

A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency and the Related Suffering of Sentient Beings

by Kokyo Henkel, February 2022

Though there are many problems and causes of suffering in the world today, it looks to me like the climate emergency is the greatest challenge that humanity has ever faced. Of course, with so many other issues like war, violent crime, disease, poverty, oppression, racism, sexism, etc., not everyone may agree that the climate crisis surpasses them all. All these other issues have been around since the beginning of humanity, but could also be seen as slowly and steadily improving over the centuries – for example, world leaders meeting together and negotiating peace treaties, increased law enforcement against crime, development of modern medicine, world trade and emergency aid, greater awareness of social blind spots such as slavery, citizens' protest movements against injustice, etc. However, the destruction of the natural environment on a massive scale, including deforestation, toxicity of oceans, radioactive waste, exponential population growth, rapid extinction of many species, melting of polar icecaps, sea level rise, increase in large wildfires and storms, and all the various and as-yet-unknown consequences of climate change, have never been seen before by humans on this planet. Although there is not yet agreement on the timeline of devastation, many scientists, world leaders, and citizens now agree that climate change may be already irreversible, and that it is no longer unrealistic to consider the imminent demise of the human race in addition to countless other species – the “sixth mass extinction” on this planet.

Though I don't know what THE Buddhist response to this situation would be, I offer here A Buddhist response, from my limited point of view. From a Dharma perspective, the root of all suffering, for ourselves and others, is “selfism”: the unconscious misperception and belief that I myself am more important than other “selves.” Buddha-Dharma directly addresses the false belief in a separate self through understanding, practice, and verification of “no separate self.” Based on the root delusion of separate self, all greed and hate emerge in the form of familyism (my family is more important than other families), tribalism (my tribe, or sangha, is more important than other tribes), classism, nationalism, racism, sexism, and speciesism (my species is more important than other species). Even the widespread unconscious bias of speciesism is simply an extension of the root cause of selfism: “I” identify with the human species as my larger “self” which seems inherently more valuable and worthy of protection than other forms of life.

Understanding the depth of our collective human delusion, as Buddhist practitioners we can start with the practice of opening to the painful facts of the climate emergency. This includes calling it for what it is, an “emergency” or “crisis,” rather than simply “climate change” or even the gentle sounding “global warming.” There are countless resources on the web to learn of the disturbing facts, which are constantly changing. For example, one mainstream source is: <https://climate.nasa.gov/>. It is painful to open to the facts of the climate crisis, which may be one reason so few people are interested in doing so. Indeed, it can be overwhelming and generate a feeling of hopelessness. However, as Dharma practitioners with the bodhisattva vow to relieve all suffering, it is part of our work to courageously open to all suffering, and become aware of more and more personal and societal blind spots. Another reason for resistance to opening to this realm is because it can sound abstract to many people. If we see a news image of a black man being killed, this is very tangible and easily touches us deeply. But discussions about degrees of temperature and carbon amounts in the atmosphere don't have the same kind of impact. We need to look beneath such numbers to the tangible devastating effects in the present, and those coming in the future.

Secondly, after opening to the painful facts, we can come to deeply accept the dependent-arising of the climate crisis. The Buddha teaches that all phenomena arise dependent on a vast array of particular conditions, and the changing climate demonstrates this perfectly. If we are living the way we do, on a limited planet with too many people, of course these effects are happening. We can understand this, accept the truth of what is happening, and know that all of us are part of its causality. This kind of acceptance is not a passive resignation, but a realistic view of how things come to be. Based on this deep trust in cause-and-effect, we can creatively join the web of causality in a more and more appropriate way.

Thirdly, after opening to the facts and accepting cause-and-effect, we can look to and follow the example of the buddhas and ancestral teachers, who didn't tell other people what to do or how to practice (the Buddha only gave a teaching after being asked three times to do so), but lived lives of integrity, naturally setting an example for others. Though we can complain about large destructive corporations and blame them for the crisis, of course we humans as individual consumers are the only reason such large corporations exist. The heart of Buddhist practice is to not blame others, but to look more deeply at the way we each create conditions for suffering. With deep trust in cause-and-effect, we can take more and more responsibility for our own individual human part in the vast complex web of the climate emergency. The main practical activity to investigate, the moment most vital to pay attention to causality, is any time we pull out a coin, dollar, or credit card. Every purchase we make, no matter how small or insignificant, sets in motion a chain of cause and effect. Particularly, our daily consumption of food, clothing, lodging, and transportation adds up to massive effects over the course of a lifetime. Living with integrity means simply to align one's bodily actions (in this case, handing over money) with one's deepest values. Living without integrity is to be in denial or cognitive dissonance. One person living with integrity will not end the climate crisis, but it may inspire others and it brings Dharma joy. When the Buddha was asked why he still lived a homeless life in the forest when completely awakened and no longer capable of suffering, he replied, "Because I enjoy living in the forest, and because it sets a good example for future generations."

Greenhouse gas emissions, the main cause of the climate crisis, can be divided into the following sources in the U.S.: electricity 32% (from coal and natural gas), transportation 28% (gas), industrial production 20%, home and business climate control 10% (gas), livestock (methane) 10%. Though livestock production is significant but not the highest source of emissions (some sources say it may be anywhere from 10-50%), refraining from eating meat not only reduces climate impact and other environmental impacts such as deforestation and water use, but also has a direct impact on each animal not slaughtered. If one hands over money to buy meat, that money is directly paying for an animal to be killed for oneself. Clearly, each individual animal is not killed for anyone other than the individual consumer who pays for it. In this way, the simple act of not buying meat, especially over the course of a lifetime, is preventing the slaughter of countless animals. I emphasize this here, since from a Buddhist perspective, because all sentient beings equally share in the mystery of buddha-nature, attending to this particular stream of cause-and-effect is at the heart of the practical expression of the bodhisattva vow.

