# Karma and Sīla as Gaia Practices

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 40:54

Hi, this is James Barris. I hope you find this talk supports you in your practice. If you'd like to support my teaching, you can use the donate button underneath my picture on DharmaSeed. Your support is greatly appreciated.

This is the third in a series of four talks with the overall title "Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point." We're exploring how to hold the challenging situation we all face living in today's world with consciousness, with clarity of vision, with seeing how we can bring our Dharma practice to the issue of planetary crisis.

I've been deeply impressed with a book given to me a couple of months ago called *From Me to We* by Bob Doppelt – "Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life." The overall theme, as the title suggests, is going from me to we – moving from a feeling of separateness, of disconnection, of focusing on personal interests and agendas and gains to having a larger view of your place in the world. This shift in consciousness is essential, recognizing that you are not separate from the rest of life.

The more you can see this basic Buddhist principle of anattā or not-self, seeing the emptiness of self through the delusion of separation, the more you are moving towards freedom in the Buddhist teachings. This basic understanding applied to global consciousness is the key shift that could make a difference in the world. If all of us could somehow open to that reality, this would be a very different world. This is what freedom is about.

There's an irony here: we're caught in focusing on "me," thinking that's where happiness lies, yet it's the very thing that leads to disconnection and unhappiness. This shift is not only global but personal on every level, moving us towards greater well-being.

The first principle – what Bob calls these "commitments" – is to see the systems you are part of. This is basically understanding the law of interdependence, that everything is connected to everything else. As John Muir said, "When you try to pick anything out by itself, you see it's hitched to everything else in the universe." The more you can see that you are part of many webs and systems – from your family system to your clan to your city, ethnic group, country, planet, and universe – and recognize all the systems that make up who you are inside, just within your own body, from all the different biological systems working together, you understand this basic principle of how life operates. As George Harrison said, it's operating "within you and without you" – inside of you and all around you. Seeing your place in this web is the underlying premise of recognizing that you affect everything around you.

The second of these principles and commitments is: be accountable for all the consequences of your actions. This is deeply understanding the law of cause and effect, or in Buddhist teachings, the law of karma – that actions have consequences. What you do matters.

We live in a world of conditioning. Everything has a cause and conditioning. The only level of reality that is not conditioned in the Buddhist teachings is nibbāna – that is the unconditioned. But everything else is arising from causes and conditions. To see this, and see your place in it, and to see that what you do matters, can go very deeply in how you relate to yourself in the world, not only in your personal practice but in global consciousness.

In the subtitle, Bob says these commitments are "required to rescue the planet, your organization, and your life." He's not just thinking in terms of "me and the planet," but recognizing that you have an effect on all the organizations you participate in as well. As a systems analyst, Bob sees everything in terms of nesting, interlocking systems. The more you can bring about greater consciousness within yourself, then you affect the systems you have direct connection to, which in turn spread out to affect all the other organizations and connections that your organization or organizations interface with.

As I was reading this book – and it's one of these books that's really thin, which very much appealed to me at first – I discovered it's one of those thin books where every sentence is chock full of not just information, but depth and understanding. There's so much to share about this principle of accountability for all the consequences of your actions.

One profound idea that struck me while reading this is probably familiar to you: actions have consequences—the fundamental law of cause and effect. Yet most of us don't truly live with this understanding, not just on a global level. It's one thing to intellectually grasp how we affect our entire environment, but even on a personal level, if we genuinely understood that "if I do this, this unpleasant consequence will follow," you'd think that knowledge would be enough to deter us from unskillful actions.

Oh yes, if I eat a third dessert, there might be consequences, but it tastes so good right now. Or if I really let loose and vent, getting something off my chest in a way that feels justified in my self-righteousness—it'll be okay, it'll feel good. We rarely pause to consider the repercussions that follow. How many times have we acted this way? How often have we looked back after acting unskillfully and wondered, "What was I thinking?"

