Stewardship and Intention as Gaia Practices

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 39:31

This is the third talk in this series, which I've been calling Appropriate Response at the Tipping Point. I'm inspired by this book by Bob Doppelt, *From Me to We*, and also from the current issue of *Inquiring Mind*, an excellent issue on ecology, deep ecology and concern for the environment.

This book is written by Bob, who is a systems change expert and also a Dharma student, as well as something of an expert on climate change. He teaches up in Oregon at Willamette University and University of Oregon, and has an organization that he heads called the Resource Innovation Group.

He wrote this book as a follow-up to a book he wrote a few years ago on sustainability, where he realized that although he felt good about the book that he wrote, it wasn't clear as to what exactly would be needed to shift our consciousness—what will be needed to shift our consciousness as more and more climate change affects us all, as it already is, and as it seems like it will be continuing in that direction.

What he did was take five Dharma principles, but he doesn't talk in terms of the Dharma. It's very mainstream. He did such a beautiful job in explaining these principles in a non-jargon, non-Buddhist way. Very skillful, as he is an instructor, a teacher, a college professor.

We've taken these five principles—we've gone through three of them so far—each of them based on a natural law. That is another way of saying the Dharma. One aspect of Dharma principles that would lead to a commitment to shift one's consciousness.

So far, the three laws leading to the three commitments that we've covered:

First, the law of interdependence, which means that we are all connected. This is another way of saying emptiness—the emptiness of a separate self—that we are all connected and part of a system much larger than us. These are all supporting this shift of consciousness from me, the individual way of seeing things, to realize that we're part of something much bigger and that we need to care for it. When we can see that other perspective, we're more likely to care for it in a meaningful way.

So that law of interdependence—understanding that we are part of something much larger than our separate self—leads to the first commitment: to see the ecological, social, and economic systems of which you are a part. See your part in the greater systems.

Second, the law of cause and effect—the law of karma. Actions have consequences, which leads to the second commitment: be accountable for all the consequences of your actions and the consequences on those systems.

This is not going to be new to you, but it's seeing ecology in this perspective—to apply these natural laws, which are part of Dharma practice, to a global consciousness. I find it really quite brilliant the way he laid it out.

Third, the law of moral justice. Once you understand that you're part of something larger, then you want to, as you become more conscious, see that happiness lies in non-harming. That is the basis for the Eightfold Path: sila, samadhi, and panna. Sila—right or wise speech, action, and livelihood—that's the basis for the training the mind and the heart and wisdom to arise. The commitment that would come out of that is to abide by society's most deeply held universal principles of morality and justice, that that is where true happiness lies. To just lead an ethical life will start you making wiser choices in your life, especially as you see more that you're part of a larger system.

This leads us to the fourth commitment, based on what he calls the law of trusteeship. Once you...

Once you see that you're part of a bigger system and understand cause and effect—that actions have consequences—and you are living with integrity and an ethical life, then you begin to understand your place in that system.

If you have greater power, if you have the capacity to influence everything around you, that naturally gives rise to a compassionate, caring stance. There is a kind of universal moral principle that the more power one has over others, the greater is the duty to use that power benevolently.

This represents a real leap for most people who have power. This would be a very different world if those who had power realized that it is both their responsibility and a joy to use that power benevolently. But once you are really aligned with the Dharma, you see—oh, of course! How could I want to harm another if I've got the power to relieve suffering? Then it behooves me to do what I can to be benevolent.

So Henderson calls this the law of trusteeship. It's really about expressing your caring and compassion. The basic law of compassion being the natural expression of a wise heart. This is what motivated the Buddha to teach after he was awakened.

"Oh, what do I do now?" And I think I mentioned this here before recently—pardon the redundancy if I have—but there he was, awakened, enlightened, asking, "Oh, wow, well, what do I do now?" At first he wasn't so excited about teaching because he said, "Oh, what if I try to communicate what I've learned and people don't get it? It would be a vexation to me." Those are the words in the discourse. Then he saw that yes, that's what he needed to do, because it's possible for others to wake up. And so he spent the next forty-five years of his life teaching out of compassion.

This law of trusteeship is really also based on the understanding that you don't really own anything on this planet. Somebody says, "Oh, I own this land." In their minds, they do. And relatively, "Oh, I have the deed." But nobody owns land, truly. Nobody owns all the resources on the earth. They might have power and a legal right to say what happens to those resources for a while, but those resources in a world of

interconnectedness belong to us all.

As Ram Dass says, we're just accountants in the firm. The wealth or the material that comes through us is moving through us. When you really see the idea of no ownership—which in Dharma practice means you don't own your thoughts (what a relief!), you don't own your emotions (thank goodness!), they're just coming through you, you don't own this body (it has its own laws), you don't own anything—to see on a macro level, we don't own the earth. We're part of the earth. We're part of an ecosystem, one very influential part, but the earth is home to everything that lives on it.

