Learning from Climate Change

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 42:22

I was recently at a gathering of teachers from America and Europe at Spirit Rock. The main theme of this gathering was how we can incorporate climate change into the teaching. Most of all, how can we speak about it without making people feel so uncomfortable that they don't want to come back?

This is a kind of conundrum, because if we really want to speak honestly about the situation, then if you don't feel uncomfortable when you think about it, you either have worked through a lot of this material already or you are completely cut off. It's a very complex issue and very complex to communicate. I have read extensively about it and try to translate it into simple language, attempting to communicate what I feel is going on. I feel very concerned.

When I think about teaching, there's actually nothing else I'd like to speak about in terms of Dhamma, of course. But this is for me the most burning issue. Everything else pales in front of the theme of climate change, I feel.

Polls conducted last year indicate that about seventy percent of people here in America consider that climate change is a real issue and that we have a big problem. But at the same time, those people, most of them, also think that we don't stand a chance, really, and that we don't know what to do—which is actually completely wrong. Because we know very well what we need to do. We do have the know-how and we do have the skills to do it.

But there's this emotional block that all of us—I can observe it even in myself, of course—experience when we hear of something big happening, something that is forever changing our situation. Like a shock, so to say, when a loved one dies, or when you suddenly receive a diagnosis that you have cancer, or maybe you have a big accident. This is so big that usually it takes us some time to really take it in. A shock is occurring—trauma.

Then we tend, normally we tend to shut down and go into disbelief for some time. There are different phases of how an average human being works through traumatic news. It starts with disbelief and then anger, and then if we don't stop there, if we really digest it, if we let it sink into our being, then we emerge from it usually strengthened. Because these issues of old age, sickness and death, impermanence—this is just part and parcel of being a human being. And because it is part and parcel of being a human being, we do have the innate strength and also intelligence to deal with those things if we open ourselves to it rather than turning away from it.

Around climate change there are so many very confusing messages given out. Scientists tell us the

situation is really urgent, affecting every detail of our lives—from water and air and food, there's nothing which is exempt. There are these big corporations which are still interested to not change their ways of producing and selling goods, and they try to dilute this information. So there's a lot of confusing information, and people find it difficult to know what to believe. Even people who come here usually, I think, are better informed and have more capacity to open up to very inconvenient truth.

But actually, being a human being living in the world, discomfort always holds a message for us. For example, if we are going too close to fire, it becomes very hot. We feel this is dangerous, and this is good information. If we don't have this information, if we don't take this discomfort to heart and see what it is telling us, we will not be able to make it for a long time. So nature is built like this—discomfort has information for us.

We can develop what's called in system theory a feedback loop, a negative feedback loop. We get a sign of discomfort and then we adjust our way of going about life. When the next sign comes, we adjust again and again, and through that we can stay on course. At the moment we are getting huge, huge signs that the worldviews we are living by are not any more adequate to the conditions.

But those signs and those situations have been with us human beings since we have lived in the caves. There were always times when the old way of living wasn't any more adequate and there was a lot of dissonance. And then we had to make a shift. So it's not like this is happening for the first time. It has happened many, many times, and we have come a long way.

Human beings like us, similar to us, have lived on this planet for about 250,000 years. That's how we have evolved from using very simple stone tools and living in caves to living like we live now. We have always taken these negative feedback loops as a ladder, really, to climb up, so to say, in terms of developing skills which are very complex.

So evolution has this inbuilt intelligence and we are part of it. There is something much bigger happening than just what a human brain can understand. There's something much bigger happening than we can objectify or really conceptualize. We have to also try to work with this intuition. It's not that we have to throw away all of our intelligence or our reasoning.

reasoning overboard, but we need to balance it with our intuition, with what the heart knows. I found a very beautiful insight from Thomas Berry, an American priest who was also one of the first eco-philosophers in America. He says, "The universe itself is the primary sacred scripture."

The evolution of the universe from the Big Bang until today tells the story. We don't necessarily need religious scriptures—we can simply witness this amazing process, which is like one great example of impermanence and one magnificent example of something far greater than ourselves, of which we are part.

But the dominant worldview in our consumerist society, so heavily influenced by technology and rational

thinking, is actually from the 17th and 18th centuries. It is no longer adequate for the conditions we face now. When this worldview entered the mainstream, there was only about a fifth of the current global population. There was still a stable climate and abundant resources—at that time, one could live this way.

This was called the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment, which began in Europe with René Descartes and in England with Isaac Newton. They were emerging from the Middle Ages, when large portions of society were oppressed by aristocracy and the church. People were fed up after living under such conditions for hundreds of years, and they insisted they could think for themselves. This kind of thinking had its place then—it was necessary to break free from an earlier worldview that had lost its validity.

