Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 35:23

Perhaps you saw the front page article in last week's San Francisco Chronicle: "Close to Tipping Point of Warming. Only major global effort can halt it, scientists warn."

The article reported that the Earth is reaching a tipping point in climate change that will lead to increasingly rapid and irreversible destruction of the global environment unless its forces are controlled by concerted international action, an international group of scientists warn. Unchecked population growth, the disappearance of critical plant and animal species, the over-exploitation of energy resources, and the rapidly warming climate are all combining to bring mounting pressure on the Earth's environmental health. Scientists from five nations, led by UC Berkeley biologist Anthony Barnofsky, reported their analysis in the journal Nature.

This is both not news and yet when it makes the front page, it's news again. Every so often periodically, we are reminded of the inconvenient truth that things are getting dicey, not to mention the weather patterns that seem to be breaking new records one way or another.

We've talked about this topic in the past, but it's come up again now, both because of the article and also because of the *Inquiring Mind* issue on "Earth Now." As often the case, the *Inquiring Mind* issue is very thoughtful, thought-provoking—a deep inquiry into what this means for us as Dharma practitioners and how to respond and incorporate it into our practice. Please take a copy with you. It's not only bad news and depressing; some of it is really inspiring and moving.

What do we do with this? What do we do when we read a front page story saying only major global effort can halt catastrophe? I'm here not to give you the right answer, the right response—this is what you should do or think or act. I'm sharing my own process as we talk, because I've gone through so many different feelings and reactions and responses about this. It's still a work in progress, just as the whole unfolding is.

A couple of years ago, I gave some talks on this topic after reading the book *Eaarth* by Bill McKibben, which deeply impacted me about where we're headed, what it's going to look like, and what our wisest responses can be. I was kind of on a crusade: "Okay, we've got to do something. And I've got to do something."

Besides giving some talks, I was one of a number of voices at Spirit Rock in the teachers' council saying, "If we're a place of consciousness, we've got to be a leader in consciousness around sustainability and around speaking out about this." I'm happy to say, by the way, that Spirit Rock has evolved into really placing

sustainability as a very high priority in our new master plans. We've just started a capital campaign for replacing the community hall—which is trailers—with a community temple that will give us a lot more options and facilities, and teacher and staff quarters that are much needed because they're all twenty-three-year-old trailers. Sustainability is at the highest level, so that's good. That has made a lot of us feel really good.

But as far as whether we're doing enough—if we've got to bring more awareness into our own hearts as well as the community—are we doing enough? So I went through a period like that: "Come on, it's up to us, and particularly what can I do to save the world?"

And then I've gone through periods of real overwhelm that would lead to apathy, that would lead to "Who am I kidding? What can I do? And what's the point? Yeah, I'll do the recycling and I'll do the little things here and there, but this is much bigger than my mind can wrap around."

We go between engagement and acceptance—slash equanimity—or anxiety to apathy and despair and everything in between. Can you relate to those responses?

So I'm not here to preach to you. I'm here to explore with you. And it came up recently again. You know that experience where there's a theme that comes up and then you kind of hear different messages from a lot of different parts in your life? Well, this was happening as I've been exploring this issue. One was a really terrific book that was sent to me by somebody who used to sit with me twenty-five years ago in Oregon, who's taking the Joy course now.

And he said, "I've gotten into this topic and have written a book." His name is Bob Doppelt, and he sent me this book: *From Me to We: The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life*. He's a systems change expert who wrote about Buddhist principles—though this is a mainstream book, and I'm not sure if he even refers to Buddhist or Buddha in here—but five Dharma principles that he sees as essential for not just personal change but societal change in addressing this. So I got that and started reading and said, "Oh, that's pretty good."

I wrote him, and he was delighted. I said, "If you're ever here in the Bay Area, I want you to come and share." So that came in. And then the *Inquiring Mind* issue. And then another message, which was having some contact with a few teachers in Europe who are good friends.

Every few years, the teachers have what's called an International Teachers Conference for the Vipassana community. Teachers from Europe and some from even farther away, and the states, East Coast and West Coast, get together and explore the future of the Dharma in our tradition and the vision that we all hold. I said that I'd be part of the planning committee, along with a couple of other friends here, and wanted to involve these two friends from England to be the European representatives of the larger meeting.

They both have a great commitment as far as consciousness around climate change. And they said, "Well, the meetings are wonderful, but each of them independently—I have to really look at when I get on a

plane, what's the payoff and what's the price that I pay for using all that energy." They said, "It's something for us all to think about as the future unfolds, how much we're using planes and how much we're teaching locally and at what cost."

