Earth As Witness: International Dharma Teachers' Statement on Climate Change

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:04:08

Thank you. So as I said a few moments ago, this is Bob Doppelt. One thing I didn't mention in my introduction about his beautiful work with sustainability and climate change is that he wrote a book I have found to be a great piece of work called *From Me to We: The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life*.

What Bob did was take some dharma principles—five dharma principles that he feels are the key ones to shift our consciousness if we're going to have a meaningful response to what's lying ahead with climate change—and use it as an opportunity to wake up. He presented this in non-jargon language, and it's a beautiful book that Bill McKibben praises highly, along with many other people. As I said, for years Bob has been a practitioner, and in the last two decades he's been mainly focusing on sustainability and making this a better planet.

When I saw him earlier this year, I said, "Gee, it's so wonderful that your dharma world and your sustainability world have come together." He looked me in the eye and said, "James, the dharma holds the key if this is going to be a meaningful and fruitful shift." That's when I said, "I want all the teachers in our community to hear that right from you." And he's done a beautiful job with that, so it's nice to have you back here, Bob.

Well, thank you. It's nice to be back here with all of you. This is very similar to climate change, where all sorts of things go wrong and you really don't know what's happening or what the outcome is going to be. All we know is something's not working right.

My name is Bob Doppelt. I direct the Resource Innovation Group, a nonprofit affiliated with Willamette University in Oregon, where I'm on faculty part-time. Before that, I was at the University of Oregon for ten years directing an organization called the Climate Leadership Initiative. We have one foot in academia and one foot out, and we've been working on climate change issues around the country for about fifteen years. This has led me to a number of conclusions about where we are and the kind of steps we need to take to really begin to address this issue, and I want to share some of that today.

It led me on a long path back to connecting with James. James and I met twenty-eight years ago at a retreat—a couple of retreats—and reconnected as a result of the book I had published and some other things.

But the first thing I want to do is ask you all to tell me or tell each other: How is it that you are part of the Earth's climate? How are you part of the Earth's climate?

"It's simple enough that I breathe."

You breathe. Thank you. I breathe in oxygen and I exhale carbon dioxide. Right on target.

"I use up resources of the planet, whether it's water or any of the resources."

"I'm a proud driver of a Prius, and so I think that I thereby help the planet a little bit."

So let me rephrase the question then, because this was a trick question. By driving a Prius, how does that make you part of the climate?

"Well, I don't contribute so much in the way of emissions when I go about my daily activities that involve driving. So I'm not contributing so greatly to the problems of the environment."

So you're not affecting the climate necessarily as much?

Not as much, right. And I'm also a vegetarian, which means that I don't eat meat, which means that I don't contribute to methane being put into the atmosphere and thereby causing a problem with the ozone layer.

Anybody else want to take a shot? My son recently graduated in engineering, and I had him do a calculation for me once. If you take any character in history long enough ago so their breath has swirled all around the atmosphere, every breath that I take, every single breath I take, has approximately—we may be off by an order of magnitude—something like half a million molecules that every person in history ever breathed. There you go. And in several hundred years, if there are people still to breathe, the same will be true of my breaths.

I saw one other hand here. Well, I'm aware that we are lit mostly by the use of oil or gas producing the energy that lights our buildings.

The answer to that question is all of the above. But the first answer was really central to the question that I asked: how are you part of the climate? When you sit and meditate and you follow your breath, every time you're breathing in, you're breathing in what?

Oxygen. How many of you know where the oxygen was produced? Where is the oxygen that you're breathing right now that allows your life to exist? Where was that produced?

Plants? Are you sure? Oceans. There you go. About 75% of the oxygen you're breathing right this second that is giving you life was produced through a process called photosynthesis in single-cell green algae in marine environments, estuaries and oceans, and the other 25% roughly in vegetation all around you.

So as you breathe in, in addition to following your breaths and concentrating your mind, what you're also

doing is following through on your part, your contribution to the climate system. Complex interactions occurring all around the globe are creating the energy that are allowing you to live right this second.

Then when you breathe out, what happens? We heard it before. You're breathing out CO2, carbon dioxide. What happens to the carbon dioxide that you're breathing out? That's right. So the plants and ocean resources are absorbing that, are sequestering it, and converting it again. That is the natural carbon cycle that has existed on Earth for thousands of years, and we're part of it. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here.