If it's challenging enough on a personal level to truly grasp that actions have consequences, how much more difficult it becomes when we exist in such an amorphous understanding of our place within larger systems, unable to see how our actions ripple out beyond ourselves.

This is about recognizing that we have choice and becoming as conscious as possible about the consequences of our choices. If we genuinely seek real well-being, we need to slow down and see what we're actually choosing.

The Buddha encountered this very predicament when deciding whether to teach. As you've probably heard, when he first became enlightened, he hesitated to go out and teach—it seemed like too much trouble. As the suttas tell us, he thought, "It would be a great vexation to me if I were to go out and try to teach the Dharma that I've seen and people would not understand."

But then, encouraged by a deva to survey the world with his psychic powers, he saw that everybody wants to be happy, yet almost everyone engages in precisely the kind of behavior that leads to more suffering. This recognition motivated him to teach, especially when he saw that many people had "but a little dust covering their eyes," and that if he shared what he had discovered and truly awakened them to deeper happiness, they too could realize what he had come to understand.

This isn't merely our current predicament—this is the human condition. Even when we understand cause and effect, we somehow blind ourselves to it. This is precisely why we practice: to see more clearly, to understand deeply that we have choice, and to connect with what we truly want to create in our lives.

Most people probably acknowledge climate change—not everyone, but most can see that we're in a precarious, even frightening situation. I don't want these talks to discourage you, but it seems essential that we come to terms with what's actually here. Yet despite this recognition, there's often a feeling that nothing can be done about it, leading to helplessness, hopelessness—what's the point? But you simply don't know what it might take to bring about change.

What if people truly decided they wanted a healthy and thriving planet? Here's one of my favorite quotes from John Seed, the brilliant deep ecologist:

"Perhaps if you were able to multiply all the efforts of conservationists by a factor of ten or even a hundred, it might not be enough. So there's nothing on the horizon that can help us. You might think, well, what kind of miracle would it take for there to be change? Well, it would be a very simple one, really. All that would be needed would be for human beings to wake up one day different than they were the day before, realizing that this is the end unless we make these changes, and then decide to make the change.

"Now that doesn't seem like a very likely thing to happen. But on the other hand, the whole road that we've traveled is so littered with miracles that it's only our strange kind of modern psyche that refuses to see it. I mean, the miracle of being descended from a fish that chose to leave the water to walk on land? With a pedigree like that, anything is possible."

What's truly needed is simply to wake up one day different from the day before and say, "Oh wow, this world is worth saving. And what we do matters."

Senge discusses five erroneous views about cause and effect that lead to a narrow way of being in the world, views that obscure how cause and effect truly operates. First, we assume one-way causality instead of feedback loops, and thus fail to account for non-linear consequences.

It means that we think in terms of immediate consequences from our actions—that we can see the results of what we do right away. But really, the web of cause and effect is far more subtle than that.

He uses the example of a workplace situation where you want to feel superior to somebody, so you make a little off-the-cuff mild criticism or playful put-down—something that seems relatively minor to you. But somebody else, just as if you were on the receiving end, takes it in and it hurts. They might not say anything, but you've set in motion a kind of energy that will emerge from them. It might not surface right away, but when they're around you, it will come out in little ways that you don't even realize where it's coming from.

You might just think, "Oh well, I was just teasing, playing around, you know, poking or whatever." But sometimes we hit somebody in a sensitive moment or a sensitive place and it hurts. It might be completely off your radar screen, but they're harboring that pain. So they might respond with little reactions or ways that undermine. Then a kind of tension builds between you. Because they're acting in that particular way, it just builds the system between you. And you might have no idea what the original cause was, but there's something that you've set in motion that you're completely unaware of.

This leads to the second erroneous view: we underestimate or ignore inherent time delays between cause and effect. A little seed that you plant might be sprouting the next day, the next week, a month from now, and you don't realize that seed has been festering or waiting to germinate and come back at you. This is just on an interpersonal level.

