Practicing Environmental Right Action

This talk continues to explore the topic introduced during the Dharma talk of February 17, 2022: “How Do You Want to Live?”. We are witnessing what is the most radically changing period of human history as a result of vast technological and cultural developments, with the consequential environmental changes. Buddhist principles and practices offer very useful ethical and applicable self-awareness and self-discipline skills to effectively adapt, at least personally.

The severity of the situation is memorably described in a speech before the United Nations on September 23, 2019 by Greta Thunberg, a well-known advocate for environmental action. Here is her reply when asked what young people want of the adults of the world:

"My message is that we'll be watching you.

"This is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!

"You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

"For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight.

"You say you hear us and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept on failing to act, then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe.

"The popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees [Celsius], and the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control.

"Fifty percent may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice. They also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO2 out of the air with technologies that barely exist.

"So a 50% risk is simply not acceptable to us — we who have to live with the consequences.

"To have a 67% chance of staying below a 1.5 degrees global temperature rise – the best odds given by the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] – the world had 420 gigatons of CO2 left to emit back on Jan. 1st, 2018. Today that figure is already down to less than 350 gigatons.

"How dare you pretend that this can be solved with just 'business as usual' and some technical solutions? With today's emissions levels, that remaining CO2 budget will be entirely gone within less than 8 1/2 years.

"There will not be any solutions or plans presented in line with these figures here today, because these numbers are too uncomfortable. And you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is.

"You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.

"We will not let you get away with this. Right here, right now is where we draw the line. The world is waking up. And change is coming, whether you like it or not.

"Thank you."

This speech was delivered 4 years ago, and the amounts of CO2 emitted since then have been actually increasing. This is dukkha on a biospheric scale!

The amount of distress and confusion associated with global warming is reported within a poll conducted by the American Psychiatric Association:

**WASHINGTON, D.C., Oct. 21, 2020 –** More than two-thirds of Americans (67%) are somewhat or extremely anxious about the impact of climate change on the planet, and more than half (55%\*) are somewhat or extremely anxious about the impact of climate change on their own mental health, according to [a new poll out today](https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/apa-public-opinion-poll-2020) from the American Psychiatric Association (APA)…

…Across generations, the majority of adults agree climate change is already impacting our health and mental health. Younger adults are more likely to be concerned about climate change on mental health than older adults: 67% of Gen Zers (18-23 years) and 63% of millennials (24-39 years) are somewhat or very concerned about the impact of climate change on their mental health compared to 42% of baby boomers (56-74 years) and 58% of Gen Xers (40-55 years).

The sociocultural impact is also reflected in an article published by the New York Times on March 10, 2022: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/03/09/us/mental-health-climate-change.html>

A basic principle of Buddhism involves *interdependence* or *interbeing*, which is a different way to describe *anatta, the absence of an enduring/autonomous self*. Contemporary scientific research confirms this insightful view, describing in multiple ways how human activities on the planet disrupt literally millions of years of the planet’s homeostasis. This can be related to complexity theory, which proposes the often-repeated concept regarding the weather: “When a butterfly flaps it’s wings in China, it can cause a hurricane in the Caribbean.” The research focuses on the biosphere, which ranges from the atmosphere to the depths of the oceans and includes all of life, from the microscopic amoebas to the whales, also including all the plant life on the planet.

Many scientists now propose we are witnessing the onset of the Anthropocene Era, comparable to the Jurassic or other extended periods of evolutionary time on the planet. Humans created this phenomenon, and hopefully we can modify the trajectory of it through wisdom and discipline, and this is where Buddhist principles and practices can play an important role, beginning with the Karmic choices we make every day.

I have been studying the Four Noble Truths conceptually for nearly half a century, and the more I practice cultivating the Noble Eightfold Path, the more ways I understand the usefulness of the concepts. Here is a possible application of the teaching:

*The First Noble Truth is Dukkha*, which I interpret to constitute *distress* and *confusion*. This plays out across the world in terms of Dukkha for the biosphere. The storms that move about the planet are increasingly destructive, and this can be understood as *distress*. There degree of environmental pollution of the soil and water is another manifestation of *distress*. The ignorance of the population, particularly those of us who have an education and know what effects global warming has, represents the *confusion*.