And if you don't believe that the oxygen you're breathing at every moment—produced in these complex processes—is the key to life, I invite everyone to hold your breath for about five minutes.

So we are intimately connected to, we are dependent on, we are part of the climate, part of the Earth's systems in general. But unfortunately, we humans have this fantasy that we are freestanding, independent beings that somehow exist outside of those processes. And that has led to a number of problems. And one of the problems is global climate change. And that's what I want to talk to you about tonight.

For about 10,000 years on Earth, we've had a pretty stable climate. There have been some ups and downs that mostly have to do with when the Earth moves a little bit further away from the sun and then moves a little bit back closer. But the climate has been relatively stable, and it's in that 10,000 years that human civilization developed, that agriculture was able to develop—what we see now took off then.

And that stable period was caused by a relatively stable amount of greenhouse gases that surround the Earth and form a blanket, keeping the Earth warm. By greenhouse gases, I mean a complex mixture of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, methane, and a few others. And that mixture has been, from the scientific perspective, between 200 and 280 parts per million—the mixture of those gases and pure oxygen around the atmosphere. And it forms a blanket.

So solar radiation comes in from the sun, comes through that blanket of gases, and hits the Earth's surface. Some of it is then absorbed by plants and other processes. Much of it is actually reflected back out into space. That blanket of gases that surround the Earth trap some of the heat that's being radiated back, and just enough of that heat to keep Earth at just the right temperature to support life. And the rest goes back through that blanket of gases out into the atmosphere, out into space.

That blanket of gases—maintaining between 200 and 280 parts per million—has been precisely the right amount to allow Earth's temperature to stabilize and life to flourish. This delicate balance has sustained our planet for millennia.

But over the last 150 years, we have dramatically altered this equation. We have added greenhouse gases to the atmosphere, pushing concentrations to 400 parts per million—a 40% increase that continues rising rapidly. Consequently, we now have a thicker blanket around the Earth, one that captures more heat, and this is the essence of climate change.

We all exist within a very narrow temperature window. Consider your own body: when your temperature hovers around 98.6 degrees, you feel healthy. But with just a one-degree increase, you begin to feel unwell. At two or three degrees higher, you become quite ill. Should your temperature rise five or six degrees for an extended period, survival itself becomes uncertain.

This same principle applies to all life on Earth, including our planet as a whole. We have already experienced about a 1.6-degree Fahrenheit temperature increase. Without significant changes, we are on a trajectory toward a 6-degree Fahrenheit increase—roughly 4 degrees Celsius—which would essentially spell the end of human civilization as we know it.

When I say we are "on a path," I mean something quite sobering: the warming we witness today results from emissions released into the atmosphere 20, 30, and 40 years ago. The extreme weather events we see occurring with increasing frequency around the world—these are the consequences of greenhouse gases emitted in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. What we emit today will manifest its impacts 20 to 30 years from now.

We face a very serious problem—one that most of us remain unaware of as we go about our daily activities. Yet we also have an unprecedented opportunity to create meaningful change. We can reduce climate change to manageable levels. While we cannot eliminate it entirely at this point—we have traveled too far down this path—we can still get a handle on it.

Today I want to share one way to do that, and after we explore this together, I will offer you specific suggestions for action—to leave you on a hopeful note.

This can be sobering material. Anyone feeling some anxiety? As the Dharma teaches us, we can only begin to adopt a path toward solutions once we acknowledge the suffering we are experiencing. Understanding what is truly happening becomes essential.

James invited me to speak to the Vipassana Teachers' Council last June about this issue, and a wonderful collaboration has emerged. Teachers around the world have come together to explore how the Dharma can illuminate both the causes of climate change and the path toward solutions. Through tremendous collective effort, this collaboration has produced a statement I would like to share with you.

The full statement spans about three pages. I invite you to listen deeply—perhaps even closing your eyes if you feel comfortable doing so—and let these words enter your being. Rather than analyzing intellectually, notice how this feels in your body, what sensations arise within you. After I read this, we will explore together what emerges in your experience.

This statement, titled "The Earth as Witness," has been signed by 170 Dharma teachers from around the world:

"Today humanity faces an unprecedented crisis of almost unimaginable magnitude. Escalating climate change is altering the global environment so drastically as to force the earth into a new geological age.

