Planet Earth as Divine Messenger

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 52:24

Good evening again. I hope you have meanwhile arrived fully—not just the body, but also the mind. Always take some time after rushing around the whole day, perhaps coming from work or from another engagement. It takes time for the body and the mind to come together. Once we become aware of how we feel and how the body is right now, that really helps us to fully be where we are.

The Buddha's teaching is all about pointing us in the right direction, which is where we are. In the present moment is where we can learn more about how our mind works and also how the bigger context operates. Through shedding different levels of concepts, we arrive more and more at clarity, which helps us to live our lives with less and less friction. Our expectations change through getting to know the way things really are, rather than what we have learned through our conditioning from the day we were born, or maybe even over lifetimes, if we can open up to that way of thinking.

One way of summarizing the Buddha's teaching is this: the Buddha said, "I teach about suffering and the end of suffering." That was one way he expressed what his teaching is all about, especially in the Theravada presentation, which I think is the basis of how Philip also teaches here.

The word "suffering" in the Pali language—or rather, the word *dukkha*, which is one of the three characteristics of existence—is often translated as suffering. But actually, in the original Pali, *dukkha* doesn't mean suffering. It means rather unsatisfactoriness. Originally, the word *dukkha* consists of two parts. The prefix *du-* means difficult or not really fitting. The second part of the word, *kha*, means the axle of a wheel—the hole in the center of a wheel where the axle is inserted. It means that this axle doesn't perfectly fit into the hole, so it isn't a perfect fit. Because of that, the wheel doesn't run smoothly. That's the example of how this unsatisfactoriness, which is one of the three characteristics of life, is illustrated.

Basically, it says this life is a rather bumpy ride. If we expect it to be a smooth ride, we will suffer. But if we can adjust ourselves, if we can move with the bumps, then we won't suffer. Instead, we understand how this process works better—inside ourselves and also outside. Even ultimately, there is no inside and outside, but that's how we experience it as human beings.

The Buddha said this was his whole intention in trying to share what he understood in the process we call enlightenment. He understood that the life process is unsatisfactory, which means it can't give us any lasting solutions for anything other than really opening up to impermanence. That was the first insight he had, which sent him onto the path.

The tradition has it that the Buddha, as a young man, grew up in quite privileged circumstances. It is said

that for quite a long time he wasn't aware of impermanence because he had so much access to all kinds of entertainments—beautiful people, beautiful clothes, good food, everything—so he wasn't really aware that there is actually a lot of uncertainty in this life.

At one point he became tired of those different sense pleasures and wanted to know more about life. The story has it that he was going out with his charioteer into the town. At that outing—it might not have really been a first outing, but it was the first time he became aware of certain aspects he had never really taken in consciously before. Even though he had maybe seen these people, he hadn't really seen them with his heart. He just saw them maybe with his eyes, but he really didn't take it in.

He saw what are called the divine messengers. He saw a sick person, he saw an old person, and he saw a dead person. When he saw them, he suddenly realized that he himself would also be sick, old, and would die. That was just a shocking recognition for him.

At the end of this outing, he also saw what's called a truth seeker—somebody dressed in robes who obviously had dedicated their life to really investigating their own experience and had dedicated their life to getting deeply in touch with reality. He felt very inspired by that sight. That was his entrance into the path.

After that, the story has it that he lost interest in his privileged situation and chose to dedicate his life to trying to find the truth.

This experience of having a body as a human being operates according to laws of nature which we can get to know. We can adapt ourselves to those laws, accept them for what they are, and then work together with those laws of nature. But we can't stop them from happening. This can be a very sobering insight when we really start to notice that this doesn't happen only to other people—it happens also to ourselves.

This is a contemplation which we as monastics are taught to contemplate every day—to every day contemplate the fact that our bodies do age, they get sick, and they're going to die. It's considered that these contemplations, if you really take them deep, give us a sense of urgency for practice.

Our culture and upbringing doesn't encourage us at all in these contemplations. Instead, our culture tries to hide these facts of aging, illness, and death. If you look at how we live, especially here in the West, we try to separate those things out. People who undergo these laws of nature in a big way—those who are very ill or very old—are very difficult to actually see if we don't have them in our own families. This is something we have to really make an effort to consider.

I wanted to speak about this today because I feel that nowadays, we not only have our personal bodies to contemplate, but it's happening in a much bigger way as we become aware of what changes our planet is undergoing right now. A similar process becomes apparent when we hear about climate change, because our planet is also quite sick right now. If we don't pay attention to that, we don't know what's going to happen. As a human race, we have never been in such a situation. We have been on this planet for about

250,000 years now, and it has never been this way.