*The Second Noble Truth is the action of craving and clinging*, through greed, hatred and ignorance regarding the consequences of our daily lifestyle choices. In the Twelve Step movement of Alcoholics Anonymous, they use this memorable phrase to describe addiction: “Insanity is doing the same thing over again, while expecting different results.” The addictive characteristics of consumerism, which was described during the last Dharma talk on March 9, 2022, and is posted in the archives of orlandoinsightmeditation.org, are significant contributors to the currently emerging crisis.

*The Third Noble Truth is traditionally represented as liberation from Dukkha*. Even on a personal level, this is the work of a lifetime; classic Buddhist teachings insist that multiple rebirths are necessary to achieve full liberation. It will definitely take multiple generations of wise human beings behaving differently to enact sufficient lifestyle changes to save the biosphere.

*The Fourth Noble Truth, the Noble Eightfold Path*, *provides the concepts and training that enables the necessary lifestyle changes:*

* **Wisdom**—**Right Understanding** involves knowing how our choices impact the biosphere. **Right Intention** provides a benevolent orientation that considers the well-being of all the flora and fauna affected by global warming and environmental pollution.
* **Virtue**—**Right Speech** involves cultivating significantly different “selfing stories” about what constitutes a good life. It also involves careful listening regarding the indoctrination that we are all subject to by those whose greed and ignorance is in conflict with the necessary lifestyle changes required around the world to make things right ecologically. **Right Action** involves developing alternative ways of living that reduce the “carbon footprint” we leave on the planet, as well as the toxic waste that goes into the earth and water. I prefer to term the traditional **Right Livelihood** as **Right Lifestyle**, in order to acknowledge that our definitions of a happy life and the ways we go about realizing that must be significantly modified now and over the next several generations.
* **Mental Training**—**Right Effort** involves the ability to reorganize the trajectory of our thoughts towards more environmentally responsible actions. **Right Mindfulness** is, of course, a key factor in reorganizing our day-by-day lifestyle choices to be more environmentally friendly, a truly life changing process. **Right Concentration** is the ability to maintain a coherent, well-informed and effective mind-set for accomplishing the necessary changes.

Here are some suggestions about changes that can be made on a domestic, personal level:

*Potential readings* might include “The Ministry for the Future”, a science fiction/science fact book by Kim Stanley Robinson that describes how the world might come together to intervene in the pace of global warming. I found it to be informative and inspirational. Another useful choice is “Voluntary Simplicity—Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich”, by Duane Elgin. “Diet For a Small Planet”, by Frances Moore Lappe, which I read about 40 years ago, convinced me to give up eating meat, not for purely spiritual reasons, but rather to reduce the waste of energy and the toxic byproducts of commercial cattle, chicken and pig farming.

*Consider some sort of home farming*, such as that which was encouraged during the Great Depression and WWII. Even if you just grow a tomato plant in a pot. This creates a mind-set that is beneficial. I have, over the last several decades, practice home farming; it is quite rewarding for my health, and I enjoy walking into my back yard to eat whatever fruit or vegetables might be ripe.

*Consider buying a hybrid or electric vehicle*, which we did back in 2010. We are also replacing the photoelectric panels on our south-facing roof to capture solar energy—we will not make money on the deal—I consider the investment and resulting power generation to be reparation for the biosphere for all the CO2 and pollution my actions have created.

*Conscientious recycling of appropriate plastic objects and metal containers*. We can also make more mindful choices regarding the use of water, avoiding automatic sprinkler systems and taking briefer showers. Avoid toxic insecticides outdoors, as these can kill bees and other beneficial creatures within the biosphere.

*Contact your governmental representatives, local, state and federal*, demanding legislative actions. This may seem futile initially, but as more people actively apply political and social pressure, change can happen.

Here are the comments that Steve Perlman provided during the talk that are relevant to the topic:

Hi Peter,

You mentioned Greta Thunberg's address to the UN a few years ago. She refers to the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), which I follow and recommend for scientific research. IPCC Working Group II recently released (Feb 2022): Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability Summary For Policymakers:

<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

Also recommended, two recent films available on Netflix: David Attenborough, "A Life On Our Planet"

Johan Rockstrom/David Attenborough, "Breaking Boundaries"

Published in Sustainability (Jul 2021): "An Analysis of the Potential for Formation of Nodes of Persisting Complexity"

<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/15/8161/pdf>

Discussion of the Holocene period (10,000 years) and 'The Great Acceleration' of society during the past 70 years, pushing the Earth System and the biosphere out of equilibrium and into the Anthropocene (human civilization acting as a major force at global scale), exceeding planetary limits and led by the cultural factors of wealth accumulation and consumerism in affluent society.

Best wishes,

Steve