I said, "Well, that's fair enough. I really would love to have you here, not only because of your presence, but maybe to lead a conversation around this." We're thinking about maybe doing a webcam for those teachers who don't want to use the transportation and maybe doing a carbon offset. I brought it up to the Spirit Rock teachers at the last teachers' council, and it got people thinking. It's like, "Oh, okay, hadn't been in our consciousness, we've got to start thinking about this." So it's going on the agenda for next year, whether or not these people come: what is our responsibility as far as use of energy and travel in the future?

From all sides, it's up for me. In one of the articles—there were two articles that really struck me that I wanted to share a little bit about and then we can explore together—one was by Bhikkhu Bodhi, who wrote the article "Drawing Back from the Edge of a Cliff." He gives this example of the old Roadrunner cartoons. Remember Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote would chase the Roadrunner and he'd go off the cliff and there he is spinning his wheels, and then he goes back to the cliff and avoids catastrophe. He says we're kind of like that. We're spinning our wheels off the cliff. Do we wake up in time and draw back, or do we crash?

In his mind, he thinks of the Dharma as helping us to navigate through these dangerous times, first in diagnosing the problem, and then in giving some pragmatic ways to act. As far as diagnosing the problem, probably not hard to see that the problem is the suffering that comes from greed and what he calls arrogance—our ethnocentric view—and ignorance. Just not seeing the consequences of our actions.

He says it's based on the misunderstanding that the key to economic growth is mass consumption. That is a basic fallacious thinking that is propagated by corporations, politicians, and the media. And that in order to make a change, in his opinion, from a dharmic point of view, it requires an immediate response, a long-term pragmatic response, and a systemic response.

I'll just share with you some of his thoughts. The immediate one is we wake up and realize we are destroying the planet, and we stop doing whatever we can. Like the article in the *Chronicle* says, well, we better stop real fast. And then the long term, just looking for different sources of energy and that the corporations aren't running things. Okay, now that's a pretty big long shot.

The second response requires a long-term pragmatic approach, finding different sources of energy and ensuring that corporations don't run everything. As he acknowledges, that's quite a long shot.

The systemic response calls for nothing less than a change of consciousness—truly seeing that genuine happiness lies somewhere other than in getting our next hit of pleasure. This involves recognizing that fulfillment doesn't come from feeding our cravings, and understanding how our actions have

consequences in an interconnected world. As he puts it, this transformation will require a clear, honest understanding of our predicament and ethics grounded in humility, compassion, and global stewardship.

When I read that article, it all made perfect sense. Yet part of me wondered: how could such a transformation actually come about? Good luck with that. Perhaps it happens only when we see there's no turning back—when we're off the cliff, about to fall. It's quite possible.

I've always believed that dukkha is usually what wakes us up, both personally and globally. Perhaps we have to experience enough suffering to finally change. It's so hard to transform our habits. When you think about it in your own practice, even when you know that doing a certain action will lead to regret, you know that mysterious moment where you think, "I know this won't be good in the long run, but it feels so good now. What the heck?"

You know this. Here you are, dharma students trying to be as conscious as possible, and probably you still get deceived from time to time by your own consciousness. So imagine how difficult it is for those who are less aware, or for an entire social psyche to change, unless there are real consequences that are immediately felt.

That's one article. The other piece that really touched me, which I highly recommend, is by Joanna Macy. The title is something like "Woman on the Edge of Time." She's both brilliant and inspiring. I'm sure most of you are familiar with Joanna, who lives right here in Berkeley.

She offers the long-range view, the dharma perspective. She did a three-month self-retreat at her house last year, simply reflecting on these issues—seeking a deeper kind of inquiry. It was a retreat into deep time. Some of her insights were articulated in ways that felt new to me.

One understanding is that our lifestyle masks the perspective of deep time—the perspective that includes the past and all that came before, and the future and all that will unfold. We might grasp this intellectually, but everything in our culture conspires against embracing that long-range view.

I want to share a few of her thoughts that really struck me. In our current life, time becomes an increasingly scarce commodity. Our lives are driven, pressured, and fragmented by hurry. We often blame ourselves for having poor time management skills, but the source of the problem lies in the nature of industrial growth society—specifically, in its technology and market forces.

Searching for efficiency, we develop technologies to increase the speed of every operation and machine, measuring time in ever more minuscule fragments: nanoseconds and fractions of nanoseconds. These speed-induced pressures affect the body, producing many forms of "hurry sickness" and the feeling that things are spinning out of control.

Beyond technology, market forces accelerate time as well. With primacy given to corporate returns, goals are determined and progress measured by how fast profits and market shares increase. Corporations seek

not only greater profit every quarter, but also a rising rate of growth. This creates exceedingly short-term thinking, leaving little or no room for reflection or weighing consequences.