Unprecedented levels of suffering for all life on earth, including human, will result. Significant reductions in greenhouse gases and other actions will be needed to reduce climate change to manageable levels. But more fundamental changes are also needed, and this is where we can draw guidance from the rich resources of the Buddha's teaching, the Dharma.

"This statement briefly describes core Buddhist insights into the root causes of the climate crisis and suggests ways to minimize its potentially tragic consequences.

"As a starting point, the Dharma states that to formulate meaningful solutions to any problem, we must first acknowledge the truth of our suffering. As shocking and painful as it may be, we must recognize that without swift and dramatic reductions in fossil fuel use and major efforts to increase carbon sequestration, global temperatures will rise close to or beyond 2 degrees Celsius—3.6 degrees Fahrenheit. This increase will lead to injury and death for millions of people worldwide and the extinction of many of Earth's species. Millions more will experience severe trauma and stress that threaten their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. These stresses will, in turn, trigger social and political unrest.

"In a grave injustice, low-income communities, poor nations, and people systematically subjected to oppression and discrimination—who contributed little to climate change—will initially be harmed the most. Even worse, as frightening as it is, if we fail to make fundamental changes in our energy, manufacturing, transportation, forestry, agriculture, and other systems, along with our consumption patterns, with utmost urgency, in mere decades irreversible climate shifts will occur that undermine the very pillars of human civilization. Only by recognizing these truths can we adopt a meaningful path toward solutions.

"The Dharma teaches us the origin of our suffering. The majority of the world's climate scientists are unequivocal that on the external physical plane, climate change is caused by the historic and ongoing use of fossil fuels and the greenhouse gases they generate when burned. Destructive land management practices such as clearing forests also contribute to reducing nature's capacity to sequester carbon.

"The Dharma informs us, however, that craving, aversion, and delusion within the human mind are the root causes of vast human suffering. Just as these mental factors have throughout history led to the oppression, abuse, and exploitation of indigenous people and others outside the halls of wealth and power, craving, aversion, and delusion are also the root causes of climate change.

"Climate change is perhaps humanity's greatest teacher yet about these mental forces when left unchecked in ourselves and in our institutions, and how they cause harm to other people and the living environment. Led by industrialized nations, the desire for ever more material wealth and power has resulted in the relentless destruction of land and water, excess use of fossil fuels, massive amounts of solid and toxic waste, and other practices that are disrupting the Earth's climate."

However, by acknowledging and addressing these internal mental drivers, we can begin to resolve the

external causes of climate change.

The Dharma offers hope by teaching us that it is possible to overcome the detrimental forces of craving, aversion, and delusion. We can use the climate crisis as a catalyst to acknowledge the consequences of our own craving for ever more material wealth and the pursuit of power, and realize we must change our assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors. We can use the climate crisis as a catalyst to educate ourselves about planetary processes so that we understand that the Earth has ecological limits and thresholds that must not be crossed. By learning from our mistaken beliefs and activities, we can create more equitable, compassionate, and mindful societies that generate individual and collective well-being while reducing climate change to manageable levels.

Finally, the Dharma prescribes a pathway of principles and practices we can follow to minimize climate change and the suffering it causes.

The first principle is wisdom. From this point forward in history, we must all acknowledge not only the external causes of climate change, but the internal mental drivers as well and their horrific consequences. To be wise, we must also individually and as a society adopt the firm intention to do whatever is necessary, no matter what the cost, to reduce climate change to manageable levels and over time restabilize the planet's climate.

The second Dharma principle is ethical conduct, which is rooted in the compassionate concern for all living beings in the vast web of life. We need to make a firm moral commitment to adopt ways of living that protect the climate and help restore the Earth's ecosystems and living organisms. In our personal lives, we should recognize the value of contentment and sufficiency and realize that after a certain modest level, additional consumption, material wealth, and power will not bring happiness.

To fulfill our wider moral responsibility, we must join with others, stand up to the vested interests that oppose change, and demand that our economic, social, and political systems and institutions be fundamentally altered so they protect the climate and offer nurturance and support for all of humanity in a just and equitable manner. We must insist that governments and corporations contribute to a stable climate and a healthy environment for all people and cultures worldwide now and in the future. We must further insist that specific scientifically credible global emission reduction targets be set and means adopted to effectively monitor and enforce them.