Admittedly, many lifestyle changes that would greatly reduce climate change if adopted by many are quite "inconvenient." They require a little extra time, attention, work, and sometimes discomfort. Going back to root of "selfism," these extra burdens for "me" could be seen as the real fuel for the climate crisis. However, if we have deep trust in cause-and-effect, and are open and aware of our individual place in this vast web, it may be more joyful to live with integrity and inconvenience than with denial and a bit more comfort. The practice of Buddha-Dharma, when it's really working, naturally brings more contentment with less consumption. The simple joy of just "being" becomes more and more apparent, and the illusion that happiness comes from getting more "stuff" becomes more and more exposed and seen through. Thus, naturally, Dharma practice benefits oneself as well as the whole ecosystem. Even if our individual lifestyle choices as consumers never seem to make even a tiny dent in the climate crisis, even if we are inevitably witnessing the last centuries of the human race and many other species on this planet, living with integrity is no less beautiful. Though the Buddha couldn't convince everyone to live in a more wholesome and joyful way, he never gave up his own wholesome and joyful way of life.

Finally, though it may not have a tangible effect on the climate, to spend time in wild nature is deeply healing for modern humans. It could be argued that our increasingly mechanized, high-speed, urban-based lifestyle, and our alienation from wild places (especially in first-world countries), is at the heart of the problem. To simply remember that humans are not the central and most important beings on this planet is itself transformative. On a practical note, here is a list of consumer items I try to pay particular attention to, though I don't always accord with my own values completely. I offer this list as some ways I like to trust cause-and-effect and joyfully give up a little convenience – not as a way to tell others what they should do. May all practitioners of Buddha's Way discover their own blind spots in the web of cause-and-effect and find their own unique expression of joyful integrity in the midst of this unprecedented crisis.

Food (an entire human lifetime of purchasing daily food creates large effects)

vegan (no meat, dairy products, eggs, leather, silk; livestock contribute 10-50% of all greenhouse gas)

unpackaged (especially no PVC blister packs or other plastic; “recyclable” plastic is no longer true)

organic (uses no petroleum fertilizers and pesticides, which also degrade soil)

local or home-grown (reduces transportation fuel)

seasonal (needs no refrigerated storage)

non-GMO (no genetically modified organisms)

fair trade (especially bananas, chocolate, coffee, and other third-world products)

whole grains and whole foods (avoid junk food, soda, and alcohol which are wasteful to produce)

free (50% of U.S. fruits and vegetables are wasted; Food Not Bombs distributes free leftover vegan food)

Transportation (an entire human lifetime of transportation creates large effects)

walk, bike, use public transit (train, bus), carpool, avoid flying (purchase carbon offsets at Terrapass, etc.)

if need to drive, consider a used electric/hybrid car, combine errands, don't carry extra weight

Home Energy Use (an entire human lifetime of home energy use creates large effects)

use minimum residential heating, air-conditioning (if above 58°, below 88° in house), insulate, use blinds

turn down water heater to minimum setting (if need to mix with cold water it's too hot), insulate heater

turn down refrigerator and freezer to minimum setting (refrigerator uses significant energy)

boil only as much water as needed, cook larger quantities of food (such as soup) and re-heat as needed

use oven only when it's full, or bake several things in a row

wash dishes by hand instead of electric dishwasher, using dishpan to save hot water

wash clothes in cold water, dry clothes in sun (electric clothes dryer uses significant energy)

use compact florescent light bulbs

turn off electric appliances when not in use, minimize electricity use, consider heating only one room

purchase renewable energy (join Arcadia Power at no extra cost for carbon-free renewable electricity)

Water (city water systems require energy-intensive treatment plants, heating water uses fuel)

shower only twice a week (especially in winter) and don't shave in shower

install low-flow showerhead and faucets

wash dishes by hand, use dishpan to save water, don't leave water running when washing dishes

flush toilet only when there are solids in it

use leftover water from cooking, dishwashing to water plants (Oasis soap & Dr. Bronners OK for garden)

plant only drought-resistant plants

repair water leaks promptly and minimize water use

Refuse, Reduce, Reuse, Recycle (consider any consumer products, ideally in that order)

question all purchases, buy used whenever possible, rent when needed, simplify life as much as possible

reuse plastic bags and ties for bulk food, use reusable shopping bags, reuse plastic wrap & aluminum foil

compost food scraps and use compost for garden or give to a friend with a compost bin or garden

wash, shave, and clean with organic unpackaged watered-down vegetable oil soap (bulk Dr. Bronner's)

purchase used and unpackaged clothing, kitchen utensils, books, etc.

use scrap paper or 100% post-consumer waste paper

use electric devices that can be charged by USB plug, or only rechargeable batteries when needed

maintain and repair everything until it cannot be used any more, patch clothing

Other (this list is truly endless; see website at end of page for relative impact of various actions)

use cleaning and body products that are unpackaged (refilled from bulk) and not tested on animals

use refilled printer ink to save plastic cartridges (Rapid Refill, etc.)

bring personal coffee cup to cafe, avoid disposal cups

grow organic food, plant trees

use internet or libraries to download or borrow books, CDs, DVDs, magazines, newspapers

invest only in environmentally and socially responsible companies and banks (Green Century Funds, etc.)

vote, sign online petitions to protect environment and animals (Friends of the Earth, 350.org, Avaaz, etc.)

do not produce more children on an extremely overpopulated planet (or, adopt children who need a home)

volunteer work for environment, animals... www.kimnicholas.com/uploads/2/5/7/6/25766487/fig1full.jpg