In my teaching, I find this theme resonates deeply with young people. Although they enjoy instant communication through electronic devices, they suffer from not having time to finish anything or think through one matter before something else demands attention.

I remember when Sesame Street was just starting when I was young, and I thought, "Wow, the attention span is being narrowed down to two seconds—quite a hit for a young child's brain." And now even that seems long. You see these rapid-fire sequences with fifty images flashing in two seconds. We've forgotten how to think of time in a different way.

We use up everything we can—forests, fisheries, oil, coal—without any thought of what's left for future generations. What we don't consume, we contaminate or destroy: rivers, oceans, topsoil, not to mention cultures. It's strange indeed that we're willing to do this, given the fact that in past eras people labored for generations on cathedrals and sacred cities and irrigation schemes that they didn't expect to see completed in their lifetime. What a different psyche that is.

Yet I've come to believe that this behavior, as distressing as it is, is not because we're evil, but because we're caught up in a mind-destroying acceleration of time. And I also believe that we can begin to free ourselves from this and reclaim our birthright to live in sync with the natural world and in wholesome relation to the past and the future.

She talks about continual connection to the future—continual, while you're living in the present, of course—continual connection to see actions and consequences and to think in terms of what the Native Americans, the Iroquois particularly, would consider: making every decision based on what will be the consequence for the seventh generation from now. There's actually a company that does recycling called Seventh Generation—named for this very principle. What is the consequence of doing this for people and other beings way in the future?

Let me read one more piece, and then I think we'll do a little exercise:

"When fear and despair arise over the state of our world, the deep time perspective helps me look farther down the road and keep on going. There are so many who've gone before and who are coming after. It buoys me to feel linked with them in this ongoing drama, feeling that I can see the work my colleagues and I are doing as giving people an appetite for living with our planet in this fateful time and doing what we can so that the beings of the future can play their part as well. This is my most basic motivation.

Because I think about the future beings so much, there are times when I imagine I hear them. They are right behind my left shoulder and they're telling me not to give up. They're telling me it doesn't matter that I'm not a nuclear physicist or climatologist with expertise and renown. They remind me that what matters is that I'm alive now and they are not, and I can speak for them."

So one exercise that she does—and I thought maybe we could just experiment with this ourselves—is to imagine being a being in the future and looking back at what we would have to say to us, with hopefully as wise and kind a heart as possible.

So I invite you, we'll just experiment with this, to sit up for a moment and close your eyes. Imagine living seventy-five years from now. You can pick the age—you can be a child, a teenager, a young adult, or an adult. First, just hang out with your idea of what life might look like or be like. Just the way it is. This is what life is like now—whether it's something that has some hope or inspiration in your vision or not. There's no right or wrong in this. Just see what comes to you as what somebody seventy-five years from now, what their life might look like—at least the external part, as well as what it feels like inside.

And then, suppose you had a chance to speak to someone today and share any thoughts, any reflections, any questions or words of encouragement to someone today, maybe someone just like you. What would that being want to say?

Now, what I'd like you to do—I've done this exercise myself with Joanna in a slightly different way, but the general idea here is—if you're open to it, get into a triad with two other people and speak from that being who lives seventy-five years from now. You're speaking to two people who are living today and sharing with them what you want them to know or what you want to ask or what you want to say, either for inspiration or for frustration or whatever, and witness each other.

I think we'll take about three minutes each, and I'll ring a bell when it's time. It can be a dyad if it's not evenly divided up. I'd really encourage you to do this. I know you might say, "Oh my goodness, I don't feel like talking to anybody," or "I don't have anything to say." This is kind of showing up for the situation. There's no right or wrong. Let's just see what comes out of you.

So I welcome you to turn to a couple of people near you. You can decide who goes first. The other two are really witnessing—you're witnessing. Ready? First person can go.

So one person speaks at a time. Okay, start finishing up now. You can thank your partners and let's come back together for a few minutes.

First, just notice what's going on for you now inside. And if you can make space enough to hold it all with a very kind, loving awareness, getting in touch with caring inside, held with wisdom.

So we have a few minutes, and I realize that things might get stirred up. Part two, which I thought was next week before I got the dates wrong, is about these different strategies and working with it as practice. I hope you can just hang in there for a couple of weeks.

But anything that came up for you either in that exercise, or as a way that helps you hold in your wisest moments this whole issue?