Third, we respond to symptoms rather than addressing root causes. Maybe that other person says something really nasty a month down the road. You think, "How could she say something like that? That's not really fair!" Maybe it's five times worse than what you originally said. And then you're addressing the symptom—the immediate interaction, what she says—not realizing the root cause had something to do with what you did. So we look at symptoms and try to address them instead of what underlies that whole setup of energy.

Fourth, we focus on daily events rather than long-term patterns. Maybe you try to be really nice to that person and make up to them, saying, "I'm going to really be kind to them today and put an end to this." Except you don't realize how long the conditioning has been going on. So you wonder, "Gee, why don't they get off it? Why are they so nasty to me?" But you're not realizing there's been a pattern that is very hard to change.

And finally, we assume that the whole system will be improved by optimizing its parts. This means thinking that if one person is feeling better—say in this situation, if I'm trying my best and feeling better—then everybody else will feel better too. But really, he makes the point that in a system when there's a balance, if anything is thrown out of balance and some position is improved for one element of that balance, it's usually throwing the whole system out of balance. Even though one element feels a lot better, it will have its consequences in another part of the system.

Now, applying these five errors to the earth—not seeing cause and effect, not seeing that what we do will have an effect over time, and that there are patterns that get set up over time that are deeply conditioned, making that conditioning really hard to change unless you're very aware of it.

He uses the example we're all familiar with: burning coal or oil or gas. We've been doing it for so long and thinking there's no problem with that. Even when we know there's a problem, it's hard to change the conditioning. The same with cutting down forests. We've been building and using land for agriculture for so long that in our consciousness, it's just the way things are. So even though you know intellectually that there's harm, that habit is so hard to change.

I was remembering one of the Buddha's discourses where the Buddha gives this example about how impurities can be thrown in a lake and you won't notice the consequences, or impurities can be burned in the air and you won't notice the consequences because it's such a wide space, or impurities can be thrown into the ground and the earth can absorb them.

That's not so, is it? If you think the Buddha knew everything, he wasn't taking into account our current condition where there's a certain point at which laws that have been going on since the beginning of time don't apply. So it's not seeing how those patterns become outdated and are no longer working.

He makes the point with a few facts: the temperature of the earth is now one degree centigrade higher than it was at pre-industrial levels. It seems that right now we're in the middle of it rising another degree, which is having huge impacts. But it could rise by as much as 6.4 degrees centigrade if it continues for the next century or two.

One degree centigrade is where we are now. Can you imagine 6.4 degrees more?

He presents the striking reality that the effects of our actions remain largely invisible to us—we don't see the effect on cutting down the forests, which account for twenty percent of climate disruption. When forests are destroyed, CO2 is released into the air while the trees that would transform that CO2 into oxygen are gone. The plants that naturally cool the earth are no longer there. We might understand this intellectually, but we don't embody it in our hearts.

The effect of just one degree centigrade higher temperature creates a four percent increase in water vapor. As the atmosphere heats up, more water evaporates, causing intense rainstorms and floods, along with record-breaking high temperatures. When he wrote this book, record highs were outnumbering record lows two to one. Just last week I heard on NPR that there were around 2,000 record highs in the United States over the past month or two, compared to only 40 record lows. This is simply climate cause and effect playing out before our eyes.

In the biosphere, we're witnessing a loss of biodiversity without seeing the cause and effect and long-term consequences of this destruction. It disrupts the delicate balance we depend upon. The fires burning in Colorado right now illustrate this interconnectedness perfectly. Much of the devastation stems from pine

beetles that have grown unchecked because warmer weather has affected their proliferation. These proliferating pine beetles are devastating the trees, and when a pine beetle attacks a tree, the tree dies and retains only ten percent of its original moisture content. Each piece affects every other piece—all these dead trees become kindling for any spark that ignites. It's quite sobering to contemplate.

Another way we fail to recognize cause and effect appears in our consumption patterns. Population growth combined with our increased technological capacity to exploit Earth's resources has resulted in an astounding increase in material consumption. Consider this: in 1900, the United States consumed approximately 160 million metric tons of material. By the year 2000, we consumed 3 billion metric tons. The author calculates that if everyone lived as North Americans live, we would need seven additional planets to maintain our current material lifestyle.