We have been living with this Age of Reason thinking for three or four hundred years now. But conditions have changed dramatically. There are many more people on this planet, and we can no longer live as if everyone can simply think for themselves. We must return to a way of thinking where we consider ourselves as "we" rather than just "me," because there are too many people and too few resources. This old way of operating is outmoded.

Yet our media, politicians, and educational systems still function according to these outdated principles. We too have been taught this way—that we are on top of this planet and can manipulate everything. If we just study hard and become skillful and intelligent, we can make lots of money, be truly safe, and remain in control. This is how I was taught.

Now we find ourselves fully immersed in a situation where this simply isn't the case. Despite all the intelligence we thought we possessed, there were so many things we didn't consider because we couldn't see them—countless details of the complex web of life that makes up this planet and of which we are part. For example, just one small thing stops functioning, one kind of insect dies out, and then certain natural processes cease, crops fail. It's such an amazing system because it's all interconnected. With our limited brains, still functioning perhaps as they did in the 17th and 18th centuries, we cannot comprehend it all.

This is why I find Thomas Berry's quote so beautiful: the universe itself is the primary sacred scripture because it contains inherent guidance and meaning. It breaks all our concepts of how things work because we cannot understand it with the thinking mind alone—it's far too vast. But we can trust it if we have heart, if we can respect it and open ourselves to it, even when we don't understand it intellectually. There is something much more powerful than what the thinking mind can grasp, and the time has come when we all must be willing to remain uncomfortable long enough for this process to unfold.

We receive the news, we listen to talks like this, we read excellent books, and the information enters our brains, our intellect. But then we must truly be with it, sit with it, and digest it. This involves a certain amount of discomfort—feeling guilty, feeling despair, not knowing what to do. But if we don't allow that process to happen, we will never know what to do. The capacity to know what to do, the strength to act, and the will to act—these arise from taking in the news and digesting it.

This has happened many times in your life, I'm sure. Perhaps not about climate change, but other uncomfortable truths. There have been several instances in my life when I first heard difficult news and thought, "This is the end of the life I wanted to live. I'm no longer interested because this is too painful. I don't want to deal with this." But when I had no choice other than accepting it—because we can struggle against reality, but it doesn't change—accepting it and opening to it, sometimes after years, I realized that it was actually a stepping stone to greater maturity, wisdom, and compassion. These experiences shattered my previous understanding of what had to be in place for me to be happy.

I believe this so-called climate crisis, which is here right now and will remain for many generations to deal with and clean up, is simultaneously a great learning opportunity. This is how this miraculous cosmos seems to work—again and again, it comes to what we might call a bottleneck, but it doesn't stop there. Species or systems that cannot adapt to the shift simply transform into something else.

You've probably heard that we are currently in the midst of what's called the sixth mass extinction since the Big Bang.

And you know, the last one was when a meteor struck planet Earth before the dinosaurs emerged. That massive collision caused tremendous loss of life, filling the sky with so much ash that sunlight couldn't penetrate. The planet cooled dramatically for millions of years, food became scarce, and countless species perished. Yet after that devastation came another explosion of life. This pattern has repeated six times throughout Earth's history.

We find ourselves in the midst of the sixth mass extinction now, evidenced by the accelerated rate of species loss since the Industrial Revolution. The pace far exceeds natural background extinction rates, and there's overwhelming scientific consensus—about 97% of climate scientists agree—that human activity drives this crisis.

For the longest time, we simply didn't know. But over the past thirty years, the message has gradually spread: our actions are directly connected to these changes. If we continue on this trajectory, we risk eliminating ourselves as well. Yet we genuinely do have a choice.

The crucial point is viewing this entire situation within a much broader context. What learning does the climate crisis actually support? What is it calling us toward?

The learning involves stepping beyond the edge of reason—that worldview which served humanity well in transitioning from medieval times into the Enlightenment, but which has now reached its limitations. The Enlightenment paradigm treats the world as a machine and human beings as little machines running around, assuming that once we understand all the mechanical laws, we'll achieve complete control.

Obviously, this approach isn't working. If we truly were in control, we wouldn't have generated such massive pollution. If we possessed real mastery, we would have created something far more beautiful. The truth is we're not in control because we can only recognize certain depths of the process. We simply

cannot fathom the mystery of this universe.

We're awakening to the recognition that we are actually part of it. We're not positioned above it, observing and manipulating from some external vantage point. That doesn't work—we're far too small-minded for such a role. More fundamentally, that's not our place because we belong within the web of existence.