The third dharma principle, and the one that makes all of the others possible, is mindfulness, or mind control. This offers a way to heighten our awareness of and then to regulate our desires and emotions and the thoughts and behaviors they generate. By continually enhancing our awareness, we can increasingly notice when we are causing harm to others, the climate, or ourselves and strengthen our capacity to rapidly shift gears and think and act constructively.

Mindfulness increases awareness of our own inherent interdependency with other people and the natural

environment and of values that enhance human dignity rather than subordinate people, animals, and nature to the craving for more material wealth and power.

As we awaken to the responsibility to follow the path described in the Dharma to help us protect and restore the planet and its inhabitants, we may feel awed by the immensity of the challenge. We should take heart, however, in the power of collective action. Buddhists can join with others in their sanghas, and our sanghas can join hands and hearts with other religious and spiritual traditions, as well as with secular movements focused on promoting change. In this way, we will support each other as we make the necessary shifts in perspectives, lifestyles, and economic and institutional systems required to reduce climate change to manageable levels.

History shows that with concerted, unified, collective efforts, changes that at one time seemed impossible have time and again come to pass. When we come together to celebrate our love for the natural world and all of the beings that inhabit it, and when we take a stand to counter the forces of craving, aversion, and delusion, we reclaim our own inner stability and strength and live closer to the truth, closer to the Dharma. Together, we may seek to ensure that our descendants and fellow species inherit a livable planet. Individually and collectively, we will be honoring the great legacy of the Dharma and fulfill our heart's deepest wish to serve and protect all life.

Would anybody like to share what's going on within you or what went on within you as you heard this? Anybody want to share anything that's happening right now? Anything stand out as you heard it?

As I listened to it, I actually felt more hopeful. I could make a difference. I felt energized. I started thinking through, oh, what could I do? And started reviewing various things that I use and do, and how can I do better?

Anybody else experience anything like that? Anybody else have other reactions?

I thought that it reminded me that one person really can make a difference, but also it sounded very first world to me. And I've seen a lot of people around the world who live for today, and they don't really have the luxury of this type of thought. So I just wonder what you think about that.

It's a very good point. Did you want to say something? Actually, let me respond to that and then talk about some solutions here.

The document actually—what I've just read to you is somewhere between the thirtieth to one hundred thirtieth rendition of the document as it was being written, with thirty or more teachers from all over the world with different perspectives, so it kept changing to reflect all that. One of the pieces of feedback we got in an early document was that it was very Western-focused and wealthy Western-focused, and so it was changed substantially to reflect that. I'm not sure we captured everything, but we also decided we couldn't capture everyone's perspective from all over the world. We could do as best as we can.

But there were two goals in writing this document. The first is to inform all of you—that is to say our sanghas all over the world—about this issue and how the Dharma helps us understand the causes. If there was ever an issue that is a Dharma issue, it is climate change. Yet for many of us, we believe this is not a Dharma issue. It's a political issue. When we walk in here, this is about our own internal process. But in fact, it is our internal processes that have created this external problem. So this is the ultimate Dharma issue. And I'll say if we don't address it through the principles described in the Dharma, we're going to have a very tough time ahead. So one goal is to inspire all of you and all other members of sanghas around the world to engage in solutions.

And there are individual level solutions that can be implemented and can make a big difference. Let me give you one example.

About ten years ago, my wife and I bought a house—not a new house, but an old house, a new place to live. It was not very nicely built, so I spent the first three years on my hands and knees with lots of scars, putting in new insulation and installing new windows and doing all sorts of improvements. We had the energy bills from the people we bought the house from, so we were able to compare our new energy bills with the previous ones. We cut our energy costs—therefore our emissions for the house—by about 40% through that process. Mostly it was because it was an old, leaky house.

But then we thought, that's just not enough. That's a good start, we're glad we did it, we saved some money. So then we looked around and thought about what we're doing personally just out of wanting to have things easy—our craving for comfort—that we really don't need. We did an assessment of the entire house and looked at all the electronic gizmos we had everywhere. We asked, what do we really need? It turns out we needed about a fifth of them.

Then we asked, what of those are on constantly? It turns out we had lights in back rooms that we were only in about once every two weeks—a spare room when somebody came over. So we first recycled or reused all of the electronic items we didn't need, and then we unplugged the rest unless we were using it. We even unplug the toaster now, even though we use it every morning. The hot water heater for tea—everything gets unplugged. We cut our energy use by another 15%. We're down to about 60% of our original usage.