"I don't know if this is wisdom. It's actually something that bothers me. This is something that I've been

thinking about for a while. For myself, I do my best to be as conscientious as possible, and I'm starting to feel this anger towards humanity. And it feels in conflict with my Buddhist practice of compassion. So there's this disdain that's coming up—well, I should feel compassion toward people, but they're so awful, you know, like what we're doing. But then there's this real compassion for the earth, which is suffering. And it's almost like these two things are in conflict: my compassion for the earth and then compassion for people. I've never voiced it out loud, and there's a confusion about how to hold that."

Well, it's understandable to feel anger and outrage because it's coming from caring. So that's the first thing to get in touch with—that's the source. It's a heart that really cares. And I think it's possible to have both anger and frustration on the one hand, and another level of compassion for the ignorance that causes people to act against their own self-interest.

It's like the Buddha saying—everybody he could see wants to be happy and everybody doing exactly the things that cause more suffering. That was 2,600 years ago. Now we've just kind of upped the ante with our modern technology. But it's just ignorance. So it's compassion for the ignorance. Because even the corporate moguls would probably want a better world, a good world for their grandchildren if they could think about it. It's just not connecting the dots.

So there's anger, outrage, caring, and compassion for the confusion behind it all. But you've got to make space for it all. If you say, "Oh no, I shouldn't be feeling that," then you're just working against yourself. So it's just, yes, it's all there, and there's an awareness that can hold it.

As one of the articles talks about, world systems come and go. This is another shift in the Earth's balance. But in one of the other articles that I wanted to share with you, there is—it's just the natural way of things. Even our confusion and our ignorance is part of the natural evolution of things. We're part of that. We just have this image that it's up to us to make it all right. But maybe it's not. Maybe there's something that will come beyond us and after us. But you've got to let go of knowing. That's where the deep time helps so much—you're letting go of figuring out any answers and just allowing yourself to hold it all.

"When this first came up, I pretty immediately go into berating myself and just being like, 'I shouldn't drive or I shouldn't eat tropical fruit or should I get on that plane that I booked a month away?' And then I start coming back to the compassion thing where everything goes and it makes sense and that's why it's the center of the practice—just noticing that that anxiety and that fear of technology or things speeding up isn't productive for myself or my energy or around me or anything. So it's just coming back to seeing that. I think the deep time is really important to just understand that I don't need to solve it or I don't need to feel the guilt, and that it's bigger than that."

I guess it's like you were saying earlier—the difference between apathy and equanimity. If you have compassion for yourself and don't get stuck in that crazy feedback loop where you're just feeling guilty and bad, then you can be aware but not be so swept away by it, moving more toward equanimity. But it's interesting to hear this and to feel it come up, to go through so many things and then come back to just

compassion. It's beautiful.

Yes. And the thing is, guilt and fear don't add to the solution. They're just more contraction, putting that energy out into the world. Of course, it's completely understandable and human to feel guilt and fear. It's not that you shouldn't feel them—just like you're not avoiding feeling the anger—but somehow to hold it all in a bigger picture where, oh yes, that's part of being human. And there's something I can do: cultivate a bit more love, a bit more caring, a bit more consciousness. That also is our offering to the world.

Jackie offered another perspective: "I read a long time ago a book by Doris Lessing called *Shikasta*. She was a follower of G.I. Gurdjieff, but she put his philosophy—which, as I find out more and more about Buddhism, was a Russian interpretation of Buddhism, more or less—into this really long viewpoint. That really helps me when I'm starting to feel discouraged or desperate, or when I'm caught up in how futile my individual efforts seem. I think of that long view, and that each one can do what they can do. If you can keep doing what you can do and have a positive attitude and that hopefulness in the long term, that helps me tremendously."

Yes, and in a couple of weeks I will share both from this book, *From Me to We*, and also a beautiful piece written by Ernest Callenbach, who wrote *Ecotopia*. He passed away in April, and I've gotten to be friends with his wife, Christine, who sent me this piece. It was found on his computer after his death—an epistle to the Ecotopians, a visionary letter of how to hold our current situation that really inspired me. One of the essential ingredients he writes about is that the human heart sustains us most through hope—not hope born of fear, but hope arising from possibility. It's so beautiful, and we'll look at that along with *Fro m Me to We*.

In the meantime, as we close, get in touch with the fact that you care. Remember that it's not up to you to save the world. It's just up to you to perhaps be as conscious and as loving as possible, to have the capacity to hold it all without figuring out any answers—just resting in the not knowing. And that includes not knowing that things might transform into the next visionary possibility. You don't know. Letting go of knowing and just loving.

May we all see through our fear and confusion and hold our lives and our Earth with great kindness and compassion. May all beings come to the end of suffering and express their love well. May you all benefit from our coming here together and sharing the Dharma.

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