This shifts our consciousness to being trustees, because we have a lot of power and affect what goes on here to an inordinate extent, as never before in history. I was reading—oh, maybe it's in Henderson's book, or maybe it's an article I was reading recently—but some are calling this the Anthropocene Age. You know, the Pleistocene and the Mesozoic and all of those different ages in the history of the planet. This is the first time that one species is the major influence of changes on the planet.

Which has its downside, doesn't it? But if we see ourselves as trustees, then it has an upside if we can wake up in time.

I'm remembering, as I was putting down these thoughts, seeing one of my favorite performers, a musician named Andreas Vollenweider. Anybody know Vollenweider's music? He's the Swiss harpist who writes the most amazing, beautiful music. He was giving a concert in the Greek Theater a number of years ago—a really high guy. And he said something that still touches me when I think about it.

This was around 2003, 2004, during the Iraq War when things were getting intense. And he pleaded with us, saying, "You here in America, we look to you—you're a very important part of our family. You're our big brother in the best sense of the word. And as an elder, as a stronger, more powerful brother, we look to you for support and understanding so you can inspire and guide and lead us to a better world."

I remember it was a fabulous concert, but that was the most memorable moment. Tears were streaming down my face and many others'. It was this heartfelt plea: Look at your place. Look at your place in this world—and beyond just us in this country, but for all humankind, to see our place in the bigger world.

There's what Julia Butterfly Hill calls "a joyful responsibility" once you see the effect you have, that you can really make a difference.

So here we are, trustees. And what Bob does brilliantly in this fourth commitment is examine what being a trustee entails in our society. He looked at all the legal documents of trusteeship and discovered certain duties that come with being a trustee. He simply applied those duties, those obligations, to being trustees for this planet—which in the fullest sense is our living trust. This is our living trust. It's alive, and this is the trust. To see ourselves as trustees means following the basic guidelines of any trustee.

Here are some of those guidelines. First, the duty of loyalty. When one is entrusted with an estate or

resources, the duty of loyalty means we act in the best interests of the beneficiaries. In this context, the beneficiaries are all the other beings on the planet and all the generations to come, as well as the human race itself. We all benefit from good trusteeship.

So we act in the best interests of the beneficiaries, which means being completely fair, with no favoritism. If you're dividing an estate, you want to do it as fairly and impartially as possible. A trustee shouldn't appropriate assets for private gain. While a trustee should be compensated for managing a trust, one of the duties is that there be equitable distribution of compensation for the efforts of being a trustee.

Here's where I'll share some rather striking facts about trusteeship, particularly in the US and UK. The top 1% of U.S. earners receive 23% of the nation's total income—almost triple the 8% share they held in 1980. The top 1% also own over 34% of all privately held wealth. This was in 2007; it's probably jumped since then. The top 20% of the population own 85% of the wealth, while the remaining 80% own just 15%.

In the UK, the richest 10% of the population are more than 100 times wealthier than the poorest 10%. The US, with less than 5% of the world's population, holds about 25% of total global wealth. Europe, with about 11% of the world's population, owns about 32% of the total wealth. So 16% of the world's population owns 57% of the total wealth. Less than 1% of the global adult population owns more than a third of the total global household wealth.

Equitable distribution of compensation is a duty. Another aspect of the duty of loyalty as a trustee is to become aware and accept responsibility—not just to make money, but to see the planet, the climate, and the biosphere as public goods, not private assets.

One last duty of loyalty: to treat all beneficiaries fairly. Bob makes the case that in certain countries where there is equitable distribution of assets—namely Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, which have very high standards of living—they have far fewer health and social problems compared to the US and UK. When people are treated fairly, society as a whole is better off. This is just common sense, but we have to get it into our consciousness.

The Buddha, in one discourse, talks about the duties of a king. He says that one of the first duties is to ensure that the poorest of the land are given their needs and necessities. Because if they're not, and there's a big discrepancy between poor and rich, then there will be a disgruntled segment of the population which will have an uprising, causing war and chaos in the land. So he spells it out: A good king, a wise king who doesn't want chaos in the land, distributes the assets in a way that everybody benefits.

So that's trusteeship—the duty of loyalty. Another duty is the duty of prudence: a trustee must discharge duties with care, skill, and prudence.

That means a trustee should avoid risky investments, should acquire knowledge and skills needed to effectively act as responsible trustees and educate themselves, and understand how the living trust works and their responsibilities and how to perform them.

In terms of global trusteeship, it means a duty to abandon the idea of continuous economic growth, that economic growth is what we're based on, is what wins. We need to redesign the consumer paradigm instead of take it, make it, and waste it, to have an understanding of how assets are limited and there's a recycling that's needed, to use resources sustainably, to follow the precautionary principle, which means that the burden of proof is on corporations not to harm rather than on the public to prove that it will harm. And also to prepare for and adapt to climate disruption. To really be seeing in the big picture where this is leading and to have preparation for it, and a duty to monitor and disclose when things are getting out of whack.