I think it's very important nowadays to extrapolate these reflections about old age, sickness, and death in relation to our personal bodies and extend them to the planet as well. We need to take the teachings of the Buddha further and see our personal suffering and the ways we cope with it in a much larger context.

When the Buddha was walking the planet about 2,500 years ago, the situation was very different. Climate change definitely was not an issue. People were under the impression that this planet and its resources—the air, the water—were all limitless because there were so few people living on the planet, perhaps a fifth or even less than today. So that wasn't an issue the Buddha addressed directly.

The Buddha did speak about world systems arising and ceasing, but he didn't speak about it in terms of an experience you could have within your own lifetime, because those changes happen on such a big scale that we can't really witness them directly. But because modern science has developed many different tools that allow us to look into the past and future, to go into the depths, we have extended our sense organs in such a way that we can actually witness some of those changes now.

One result of this is that we know this climate change taking place now is heading in a direction that is very disconcerting when we think about future generations and our responsibility to them. We need to find ways to translate this information into action. I think quite a few people know about these facts—I'm one of those people and I've read quite a lot about it—but I also came here with someone driving me in a car, and I'm going to go back the same way because I wouldn't even know how to get back otherwise. The systems are not in place.

The question is: How can we as a society translate information into action? The teaching of the Buddha offers a whole array of skillful means for how we can translate information—for example, about old age, sickness, and death, about impermanence—and let it really sink into our being so that our actions are informed by that information. There seems to be a disconnect.

There are many books and websites where you can see the warming and the predictions for the future: that if we don't make some real big changes around 2030, we will have reached a degree of warming where very dangerous feedback loops could kick in, which would then be basically unstoppable. But if we were to really start changing our ways now, we actually could contain the warming at manageable levels. Yet somehow, as a society, we are not able to organize ourselves accordingly.

I'm not thinking that I'm good at this either. I'm just trying to reflect on the fact that we have so much information because science is so advanced, but somehow we lack the connection between the heart and the information. Those channels are so clogged up with conditioning that we can't really bring it home in a way that allows us to live accordingly.

This is exactly what the Buddha was saying 2,500 years ago. We see all of these things going on, but we live as if they weren't happening. What's going on here, really? Why are we like that? Including myself, of

course.

Somehow, we are not really aware that we are all part of this planet Earth. We live on it as if it were just some kind of environment where we can take what we want and dump what we don't need, assuming it will be cleaned up by somebody else. But who is that somebody?

I find it very interesting to reflect on this work...

The word ecology is fascinating—its first part, "eco," comes from the Greek word "oikos," which means house or home. So ecology literally means to study one's home. The word economy shares the same root, meaning to look after one's home, to care for one's house. I looked this up on Wikipedia, and discovered that the word economy was first used in the 14th century in a book about monastery administration—how to care for the monastic home in the best possible way so residents could live a healthy life and leave behind a dwelling that future inhabitants could also enjoy.

Yet somehow we're not living this way. We inhabit the Earth like careless teenagers who don't think about tomorrow, trusting that parents will clean up after them. These young people haven't yet made the connection between where food comes from and how difficult it is to maintain a household. They're simply mindless. And this is exactly how we live—because we don't see our lives within the bigger context, we haven't truly understood our situation. If we had, we would live differently.

It's illuminating to contrast "ego"—the limited self that doesn't understand the larger context—with "eco," the bigger self, the broader perspective. If we could see ourselves and our lives within this expanded context, we could step out of identification with our personal likes and dislikes and embrace a more encompassing view of existence.

This is what the dharma wants to open us up to. The teaching points us toward the dissonance we experience in life. But in our consumerist culture, we're conditioned to always move to the next thing, and the next, and the next. We never turn toward the dissonance because we haven't been trained to do so. The Buddha's teaching offers various means to turn toward difficulty, trusting that the healing direction lies within the suffering itself. Only by facing our pain can we break through the delusion of our conditioning, the identification with our thinking about how things are. The doorway to freedom is suffering itself.

Philip Moffat writes about this in his book "Dancing with Life," where he explores the Four Noble Truths—the essence of Buddha's teaching. The First Noble Truth acknowledges that there is suffering, dissonance, unsatisfactoriness in life. The healing lies in turning toward it rather than away from it. Modern consumerist culture excels at turning toward the next thing, but it's poor at facing dissonance. Now the planet is sternly telling us we must wean ourselves from dependence on endless consumption because we simply don't have the resources. We're living far beyond our means.

I've read that American culture lives as if we had six planets' worth of resources to exploit, but we have

only one—and it's on its last legs in terms of sustaining human life. The Earth will continue, of course, but we won't be part of it. We're taking many other species down with us.