Then we put up a solar electrical system and solar hot water system. Now, we own our house—if you don't own your facility, you may not be able to do that. And we have very good solar access; we bought the house with that in mind. There are no trees in the way, no other buildings blocking the sun. Not everybody can do that. But we put up these solar systems and basically got off the grid. We figured we're going to pay that off in about seven years.

If we can do it—although we have the financial capacity, we owned our home, we had solar access—it just gives you a sense that much of our energy use, at least in this country, in the industrialized nations, is frivolous and wasted. If we can just become aware of that—again, increase our mindfulness of what we're

doing and take steps—we will make a big difference.

Just look around Berkeley and San Francisco and Oakland tonight and look at the immense number of lights that are on. How many are really, really necessary?

When I first moved to Oregon in the early seventies to go to grad school, we had a governor named Tom McCall. I don't know if anybody remembers that name, but he was a Republican, and we had a long-term drought. In the Northwest, the power was produced by hydroelectric facilities, so drought means less energy. He knew that we were going to have an energy shortage, so he issued an executive order to all state agencies to turn off all your lights at night. Then he got the Chamber of Commerce in Portland and other major cities to do the same thing.

Our towns went pretty dark at night. And the public loved him. He was revered because he not only had cut energy use, but it was a symbolic act to make it clear. So then the public did the same thing. And what do you know? Lifestyles didn't change. We pretty much went about our business just like normal. But we had now understood—we were more mindful of what we were doing.

And we had no problem with energy use that summer. So we can make these changes—in our own homes, in our sanghas, and in the places we work.

This is one part of what the Teachers Collaborative is trying to motivate you to do: engage in your own homes, in your own lives, in your workplaces. But we also need to realize that systemic change and institutional change are required. You alone aren't going to make the difference, but without your changes, we're not going to get there.

This is because of how our political system works—elected officials follow rather than lead, in our country and in many other democracies. We think they lead, that we're electing leaders, but leaders follow what they perceive people want them to do. Right now, there's a group of people and industries that they're following who are not taking us on the right path. So it's got to be you they follow. That requires you all to engage by modeling it, walking the talk, and then working collaboratively with others.

There is tremendous activity happening behind the scenes that people don't know about. Businesses especially are keeping their heads low. My organization works with many companies—they don't want their names known, but I think this one will: Nike. You all know Nike, the Oregon company. We helped them analyze their entire economic value chain. Where do their raw materials come from? Where are they shipped to be turned into one part of a shoe that goes to the next part, and so on, until they eventually end up on your feet? And what happens after you wear them? Where do they go as waste?

We did this assessment with graduate students—lots of fun. Nike realized they were at great risk from climate impacts and that they were contributing significantly to those impacts. So they've made fundamental changes in their business model, including a commitment to completely get off fossil fuels. A number of other corporations are doing something very similar, but they're keeping quiet. Some won't

even talk about it. Others will discuss it, but only privately—they're not putting it on their websites.

This is why I'm optimistic that so much of our energy use and emissions is simply frivolous and wasted. If we become mindful of what we're doing, we can make a difference. Underneath it all, there are many changes happening. If we can get a push over the edge, I think we can make significant progress.

I want to suggest that the Dharma shows us it's absolutely right that first we must acknowledge the suffering that exists and the suffering within ourselves that has caused that external suffering. But the Dharma offers a pathway we can follow simultaneously. If we do follow that path, we have an opportunity to reduce climate change to manageable levels, while also realizing we will see some serious impacts no matter what happens. So we also need to prepare for that.

The second goal of the Teachers Collaborative is to infuse the Dharma—these principles I just read—into the public debate about climate change, with your help and others'. The public and decision makers need to understand the root causes of these problems and the pathway to solutions.

I encourage you to talk about these issues. You can use Dharma language or mainstream language. When you see someone not worrying at all about how they might be contributing to climate change, ask them to take a breath and become aware of their connection with everything—that they don't exist except through these interconnected processes. Those simple steps often help people become much more aware.

Other thoughts or questions at this point?

I'd like to add a couple of things. First, you can see that statement online and sign your name if you want. Go to oneearthsangha.org—"one" either as the number or spelled out. I just wrote an article for the Huffington Post yesterday. The link is there too, or you can Google my name and "Huffington Post." It's called "Inspiration and Joy Amidst Suffering and Loss."