So, not to depress you entirely, what is the answer? This is where mindfulness becomes essential. We must honestly examine the effect of our personal actions and consider how we want to be present on this planet.

The author offers a stark example: "Our failure to understand or accept that we're pushing the Earth's climate system beyond its limits every time we turn on the lights, use electronic devices, drive vehicles, or in other ways use or burn fossil fuels or denude the forests is a matter of life and death for billions of people."

Now, how do you live with that awareness without becoming completely overwhelmed by guilt? This remains a genuine question for me. I drove here today. Yesterday I was speaking with Jaime, who rides bicycles everywhere. He's put only 3,000 miles on his car over the past two years because he cycles wherever he goes. At the picnic, I found myself feeling inspired by his example while simultaneously feeling like such a glutton—the ugly American, you know.

But I believe there's a balance between overwhelming guilt and genuine awakening to our effect on the planet. We need not become so immobilized by our choices that we can't appreciate and enjoy life, but we can become more conscious of our decisions.

As I reflected on these facts, particularly on cause and effect, I thought of Jaime and another person in my world who often sits on my shoulder—my friend Julia Butterfly Hill, who has visited here several times. I've told her this directly: "If you knew how much you're with me every time I'm about to throw out extra paper..." She laughed when I said, "It's good, though sometimes I wish you weren't in my head, but there you are. What can I say?"

There's something powerful about cultivating mindfulness in how we move through life, especially when we're doing something that, if we pause and really consider it, prompts us to ask: "Is this helpful or not?"

And to just slow down enough to get in touch with your choice rather than acting on automatic pilot—that makes a difference.

So I would like to read this commitment again and have us get in touch with it. Not with heavy-duty weight where we're burdened by it, but where it becomes a source of real joy. Why don't you close your eyes as I say this. In fact, we'll do the first one and the second one—I didn't do that last week.

*First commitment: See the systems you're part of.** Really recognize the dharma principle of interdependence. No human is an island. How wonderful that life connects you to everything around you. Take that as a dharma practice. See yourself in the web of interconnectedness.

*Second commitment: Be accountable for all the consequences of your actions.** Can you take that on as a joyful responsibility? To do the best you can, be accountable for all the consequences of your actions—for yourself, for all the people you influence, and for the planet. You might even imagine what that might look like in the places where you go unconscious. Just bring a little bit more consciousness to the fact that your actions have consequences.

*Third commitment: Abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice.** So again, another dharma principle. The first one—interdependence, anatta. Second one—law of cause and effect, karma. And this third principle is the foundation of a good, peaceful heart: sila. Right speech, right action, right livelihood—three components of the Eightfold Path that bring about a sense of ease and peace and openness in the heart.

Bob doesn't talk in terms of dharma principles. He doesn't use jargon at all. He mentions Buddhists briefly in the introduction, but very off-handedly. These are universal principles—the law of moral justice, which exists in every spiritual tradition. But the Buddha particularly said: if you want to find peace in your heart, then don't cause suffering.

Now, more than ever, this principle is essential if we're going to change our place on the planet. More than ever, we are asked to have some restraint, to have some self-control, to be cooperative. We're all in this together. Harmony within the system is essential if we're going to maintain balance—harmony, to the extent that harmony is a conscious choice.

Of course, disharmony is part of the world, just like earthquakes and volcanoes and old age, sickness, and death. But as far as moving from "me" to "we," moving from the individual to the common good—if you have an understanding of the law of interdependence and of cause and effect, then you see that the welfare of others is intrinsically connected to your own welfare.

In the Buddhist tradition and other spiritual traditions, it's often put as "do no harm." That's the basic attitude of right speech, action, and livelihood—not causing suffering. The inverse of the golden rule: don't do to others what you would not want them to do to you. But really, on a more positive expression, the notion of ahimsa—not just nonviolence, but the goodness that comes from caring, from acting in a harmless way. The gift of harmlessness.