The climate crisis serves as the very impetus that can provide the energy to catapult ourselves into the next worldview. We can cooperate with this movement, flow along with it, or simply pretend it's not happening and turn away, going down in flames.

I've brought some quotes that I find deeply inspiring. One comes from Thich Nhat Hanh, who has written about these issues for decades: "When we recognize the virtues, the talent, the beauty of Mother Earth, something is born in us. Some kind of connection. Love is born. We want to be connected. That is the meaning of love—to be at one. You would do anything for the benefit of the earth, and the earth will do anything for your well-being."

Another voice is Arne Naess, the Norwegian eco-philosopher, speaking as a scientist: "When we perceive our deeper identity as an ecological self that includes not just us, but also all life on Earth, then acting for the sake of our world doesn't seem like a sacrifice. It seems a natural thing to do."

This points toward opening ourselves to a deeper identity by moving through the discomfort, sitting with the dissonance that arises when we encounter this information. Often guilt, shock, panic, and many other feelings surface. If we can truly sit with these responses...

There's a wonderful woman named Joanna Macy who teaches extensively about this process. She's also taught at Spirit Rock.

She lives in Berkeley. She's in her eighties, and she's been working with this issue for forty years or so. She's a Buddhist, and she brings in a lot of Buddhist technology—the technology of meditation and of opening to one's feelings, to one's emotions, and through digesting them, coming to know what to do as an individual, because we all have a different role to play.

She speaks about opening to the pain for our world, and opening to all of the powerful emotions that can be triggered through this information. Not being ashamed for feeling really, really concerned, and maybe for a few days feeling really panicky about it, or feeling totally disturbed about it, or totally sad about it. This is all part of the process, because it is very, very urgent for people to wake up.

Because there's so much distraction in this culture—all around the planet there's so much consumerism, so many opportunities to distract ourselves, and the media constantly try to distract us—it is actually not easy to stay with the information long enough so that it translates into a new way of approaching one's life. It really takes time, and it takes a lot of samatha, I think, to be able to stay with it.

Whenever you get distracted into whatever—and it doesn't all have to be negative distractions—nevertheless, this is the most important thing we have to pay attention to, more important than anything else. Because if this course we are on, if we don't come off this course, then we don't need to do anything else anymore because we won't be here.

So we have to build resilience to be able to deal with all of the impacts that are on the horizon. And we do have the skills to contain the warming to degrees where human beings can still live here. Scientists think that we can contain it between two to four degrees Celsius. But even two degrees Celsius is already a very, very different way of living than what we live now, let alone four degrees. And if we don't change course, we're going to go toward ten degrees by the end of the century. There won't be any human beings around.

To really stop long enough to take this in, and do it together with other people, and really realize we can meet this together. Today is such an example—we hear this together, we speak about this together, because we have to meet it all together. We are all together in this. There's nowhere to go. There are some very weird people who think we can go to another planet, but I don't think that's going to work. I don't think there's any planet close enough we can go to. And then it would be only like a few very rich people who could go, so I'm sure we won't be able to go. So we have to make it work here.

What I found very interesting is that through not distracting ourselves, and through really paying attention to how we live, there arises a certain repulsion with the excessive way we live—a lot of everything, a lot of this, a lot of that. We can trust that if we really take in the information, our lifestyle by itself will make us feel uncomfortable with certain things we haven't felt uncomfortable with maybe just a few months ago. But if we take in the situation—because we are part of nature, we are part of the cosmos, and the cosmos gets to know itself through us, through human beings, because we have this capacity to reflect on what we are doing—because we are part of the cosmos, we are part of that shift, if we can really open ourselves up to it.

If we can start to see how all of this connects, which we will start to see if we really pay attention, certain things will start to become apparent to us. Then certain things we don't want to do anymore because they don't bring us joy anymore. And we don't have to be afraid of that, because it is the only way forward.

It might look bleak right now, but if we clear out these channels of ignorance—that we are really not aware of what we are doing—if we manage to clear this out through paying more attention, then through this clearing out we also feel much more connected to the universe itself. We experience ourselves much more as an intimate part of it.

Because we can only live the way we live on this planet because we are not connected enough with it. We are not feeling the pain of it. Or like Thich Nhat Hanh says, we are not aware of the crying of the earth because we are deaf to it. We are too invested in doing all other things and listening to other things. But if this rather inconvenient information makes us pay more attention—if we don't do it for the sake of ourselves, then maybe for the sake of our children or our future generations—then through listening and

through paying attention, we also have the benefit of feeling more connected.