I don't say this to assign blame, because we've only been aware of this crisis as a society for about thirty years. We're slow learners, and it takes time to translate information into action. But circumstances are becoming increasingly urgent. If we don't change our ways dramatically by 2020, we face the possibility of severe changes that will make it extremely difficult for humans to remain here—shortages of food, water, clean air, fertile soil, widespread illness, climate refugees, and resource scarcity. We're looking toward an extremely turbulent future.

Some difficulties are inherent in human existence—old age, sickness, and death. We can't do anything about these; they're simply part of the human experience, and they have their own beauty. Like flowers that bloom, reach their peak beauty, return to earth, and bloom again, the human body follows this natural cycle with tremendous built-in intelligence that can leave the human mind speechless.

But other forms of suffering—like how we live on the planet—represent choices. We can live differently. This kind of suffering isn't inherent in human existence; it's the result of ignorance. Here we can take action, because we don't need to live as we currently do.

It's not needed to live in this kind of way, really squandering the resources as we do. I've brought a quote from a Christian priest named Thomas Berry, who died perhaps twenty years ago. I found a very powerful, very short quote from him. He says, "The universe itself is the primary sacred scripture."

To look at the process of the evolution of the universe, which modern science tells us has been going on for over thirteen billion years since the Big Bang - this planet has developed such amazing life forms, and we are one of those. This process has a very mysterious intelligence built into it, moving toward ever greater complexity, ever greater levels of inclusion, and also greater levels of diversity.

As the human race, I think what this means is that greater levels of inclusion and diversity require us to see ourselves not on top of the planet and all the different species that are here. They are not here for our use - it's more like we are just one of them. Meditation is a technology we can use to tear away those veils of delusion that make us believe we are separate from everything else and that we can somehow control this.

Even though there is so much information telling us we cannot - otherwise we wouldn't have created such a mess. We would really be able to control it because I think the intentions were good. But obviously the ignorance was so great we did not know so many things which we thought had no real value. Nowadays we know that if just one kind of insect dies out, a whole process is interrupted. We just didn't know any better.

But now we start to understand that there's so much we cannot fathom with our little minds. So I think it's very important to develop this kind of respect for that which we do not know. It is difficult, but I think the

practice is there exactly for that.

One other central insight the Buddha had when he experienced what's called enlightenment was the insight into emptiness. Or in the Pali canon, it's often expressed as not-self or anatta. This means that the way we understand reality when we look at it with our senses - when we touch things or see things or hear things, taste things and so on - this is one way we can interpret experience, but this is not really reality in the ultimate sense.

With our sense organs, we do experience ourselves as separate entities, walking around and doing things. But in reality, this is not the way things are. We are all part of something much bigger than ourselves. This being part of something much bigger than ourselves is a responsibility and at the same time a great privilege, because we sustain ourselves through that.

But in terms of awareness and consciousness, we somehow seem to be like teenagers. If you have had children - I didn't have children, but I have read in psychology books - teenagers want to be independent, they want to do what they like, but at the same time, they want to be taken care of by their parents. This is our level of consciousness in terms of how we live on this planet. We just want to take whatever we like, but we don't want to have any rules to live by. We want to have the best of everything.

Now our parents, so to say - if we want to call the planet our parents - show us the limits and say, "No, stop now. You can't go this way any longer. You have to turn inward and learn to live with dissonance, learn to live with greed and hatred and learn to transform it rather than try to always get your way." This is what maturity is all about - to be able to know what you are feeling and to be able to hold this feeling and not necessarily act on it.

The teachings give us different tools so that we can develop the strength to be with what is, go through it, come out at the other end, and respond in a way that is appropriate to the situation.

Here is a quote from a Norwegian eco-philosopher named Arne Naess: "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."

It is exactly that ability to perceive our deeper identity which we have to train ourselves to develop. We have to really be able to stay long enough with our experience so we can go deeper. The meditation teachings are the skillful means by which we can work on this deepening and on the letting go of identifying with more surface concepts that our culture is bombarding us with all the time, especially the media. The media are just very irresponsible.

It takes a lot of strength to really stay alert. Coming to a sangha like this on a regular basis is a very powerful reminder that we have to help each other to really stay vigilant with this. There's a lot at stake - what is on stake is just immense right now, and it's very difficult to stay conscious of it because wherever you go you are bombarded with messages that point in all different directions, only not in the most

important one.

So I hope that you'll be willing to take in the message I try to give.

These messages may not be pleasant to hear, most likely. But I believe they are important. We have a very powerful opportunity for practice now because there's nowhere to run anymore, really. The only escape we have is into awareness, because the planet has become a very small place with over seven billion people. The only place to go is to wake up.

