system that were designed right from the outset to turn people into sort of good workers, cogs in the machine if you will, of our dominant society.

So I think when we start to look at what we actually and what education could look like as part of leading us towards an ecological civilization, it would be to start from those very foundations, this recognition that actually humans and as children as as infants and young children and we want to, we're very curious, we want to learn and but we want to learn in our own embodied ways, we don't do one, we don't actually learn best by some teacher telling us you know you've got to learn this times table or here's the 16 lessons that I'm going to test you on. Actually we learn the best when we're driven by our own curiosity, when we actually direct our own learning.

So understanding their basically learning a sort of ecological thinking and that's a crucial ecological literacy, that's actually a crucial phrase that Fritjaf Kapra has been many years like fleshing out that notion of what he calls ecoliteracy, incredibly important. Also learning together and actually children learn best not when they're tested separately and they have to memorize their things and they do their tests together. When they actually learn together and come up with problems, problem solutions together, that actually creates a greater collective intelligence and that's one of the most important things that a child can learn right from the earliest age is to actually move to work with others to come up with solutions leading to those more pro-social behaviors.

And there's other things like that, there's the notion of education being more embodied. So again rather than trying to say that distinction we learned from Descartes about the mind being separate from the body, actually learn about stuff in the actual in the field. So go out into literally into the field if you're learning biology and actually look at how things work and actually feel into it rather than simply learn the theory before you actually sense what it's actually about. Now Jeremy you have been writing and talking about deep transformation.

Can you comment, share with us on the principles and practices of deep transformation? What are they and why do you think they're important? Yeah, yeah sure and that's actually the name of a course, an online course I offer in conjunction with Gaia Education, like a 10-week course with exactly that title. And so really what we mean by deep transformation is similar to the way I was talking about an ecological civilization and being at a

fundamentally different from our dominant civilization. Deep transformation really begins with the recognition that our own conditioning, our own ways of thinking and have arisen from having grown up in this worldview of our dominant culture.

And so one of the first things we do in this course on deep transformation is begin to look at how we actually form our worldview and begin to see this, begin to notice where the worldview of separation, that mechanistic worldview that is dominant, how it sort of infiltrates so many aspects of our life and begin to explore what things, how things might look and how different elements of society might look if we started from that place of deep interconnectedness.

And so the bulk of what I mean by deep transformation really looks at similar to how I described those questions about the web of meaning. Some of those fundamental questions of who am I, where am I, how should I live, start to look at each of those deep questions from this place of interdependence, this recognition of this different worldview and then explore what that actually means in terms of our lives, the meaning we make in our lives and ultimately how it means in terms of how we might engage with society. And that's a crucial part there because I've been talking a lot about how this dominant worldview is filled with separation. And one of the ways in which we see ourselves as separate is we see each of us as separate from the rest of the world.

So we might even think of things like philosophy or learning as being, that's my learning or my philosophy, it's separate from what else is out there. But once we begin to recognize our very identity is actually like a part, a fractal part of all of life that's out there. My identity as well as being a separate organism, I'm also part of community, I'm also part of all of humanity, I'm also part of all of life. And as we begin to explore that, it begins to lead us to want to engage in some of that societal transformation, because we see that life itself is under attack from what our civilization is doing right now.

So we begin to explore that not like sort of and feeling like, oh, I should get engaged in trying to make the world a better place because it's a good thing to do or whatever, but more that we begin to want to do that because our very identity is being under attack from the, and all the devastations going on in the world right now.

So this whole process leads to a place of engagement, ultimately leads to this place of how can each of us together co-create this possible pathway toward an ecological civilization?

In this transition towards an ecological civilization, what do you think is the role of ethical standards? Why is that important? You have been articulating some ideas around this too, right? Sure. Yeah, I think it's crucially important. Well, I think that maybe a way to answer that question is to start off with this recognition that our values themselves, our sense of morality or ethics, themselves arise from our sense of identity. And that's actually something I explore in the web of meaning itself, because like you can think about it like this, if I believe in what the neoliberal ideology tells me that I'm a separate individual, and that's all I am. So then my values will be all around things like libertarianism and my freedom to do whatever I want and screw anybody else and becomes a core value.

But if my identity is with community, then my values will be community-based values such as fairness and compassion for those around me.

And if my identity expands to involve all of humanity, then my values will just naturally turn to things like a sense of justice, a sense of equity for people who have been oppressed by what our civilization has done. And just finally, if I actually begin, there's this wonderful quote from Albert Schweitzer. He was a 20th century humanitarian, a Nobel Prize winner, who once said, as he expanded his sense of identity, he said, I am life that wills to live in the midst of life that wills to live. Such a beautiful quote. And to me, that's a great way of expressing that notion of your identity expanding to include all of life. And in his words, he said, once from that place, you cannot but have reverence for all that is alive. And that's the way in which values relates to identity.