I want to ask you to address something as well. When I read it, I felt a couple of familiar responses. One was, "Oh my goodness, this is really heavy." Another was, "How could the population shift in thinking to the point where we say, 'Yes, we're all on the same team'?"

What I really got from both your presentation at the teachers' conference and your book is a sense of cautious optimism about the possibilities. Your cautious optimism has rubbed off on me a bit. How do we transmit that so it starts to shift consciousness?

Those are both excellent points. Let me address the solar energy question first. The way solar energy works is that during the day, when the sun is shining and your solar panels are producing electricity, that electricity goes directly into your home to power whatever you're using at that moment. When your panels are producing more electricity than you're consuming, that excess gets fed back into the electrical grid. Your electric meter actually runs backwards during those times, giving you credit.

At night or during cloudy periods when your panels aren't producing electricity, you draw power from the

grid using those credits you've built up. So yes, technically you are sometimes using electricity that may come from coal-fired power plants. But the net effect is that you're adding clean, renewable energy to the grid during peak sunshine hours when demand is highest, and you're displacing dirty energy sources.

The beautiful thing is that as more and more people install solar panels, we're collectively cleaning up the grid. Each solar installation is like adding another clean energy generator to the system. Over time, as renewable sources grow, the electricity you draw from the grid at night becomes cleaner and cleaner too.

Your second point about your sphere of influence is wonderful and so practical. Thirty family members plus twenty-five tenants—that's fifty-five people you can directly impact! Those programmable thermostats, efficient lighting, water conservation measures—these are exactly the kinds of changes that multiply outward. When people see these practices working and saving money, they adopt them in their own lives and share them with others.

This is how consciousness shifts happen—not through grand gestures, but through these ripple effects of practical changes that make sense to people. One person influences fifty-five people, who each influence their networks, and the change spreads organically. That's the kind of positive momentum we need to build.

I can influence certainly a large body of people, but I would like to hear about the coal aspect of having solar.

I'm not exactly sure what they're talking about. They may have used coal to generate the materials that made the solar system themselves, the actual physical components. Or it could be that it's the backup system. Your solar system isn't producing energy all the time.

"Yeah, I'm still on the grid."

Right, still on the grid. So in the evenings, for example, if your system isn't hydro or some other renewable source—but as we scale that up with more and more renewables, and solar isn't the only one, I think we can find ways to balance out the system. We've seen it in other countries. Germany is actually the largest solar user in all of Europe, and Germany is a lot like Oregon—cloudy and rainy much of the time. Yet they're doing very well. They're even struggling with how the grid can work to absorb that much renewable energy, as we are here in the Pacific Northwest.

So I think these are transition issues for the most part that we'll have to work our way through. Solar isn't like a steady baseload energy system—it doesn't work in the evenings or on cloudy days, and it's not quite as effective in heavy rainstorms. But these are transition issues. We have to just keep at it.

There are a couple of international issues. One is that much of the major pollution around the world is out of the control of either corporate heads like Nike's CEO or democratic governments. Look at Cairo or Tehran or Bangkok or Beijing—the pollution from automobiles is overwhelming, and this isn't something

that can be controlled by a government or a movement of people. The other thing is that there are many poor people in the world who want these consumer items from China. So how does that relate to what we can do?

Good questions. I can only say that I've been to two of the UN climate summits, and in both of those, what I see very clearly is that the rest of the world is waiting for the U.S. to act. And not only because of the symbolic nature of it, but because the size of our economy really determines so many things.

If we actually get serious—the president did release the first presidential climate plan ever in July. You might have heard about it. It's a good start, not earth-shattering, but it's the first time a U.S. president has ever done that. If we can actually scale that up by fifty or a hundred percent and then get the U.S. Congress to act as well—which we're not going to get right now but could—we will see other countries act also. We heard that time and again at the climate summits: "If you're not going to do anything, why would we? Our economies are dependent on yours in so many ways."

At the same time, there are negotiations going on now. I think we will start seeing some agreements, just within two or three countries, including the U.S. The U.S. is working with China and a few others. So I think those are going to be smaller-scale agreements.

But the bigger issue—again, I'm not suggesting this is what you're doing at all—is that it's very easy for us to say, "Well, we don't need to do anything because others aren't doing anything." All we can do is control what we can control, which is our own emissions, our own household and family, and then community and organizational and state levels. Once we get that under control, once we realize that that's the power we have, then we have to see if organically—if you will—or because of the interconnected nature of the economies, these things will fall together.