In terms of practice, it's a very good opportunity because there are many delusions we simply can't afford to maintain anymore. So in terms of practice, it's a very powerful time.

I also want to end by saying that we do have all of the skills and all of the knowledge to make the changes that need to be made. The challenge is that the media are not willing to make this known because they are supported by businesses that have enormous investments in the old ways of doing things. They don't support information that would end their dominion over our bank accounts. This is the conundrum of how to support the dissemination of this information.

I think we can all do our part. I certainly try to do that and work to bring this awareness more and more into the teaching evenings we hold in the Bay Area and other places. I'm also working with all of the feelings this brings up within myself and within the sangha, and witnessing the changes that are occurring. A few years ago, people weren't really very interested in hearing this, but now there's more and more capacity and space for people who want to hear it. That's a very good development.

So there are five or ten minutes left. If there are any questions, please ask. Do you have a microphone here?

[Question about Spirit Rock teacher meeting and environmental leadership]

Thank you for that question. Yes, I was at that meeting. This environmental awareness is one of the main themes we're addressing as dharma teachers. We had a presenter who is one of the top advisors on climate change for the Obama administration give a presentation to the teachers. We've formed a group and are having our first conference call on the 17th of this month to develop ways to bring this more into our teaching. We've received very good information presented in a simple way about what's happening.

We're working on having an Earth Care Week in the first week of October, with all the teachers connected to Spirit Rock, IMS, Gaia House in England, and Beatenberg in Switzerland working together on this.

Our little vihara personally attends different rallies on climate change. We were at the rally on June 20th to stop the pipeline, at the Golden Gate Bridge. There's a very big rally organized for August 3rd in Richmond, walking to the Chevron refinery exactly one year after the big explosion. It's a rally demanding the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, and I'll be there as well. Please join us. We meet at 10 a.m. at the Richmond BART station on August 3rd—that's a Saturday. You can find all the information

online.

You can visit our website—it's all there under what's new, and it's also on the homepage where you can click. We're very happy to meet you there at the rally. It's all non-violent and peaceful, and people are encouraged to bring a sunflower as a weapon with you.

I feel that it's this concern—how we leave this planet for future generations—which brings people from all walks of life together. Because we share this responsibility together, and we have to start somewhere. It's not clear how all of this will unfold, but we don't need to know. Because we are all part of this planet, and we can trust that if we really start to listen collectively to what is needed, we will find a way to do it.

We just have to start. We don't have to know the whole thing. We just need to know the next step—just like life. It's not different from life; it's just part of life.

I want to make a comment more than a question. It's fine to go and protest at a refinery, but I think the reality is that what every person as an individual can do in their life is what's most important. Where does your water come from? Most people don't know. How do you heat your home? Maybe you can make changes. Maybe you can use public transportation more. Maybe you can get a different kind of car. There are so many things—from using our bag to go to the grocery store to how we recycle our garbage. Just so many personal things that we take for granted, and it has to start from us. Of course, we need to reach out to our families and the community, but the us part, the me—we're not doing that.

I think both are important. The systems have to change. We little beings also have to do what we can. But we can only do what the systems support us to do, so we have both. You have to look at what you do, but we also have to collectively act. So it's everything—everybody has to find their own ways to respond, of course. But I think to collectively respond by urging the administrations of our different areas in society, the big changes also have to be implemented. It's all important.

Many times humanity has given up an old world for a new one. You know, 250,000 years ago we were living in caves. Now we don't live in caves anymore—well, just a few people maybe. So we have many times already left behind old ways of doing things. We are good at that. But every time, before you do it, you think, "Ah, this I can't do. It's too much," because we are afraid of what we don't know.

But we have stepped into the not-knowing so many times. When you were giving birth to a child, you didn't know before how it would be, and you did it—somehow it came out. And that's again like this, by just opening to it.

I'd like to end with a beautiful quote by Joanna Macy: "If a hole appears, just walk through it. See what's on the other side. You'll never be lost because this emptiness is central to life, figured into the nature of all things."

The hole is maybe not knowing how to respond. But to just really open up to not knowing how to respond

other than taking the next step. Right now you don't know how to respond, and I also don't really know how to respond.

But for example, what you can do right now is keep your heart open to this information, even if it's very uncomfortable. You might feel like you don't want to know, and then go to your car, drive home, eat something, turn on the TV and forget about it. Or you can consciously keep your heart open and go home and perhaps start to read something about this—look up 350.org or Sierra Club or whatever—and maybe join such a site where you get regular information about these things. You just put your toe into the water and go a step further, and go a step further, and do what you can rather than turning away from it.

That's how it starts. And that would be a good thing to do.

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