Climate Emergency and the Role of the Dhamma

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 14:50

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammā Sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

A couple of moons ago, I was tackling the whole idea of social conditioning and how it becomes our karma—in the sense that we have to take full responsibility for the conditioning that we've been given and try to sort it out. Then I tackled the problem of neoliberalism and how mindfulness was being used to further their agenda. And so the third thing to tackle, I think, which everybody's probably very concerned about, is the environment and social collapse.

I thought I'd give a resume of where we are and then say how we can approach it.

In 2015, during the first nine months, global mean warming reached one degree centigrade above pre-industrial times. That was an important moment, and of course, it's continuing to climb. Here in the UK on the 19th of July, we passed 40 degrees—I think for the first time ever. As you know, there's a huge drought at the moment all over Europe and massive floods in Australia. I was talking to a friend out there; it peaked at 14.4 meters high. Isn't that unbelievable? That's about three or four double-decker buses. The amount of water that must have been dropped is beyond imagination. These are all little signs preparing us for what's to come, and we're not seeing very much action about it.

It reminds you a little bit of Britain before the Second World War, where Chamberlain did his best to bring about peace for our time. He'd lived through the First World War and just didn't want to see the horror of war again. But of course, he was duped by Hitler, and he died shortly after he declared war.

At the moment, we've got all these terrible things going on apart from Ukraine and China. There's a terrible incident in America with Salman Rushdie being stabbed, and I was quoting him saying that he was concerned about democracy in the US. I think that's there as well.

Perhaps most disturbing is the general mood of the age, the zeitgeist, slowly moving away from liberal democracy to illiberal democracy—in other words, fascism, some form of authoritarianism. Many people were shocked by this Orbán movement, saying things like "we are not a mixed race and we do not want to become a mixed race." They are a mixed race—they're a combination of Huns, who were Mongoloid, and Turkic peoples, the same as Turkey. I don't know what he's going on about. He then went on to say that countries where European and non-Europeans mingle are no longer nations, and then he went off to

America to give a talk to his buddies. The fact that a head of state in the EU can actually say that, and obviously there will be many people who will support him—that's the thing—really shows us where we're moving towards.

As these pressures grow, I'm reminded again of that poem by W.B. Yeats, "The Second Coming." It's got this wonderful line: "The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." You just get the feel.

And our reaction—well, my reaction anyway—I've been very gloomy. I had two or three conversations where on two occasions I had to get in touch with them again and apologize for being so gloomy about the situation.

So it's a case, I think, of beginning to realize that we have to see this situation from a spiritual point of view. To deny it, to devote ourselves to escapism—sex, drugs, and rock and roll—or to become despondent and uncaring, disengaged, that's just going to lead to some sort of despair eventually. There's the fear that grows in us and a sense of panic, and again, that can lead to even suicidal feelings.

There was a case in 1938 where Orson Welles adapted the H.G. Wells novel *War of the Worlds*, and it began without telling anybody that it was a play.

It was presented as if it were a real broadcast announcing that the Martians had landed. People fled their homes in great numbers. Fortunately, nobody committed suicide, but it demonstrates what happens when something grips a population in that way.

In a sense, we've got to tackle these responses within ourselves. The other major feeling that might arise, of course, is anger. I thought I would read the Kakachupama Sutta, which translates as the Simile of the Saw. The Buddha says:

"Even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb from limb, with a two-handed saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: 'Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of goodwill and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with goodwill. And beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.' That's how you should train yourselves.

"Monks"—and by the way, monks means everybody—"if you attend constantly to this admonition on the Simile of the Saw, do you see any aspect of speech, slight or gross, that you could not endure?"

"No, Lord."

"Then attend constantly to this admonition of the Simile of the Saw. That will be for your long-term welfare and happiness."

That is what the Blessed One said, and gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One's words.

I once read that out in a talk, and somebody said, "The Buddha had a great sense of humor." It is very difficult for us to follow that command. But in fact, all these emotional states that we might suffer from—the sense of fear, of not wanting to face reality as it comes, and of anger—the question to ask ourselves is: in what way is it helping? How does it help me? How does it help anybody else? That inquiry immediately, hopefully, cuts through the catastrophizing. We simply stay with the present moment, with what's actually happening.

Even if millions of people start to die from lack of food, from thirst due to drought, from overheating—even though that looks, from a total point of view, really quite apocalyptic—we have to remind ourselves that we all die singly. We all die just ourselves. We're alone when we die. Some will die in very painful situations. Others will die in beatitude. These are all still individual deaths. And again, we're left with the question: what can we do? We have to accept the limits of our ability, of our power, and even of our influence.

Beginning to see this whole situation as an opportunity for spiritual growth means we know we can benefit from it. We might have to come to that difficult realization that there's not going to be a cure for this situation, and all we can do is care. It's a bit like when somebody has a progressive illness, a chronic or even terminal illness. There's no cure. But you can develop care. And that means friendship, and at times even rejoicing. And of course, definitely compassion.

That's really where our spiritual practice is taking us. We have to look upon this growing situation as an opportunity for that. Otherwise, I can't see anything but despair.

This talk is an introduction to the six forums that Noreen will be leading, based on those six maxims sent last month by Schenck and Churchill. We're also going to circulate an essay written by Gwen Sanderson, one of our trustees, who is very much involved in addressing climate change and social breakdown. There's now a whole university study on collapsology, and she attended a meeting on this subject and wrote about it for us. Once that essay is circulated, we'll have a meeting on Zoom on the 12th of September—an opportunity for people to share their feelings, to explore their thoughts and feelings about all of this.

So that's what will happen in the near future.

The situation may get worse—indeed, it will get worse. There's no way we're going to stop it. So it's a case of really looking into ourselves and making that special effort to see it from a spiritual angle, to see it from a place which is going to give us that basic hope—that there is an end to suffering and that we can actually achieve it.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance, that they have not doomed you too much, and that you see the light at the end of the tunnel. May your practice liberate you from all suffering, sooner

rather than later.

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