Wait, hold on. There was something a professor at Berkeley, Professor David Roland-Holst, had said. In California, when they were going to limit energy use for big corporations, the corporations were kicking and screaming, saying, "If you try to make us comply with all these energy regulations, we're going to be uncompetitive." When they finally pushed it through anyway, the corporations actually saved a lot of money by implementing all these energy-saving technologies. So maybe the United States can lead the way and show the rest of the world that you can enrich your country by being more energy conscious.

I think that's true. Let me ask you all a question: How many of you really like to make a big change in your behavior? Not many of us, right? So it's a natural response. The first thing you get from any kind of regulation is, "Oh no, don't do that."

You have to change your habits. Some people will lose power. Some people gain power. All those issues are there. So any change, we see that every time business stands up and says the entire economy is going to collapse. It never happens.

That's not to say that some regulations are smart and some are dumb. Of course they are. And we're going

to have to learn through the process. We're going to make mistakes. And regulations are not the only tool. But mostly what we're going to find is we're going to become more efficient. We will save more money, and it will spur innovation. That's what you really find. The research shows unequivocally when there is regulation, it spurs more innovation in other ways.

So I don't really worry about it, but we have to go through that dance. That's just the political dance we go through whenever there's regulations proposed.

Let me wrap up so we can get out of here on time. I just want to thank you first for all the work that you're doing and all the impact that you're having in our Dharma community. Just this last week, Bob was working with San Francisco. He was at the city offices today with the San Francisco government, and Oakland as well. He's hitting the whole Bay Area with the Oakland city government today, looking at how cities would deal in a resilient way when things do start getting more and more difficult.

So this guy's working overtime. Sometimes I think that I'm busy, but when I look at his schedule, I hope you're taking care of yourself and finding some balance in there as well. I'm really inspired by everything that you do.

The last thing that just came to my mind is a study that happened quite a while ago—I think Stanford did it—that said what is needed for a shift, a new way of looking at things, is a 7% shift in the population. You don't have to convince everybody. When there's a 7% shift, that seems to be the tipping point, then a new way of thinking becomes more in vogue and accepted. So we can be part of that. It's not like you have to change the whole world. Just in your own commitment, it starts to have its rippling effect. And 7% is not impossible.

Let me just say one quick word about that to summarize. I think this is actually an incredibly exciting time to be alive. We have this scary thing out there that will cause suffering, but it's the suffering that can trigger a new way of being. I think it's an exciting time, and we have tremendous opportunities.

I think mindfulness, being aware of what we're doing and our thoughts and our motivations, is really the key to this. And it's a wonderful opportunity to grow mindfulness in many, many other people. Not everybody has to do it. We just have to get enough. And you're the leaders, along with other Sangha members, to trigger a real fundamental change.

So I encourage you all to stay with it. There will be ups and downs, but stay committed. I think we'll make this.

That was the gist of the article that I wrote—that just like in practice, when you go on a retreat and you go through some really hard times, those difficult moments aren't a mistake. They are the actual initiation, the passageway to a deeper awakening. In the same way, we are having this opportunity now, this awakening of humanity. Suffering is staring us in the face, and suffering shakes us out of our complacency and starts waking us up to a new way of acting and being.

So I do see this, in my bigger perspective moments, as a call to awakening. Thanks for being part of that.

Let's close with a brief loving-kindness meditation. Maybe for a moment feel how much you love this planet and are grateful for the life that you have and that it sustains. Out of that gratitude, connecting with...

your intention to do your part to be as conscious as you can and support its flourishing.

And sending metta to yourself, to all beings in all directions and to this miraculous earth that we live on, live in, live on.

May there be harmony, health, wisdom, love. Peace.

May all beings be happy and free.

And may this planet feel the caring of all who live on it.

The path forward is not always clear, but our commitment to awakening—both personal and collective—can guide us through these challenging times. When we recognize that our individual liberation is intimately connected with the healing of our world, we find the strength and wisdom to act with both urgency and compassion.

This is the dharma calling us home: to remember our interdependence, to cultivate the wisdom that sees through the illusion of separation, and to respond to the suffering of our time with open hearts and skillful action. In doing so, we become part of the great awakening that our world so desperately needs.

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