Through feeling more connected, we have much more resilience. It's like our roots go very, very deep into this very big web of life. We can actually connect into it because we are part of it. And then through that, the strength and the knowing what to do will flow through it. But first we have to build the connection.

This is all something that can be directed by the intention and by how we put our minds, where we put our minds. Do we put our minds into the next thing we want to buy, the next gadget, the next car, the next this, the next that?

Or do we put our attention to where does this all come from, actually? How does this all work? So do we go into the depths, or do we go into the flatland? It's up to us, really.

Because now, if we want to respond skillfully, we have to really go more into the depths. We can't go more and more outward to have more and more, because the conditions have changed.

There's a very good example of the Easter Islands, which are down in the Pacific, far away from here, between South America and Asia. They had quite a thriving culture at one time, and they had these huge monuments, which you have probably seen—these big heads that were buried half into the ground. There were huge blocks of stone they had to transport from certain quarries to the places where they had their shrines. In order to transport these stones, they needed a lot of trees to roll the stone blocks on. So they were cutting down all of the trees on Easter Island because the priests got slightly carried away, as they often do.

Then they cut away all the trees. And through cutting away all the trees, all of the soil was washed off. The whole culture completely collapsed. I think there are no more original Easter Islanders left. People who are living there now are different—people who came with boats later on.

That was an example which the explorers of Captain Cook's time witnessed when they came to the Easter Islands. The people had already died out. There were just a few people left. And that was once a very evolved culture. They had not paid any attention because they were so carried away with their power and with their glory that they completely lost everything. That's a good example of what we are doing now on a global level, really.

But seeing things in this bigger context can really help us to get the learning opportunity which we are having now. Because it's not that we are losing something which is worth having. This process of the universe is all about evolution and about constant change. We have the tendency to relate everything back to ourselves. This is just how it is when we are ignorant human beings.

But we already have stepped into the Dhamma because we have had a certain amount of dissonance in our lives already. Otherwise, we'd never come that far that we spend a Friday evening here with three shaved-headed women. We'd rather go somewhere else. So you can keep on going now. You don't have to

stop just with putting your toe into the water. You can go into it deeper. Because you're already going in the right direction. You can go further. And you have to go further because this is the only way to go.

Yesterday was the Independence of America Day, the 4th of July, which is also our child's birthday. We hope that she's going to be blessed because she had such an auspicious birthday. There were lots of fireworks going on, and because my room is in the backyard, there are all of those yards and I can hear people celebrating—glasses and cutlery and all of the sounds. It's very nice.

But then at the same time I was thinking of this beautiful poem by Rumi, and I thought this is so illustrative. He says: "Sit, be still and listen, for you are drunk, and we are at the edge of the roof." And it's exactly what I felt so much yesterday. We are all celebrating, fireworks and everything, but we are really at the edge of the roof, and if we just go one step further, we're going to fall down.

I think the human condition has always been like this, because this is a profoundly unstable situation—old age, sickness and death, impermanence, we never know what's going to happen next. It has always been like this, but there are times where we become more aware of it than others. And this is really such a time, like maybe the French Revolution was, or the Dark Ages were. There were always times when an old worldview broke down and a new one wasn't really formed yet. But it was clear that the old one didn't work anymore. Conditions came together and it all broke down. There was a lot of calamity and panic, a lot of disaster, a lot of people died.

And a big mess, you know. And we are now at the brink of something like that again.

But if you see it in a bigger context, then I feel much more equipped to be able to open to it and to accept it and have the humility to surrender to it as good as I can. And try to see what is my part in this, what can I do to make it a bit more bearable for everybody else, including myself. And at least to keep calm enough so that one can try to help other people to see the bigger meaning of this, which it totally has.

And knowing that this is an excellent opportunity for practice, because there's nowhere else you can go to escape it. So it's really, we have cornered ourselves.

Because this intelligent process which is called cosmos or universe, it wants to go to ever greater complexity and greater embrace of all that is living. And it doesn't shy away from the most powerful means to make that evolution happen. And if it has to make a climate crisis, it will make it. It has already made it.

And, you know, we can either really open ourselves to that truth and grow with it and through it, or we can just kind of despairingly try to distract ourselves and not look.

So, you know, I want now over the next months and so on, I'd like to study more about it and maybe speak some more in other evenings because there's lots of good material out there of people who are very wise and very connected and who are working with these issues for many, many years. A lot of Christian

people as well.

So I'm very interested to go deeper into it and see the intelligence of this universe and how it wants to flourish really.

Okay, I stop here. Thank you for listening.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.