So from that sense of this deep interconnectedness of all of life, well, the values naturally arise from that values of nonviolence and fund, yeah, a fundamental commitment to nonviolence, values of regeneration, of doing things in our life that actually helps not just that is sustainable, which itself is a good thing. But it goes beyond sustainable to regenerate it, where we're doing things that actually help the life and life to come back together again, values based on that sense of mutually beneficial symbiosis, values based on pro social activities, and cooperation. So this is where our sense of values naturally arise from that kind of different way of thinking. I like the way you put this notion of identity.

So you know the Earth Charter. And I would like to ask you if you could comment on the Earth Charter and how you think it could be used as an underlying basis or foundation of principles to help us in this task or challenge of moving towards ecological civilization. Yes, well, I'll tell you when I first came across the Earth Charter, and I was, I was just blown away. It was like such an important moment in my life because I came across it and it was like, yes, just a very realization that people somehow, I didn't know anything about it at that time, but somehow people from around the world, they come together and set this this foundational set of values and ethical principles in writing. And it was like, wow, it's incredible. To me, that is a foundation.

And if you will, almost like the foundation for the ethical framework for what an ecological civilization could be about. So really, I see the Earth Charter and these foundational ideas about an ecological civilization to be virtually identical.

I mean, very, very, very closely related. Yeah, just some of the fundamental statements we see in the Earth Charter about respect and care for the community of life, and, you know, protecting and restoring the integrity of the earth's ecological systems, for example, or like social and economic justice or values around democracy and nonviolence and peace. And these are absolutely values that come out of that realization of essentially that Alba writes a quote, that realization that we're all life. And that's what we that's what really our job as human beings is on this earth to really use that the technology use the power of our of our great collective intellect together to really work for the benefit of all of life and and for the benefit of all human beings on this earth.

And recognizing that those two are not one does not work against each other. Our current civilization believes and or starts on this gives us this really this false message that our

material well being comes in, we have to exploit and extract from the earth to get there. And but the Earth Charter sets us on this path of exploring what it look like if we actually built our civilization on that real foundation of what is right for all of us. Just why the very name of it is the Earth Charter starts from there from from that basis.

Well, we are coming to an end. I would like to ask you if you want to share just any last comment you may have on this idea of the importance for us to look at our worldviews to be aware to question our assumptions. Yeah, to help us in this. I would even say this is an element for the new paradigm of education to to help us unveil our worldviews and question them.

Something that we normally don't do, I guess. We don't really realize we have certain assumptions in our views. So can you can you comment on the role of worldviews and how we can bring that question into education, realm of education? Yes, well, I think that probably the most important place to begin is by simply recognizing that there is such a thing as a worldview. It's a little bit like imagine fish in the ocean and they'll spend their entire lives swimming around in the water and they'll have no idea that there's such a thing as water. That's just what life is, right?

Because that's that's that's that's all they know. And in a way, our worldview is a little bit like that. It's a little bit like the lens through which we see things. So in just the same way that we don't realize that our eye is actually a lens. And in fact, things we're told are upside down and our retina sort of changes the order and all these things. But once we discover that there is such a thing as a lens, we can then say, oh, what would things look like if I look through another lens? And and and so once we recognize that things we take for granted are actually part of our worldview, and it frees us up to begin to explore other worldviews. And it frees us up to sort of look at other traditions or other ways of thinking with a place of curiosity and an openness to explore in different ways.

So I feel that starting from that recognition as key, and I feel having curiosity to try to understand how things might how things might look different if they were actually if we live with each other, interacted with each other and built a society around life affirming principles is crucially important. And maybe just to close on that is this realization that once we see our deep interdependence, the sense that the the way that things are going to unfold in the future is not something that is separate from us, that each of us are actually part of co creating that future.

It's not like some spectator sport like where we're in the stands where cheering on the the good side, whatever, we're actually part of that sport itself, the very, the very ways in which we think the ways in which we express ourselves, the small daily decisions we make, are part of what will actually lead our world on this path of destruction or lead it towards that beautiful potentially life affirming future.

So that's the thing I feel to share with everyone to realize that that sense of being part of something so much bigger comes with in a sense there's a freedom that that gives you because it means you don't have to change the world yourself, you're part of a much bigger set of people like but you but it also gives you a sense of responsibility that actually as

part of that, what each of us does makes a difference. And so then let's each of us look at how we ourselves can actually work towards that life affirming future.

Well thank you so much Jeremy Lent for being here with us today. Thank you for the work you do, the book, the web of meaning, which is a great contribution. And thank you for your efforts to help us clarify this narrative, this view, a vision about ecological civilization. Thank you so much.

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