I was reading an essay by Stephanie Kaza where she talks about an "eco-sattva"—a bodhisattva pledged to

end environmental suffering. It really comes down to the basic fact that all people have a right to live on a healthy planet, a planet with as little toxicity and consumption and climate disruption as possible.

But even beyond all people, beyond human needs—not harming others means taking into consideration all the species that make up this delicate balance, caring for the earth, not harming the earth.

Here, I'll just read—the moral obligation to accept limits on human behavior. This is radically different from how we think in terms of "Well, if it's good for me, why not?" And changing from an us-versus-them mentality to... When I was growing up, I remember when they first had the picture of the Earth from outer space, and there was this big poster—maybe some of you remember it from Buckminster Fuller, I think it was—that said, "We're all passengers on spaceship Earth."

Just having that... oh, I'm getting goosebumps remembering this... just having that experience when we first saw that picture of the Earth from outer space. That was such a radically new visual: "Oh, that's our home. It's not what's in it for me. We're all in this together."

So to change that us-versus-them mentality, a moral obligation, he says, to resolve conflicts peacefully, to cut material energy and consumption, to rise above economic self-interest, to place climate and biosphere needs above human economic needs and rights, to rescue the innocent and protect the most vulnerable, to reduce economic inequality, and a moral obligation for restorative justice.

When we do this, both in our own personal life as well as holding that vision for healing the planet, we affect everybody around us. Just like he says, you don't know the effects of your tiniest actions—you don't know the effects of you living with greater integrity in your life.

So again, as he suggests, to take these commitments—just get in touch with this commitment: the third commitment to abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice. That is, as best you can, to live a life of integrity for yourself, for everyone in your life, and for the sake of the planet. If you can see that living by that dharma principle, which I'm sure you're quite familiar with, is an act of caring for the planet, it up-levels your whole motivation to be aligned with your values. "I'm doing this for myself and because I care about the planet." What a joyful responsibility that is.

To really take these basic dharma practices in the context of a larger rippling effect that we have because we care about the planet—it gives a whole other dimension to our dharma practice.

So we just have a few minutes left if anything comes up from any of this that you want to share.

"Hi, I'm Hannah. When you spoke, it reminds me how we have a synchronicity—I kept wanting to say synchronicity—how we are connected, and out of fear we push other things away. But because that connection is intrinsic to who we are, we feel that isolation and loneliness, and it's only when we are fearless and we do connect with that, that we feel a lack of duality and we're able to—which is our essence—we are able to identify with that oneness. Does that make sense?"

"And you're saying that fear gets in the way of feeling that connection?"

"Fear gets in my way of feeling that love and connection. But when I go past the fear and I just stand in it, like if I stay in the suffering and then I transcend it, then I'm able to feel that connection and the fear goes away. And when I'm coming from that, I'm able to be a vehicle of the flow that goes through everything."

"Yeah, lovely. You can just hold on to it. It takes going through the dark places that say, 'Oh no, I can't face that,' to get to that place of real caring. But when we touch the caring and feel connected, then there's a whole different motivation for acting consciously."

"And for me, very much it's beyond the mind, the intellect. I don't have access to it. And I also don't have access to it in the future, in the past. I only have access to it in the present. Right now."

"Yeah. Great. Thank you."

Any other last comments?

Okay, so let's close with a little loving-kindness for ourselves and for the earth. And as you do, seeing the understanding of karma—cause and effect—and sila, acting with integrity, as being gifts to the planet as well as to yourself, because it affects all the systems that you're a part of.

May I feel all the caring inside my heart. And may I share my love well. May I see through fears to open to all the goodness inside. May I help awaken the true nature inside for myself and for all beings. May all appreciate this life...

that we're given and care for the planet.

May our coming here together be of benefit to all beings everywhere.

Next week Lama Palden will be here, and I'll return in a couple of weeks.

Thank you.

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