So he asks, do you see yourself as a trustee? And before we look at this commitment, I want to just share with you his words: "Do you see yourself as a trustee of the living trust that is the earth? To what extent do you strive to perform your duty of loyalty, duty of prudence, duty to monitor, duty to disclose? Once you understand that what humans do today will determine the health and well-being of everything on the planet, you must acknowledge that we're trustees of the living trust that is the earth."

So here's the commitment, and I'll just put it out to you. If you want to, I invite you to go inside and see if this is something that you could take in and take to heart. Realizing that we need to make the shift from me to we: the commitment to acknowledge your trustee obligations and take responsibility for the continuation of all life on this planet. And as he says, there's a power in taking this commitment inside. You're a trustee on this planet. And it needs you.

Now we get to the fifth commitment which is based on the dharma principle that what we do matters. That basically we have a choice. What he calls the law of free will. And this is really another way of saying that we are creating our karma in every moment. The Buddha said, through intention, we are creating our world. We are what we think; with our thoughts, we make the world. And to really see that you have a choice, the law of free will, breaking free from the false beliefs that control your life and your organization, and to realize you can choose your own destiny. That what you choose matters. And how you participate in this unfolding over the next few years has a very powerful rippling effect.

And he talks about what gets in the way of choosing to participate wholeheartedly as trustees. Even if you know the score, it's not easy to make this commitment. And as I was reading the chapter, I must say there were all kinds of feelings that came to me where I know, and I've been educating myself a bit on this score, and there's a part that is saying, can I really make a difference? What will it take to make a difference? And it depends what day it is for me between saying, what else is there to do? And what can I do? Can you relate to that? And that choice point is really the one to keep alive and see you are choosing one way or another, you're choosing.

And he talks about the things that get in the way, and how the process of self-change happens. First of all, he talks about what's called the confirmation bias. And I've talked about this as well in neuroscience, that once you have a belief, your brain looks to everything that will confirm that belief. And if your belief is,

"What's the point? Forget it. Who are we kidding?" Then you will tune into all the information that will corroborate that belief. And you might be aware of the other stuff, but you'll kind of tune it out.

And there's actually a lot of very inspiring information out there. We've never been as conscious as well as we've never been as unconscious in some ways in our consciousness, that can inspire. And once you decide to move towards choosing your destiny and choosing to be a trustee for the earth, then you start to notice all of these inspiring dimensions and you're in the process of change.

And he talks about the process of change. I thought this is really fascinating. There are different stages of change, particularly around this subject of climate change and how the planet is unfolding. The first stage, the disinterested stage, where it

Here are the four expressions within this disinterested stage. First is reluctance—there's too much inertia. "Oh, I'm comfortable where I am. Yes, it's a problem, but it would just be too much to try to make a difference." Second is the rebellion reaction, where you have a high investment in the dysfunction: "What do you mean there's climate change?" Third is resignation, where you feel overwhelmed and lack confidence that any change can happen. And fourth is rationalization: "Oh, it's not my problem. I'm not personally affected, so it's okay."

These overlap but are distinct. Reluctance is inertia and comfort. Rebellion means you're invested in not believing. Resignation feels like too much. And rationalization declares it's not your problem at all.

What changes you, what gets you out of this disinterested stage—which perhaps comes to all of us—is first a disturbance, like a catastrophe that wakes you up. If you're living in Colorado, maybe experiencing all the fires, or Hurricane Katrina, or tsunamis, you start connecting the dots. "Oh my goodness." This is just like the Buddha saying that suffering is what awakens us. There needs to be enough disturbance to shake us out of our complacency.

That's often how we move out of this disinterested stage: through disturbance, awareness building—getting information that challenges our beliefs—seeing that small steps feel good, and having supportive relationships. You're not doing this alone.

If you can move out of the disinterested stage, you enter the deliberation stage of change, where you say, "Okay, I get it. I think I want to be part of more consciousness on this planet in an active way," but you're still deliberating. To move from deliberation, goal setting helps. You've got to weigh the pros and cons, weighing the information. We need to see two upsides for every downside in order to make change. If it's equal, inertia wins out. "Well, I've been doing it this way. I can go along." But if you see the upsides far outweigh the downsides, you're motivated to change.

Then you move to the design stage, where you clearly understand, "I'm going to change"—changing to being an active trustee. In the design stage, you have a plan that works for you with a limited number of clear, workable goals. You don't want to overwhelm yourself.

Next comes the doing stage, where you say, "Oh, I am changing." You hold yourself differently. You have a positive attitude about shifting your identity. Instead of being discouraged by how far there is to go, you're inspired. You start looking for the good feelings and successes that come with that.

Finally, you move to the defending stage, where you're really going from me to we. You're an active trustee, and you realize, "I have changed, or I'm in the process of changing more and more," but that's your identity, and you want to invite others to join you.

He says there are three keys to change: sufficient tension or dissonance between your life and the facts—"Oh my goodness, something's got to give here"—sufficient confidence to do what's necessary to reduce this dissonance between how things are and how you'd like them to be, and seeing that the advantages of change far outweigh the disadvantages.

Given that, here's the fifth commitment, and I invite you once again to take this based on the law of free will: to break free from the false beliefs that control your life and any organization you're part of, to realize you can choose your own destiny, and to choose that destiny as a trustee of the planet.

Just wear that for a moment. I have a choice and what I do matters. What I do matters not only to me, but to everyone I am in contact with. Whatever stage you happen to be in, feel okay about being right where you are and know that you're heading in that healthy, benevolent direction from me to we.

I know this isn't your typical dharma talk, but it feels so inspiring and moving that I appreciate your staying with it.

Continue beautifying this talk (part 6/7). Maintain the same tone and style as previous parts.

I would invite us all to hold these seeds of commitment in our consciousness and to keep allowing them to joyfully sprout in our hearts. I'm not saying I have all the answers, and I'm not claiming I'm at that defending stage. I can do my part, but I want to be more than just talking about it. We really are all in this together.

I know some of you have been very active and committed in your love of the planet and caring for it, and you've inspired me. We all need to inspire each other. That's the spirit I'm sharing from.

We have a few minutes for comments and reflections. Andrew shared this morning that he heard on NPR about the drought in the central part of the country—we haven't had a drought like this since the 1930s, around the time of the Dust Bowl. Usually droughts are in smaller areas here or there while other places get rain, but this huge expanse of land experiencing such drought simultaneously. We're at the tipping point, with more and more signs appearing.

One person shared that she's recently found joy in cooking, making things she used to buy in packages—yogurt, cookies, croutons. It has slowed her down and brought all these other benefits too. That's the beauty of finding joy in small things and thinking, "This is pretty cool."

When asked about deep ecology, I understand it as Joanna Macy and John Seed describe it—not just seeing environmental problems as things that need fixing through recycling and small actions, but recognizing that we are part of a larger system. We see the interconnectedness of things, where we are not separate from the whole, both subject and object, understanding our part in the bigger picture. It's not just about what I can do to make things better "out there," but recognizing that we are the system affecting everything else, all interconnected.

Jenny shared a beautiful example about being asked to care for a chicken. She studies sustainable agriculture but found herself resisting the commitment—having to wake up five minutes earlier to feed the chicken, let her out, watch her. She discovered those same resistances I mentioned, even for this small action. But committing to this little act of caring for this chicken has been profound, connecting her to this being that provides eggs and is part of her little ecosystem. It has connected her to the food system in a larger way and to compassion for animals that give us life through food. It was profound to move through those resistances and make that commitment.

This gives me the opportunity to address something I promised someone who emailed me—a fellow named Carl from San Diego who has been listening to these talks. Carl pointed out that I left out one important piece when discussing carbon footprint problems: the extent of our animal-based diet has a huge impact. I was amazed to learn that an estimated 51% of greenhouse gases come from the livestock industry.

The main sources of greenhouse gases from animal agriculture are fourfold. First, deforestation of the rainforests to grow feed for livestock, which contributes hugely to releasing CO2 instead of converting it to oxygen. Second, methane from manure waste—and methane is seventy-two times more potent as a global warming gas than CO2. Third, the refrigeration and transport of meat around the world. And fourth, the raising, processing, and slaughtering of the animals, which uses massive amounts of water and other resources.

Fifty-one percent. That's just amazing.

So our food choices have a huge impact. I'm not here to say you've got to change your diet, but you might just consider that each time you choose a veggie option instead of a meat one, you're really contributing to the wellbeing of the planet. It's a nice way to look at it instead of feeling guilty. You know, if you eat fish or whatever you eat, you can choose to contribute in a meaningful way.

So I hope we all keep each other awake as we go through these times as consciously as possible.

Let's close with a short loving-kindness meditation. I thank you for your attention.

First, reflect that you are part of a larger system and that your actions matter—your life of integrity matters, your compassion matters—and that you can choose your place in this consciously. Let yourself feel the wholesomeness of choosing to care for yourself and the planet, sending kindness toward yourself

and to all beings.

May all be free of suffering. May all know wellbeing. May all wake up to their true nature. And may our coming here together be for the benefit of all beings.

Including the earth in that—may the earth feel our love and our care and be healthy and thriving. May all beings and the earth be at peace and at ease and free of suffering.

Thank you. See you in a month.

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