Connecting Inner and Outer Responses to Climate Change

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 37:41

Our next presenter is sitting up here in his beautiful coat of many colors, Donald Rothberg. He's been practicing the Dharma since 1976, and he's really been very active and a pioneer in bringing the Dharma into the world of activism and peace work. He was instrumental in keeping the Buddhist Peace Fellowship going and teaching classes in communication skills and peace work—all that good stuff. He's the author of *The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World*. So, Donald, welcome.

Thank you very much. I should also mention that I have gone through very rigorous training at the Clown School of San Francisco, which is very important. And I also want to express my sadness that my collaborator, Conda Mason, is not here this afternoon. We had been planning for some time, but difficult personal things came up and it didn't work for her to be here today. I'm going to try to bring in some of her perspective. She is a teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center, very involved with permaculture. She's been developing Hub Oakland and is especially interested in issues of climate justice and really addressing questions of how climate impacts the most vulnerable and the most marginalized. I'm going to bring some of those perspectives in, and I hope we all can bring those perspectives in.

I wanted to begin with a short meditation. I want to do this by saying some lines which I find very beautiful and inspiring. In fact, a lot of times when I practice, I say these lines twenty, thirty, forty, fifty times a day to myself to invoke really a quality of awareness and a quality of mind. You can do this with your eyes open. I was reflecting on this—this really is a kind of invocation that has us see our minds as of the earth. This is from the sixteenth century Tibetan tradition, Dagpo Tashi Namgyal. It goes like this. Just let this influence your awareness:

Open like the sky, pervasive like the earth, unshakeable like a mountain, shining like a flame, lucid like a crystal.

And feel free to take that home and repeat it twenty or thirty or forty times a day. Let me say it one more time:

Open like the sky, pervasive like the earth, unshakeable like a mountain, shining like a flame, lucid like a crystal.

Most days I call my mom up, who's in her eighties, and she likes me to say those words, and we just do it

on the telephone every day. I especially like it because it actually cuts through, in a way, the distinction between awareness and the earth, between inner and outer, and lets us really experience those qualities.

I think that's really the essence of what I want to bring up today, which is about the need for a deeper relationship, maybe even a marriage of our inner practices and our outer response. This afternoon, we've really been invited as presenters to move more into the area of how do we respond. What I want to explore particularly in this short period here is the crucial way that we need to connect our inner practices with our outer responses. I think this was very much implied by what James and Rob in particular were saying. But I think that connection of our inner practices and our outer responses is absolutely critical. I think we actually need nothing less than the resources of our spiritual practices, our spiritual principles are needed for what needs to happen.

So I want to explore that in a few different ways. First, talking more about that vision. Then secondly, talking a little bit more about the inner responses. And then last, talking some about the outer responses. I wanted to bring up some, in particular Spirit Rock as a community, because I think it's very helpful in terms of outer response to think of personal response, the response of one's community or organization or family, and then the larger collective response—to see how we respond in all of those ways.

So first, on that vision—it's very possible that without that marriage, as it were, of inner practices and action, we fall into distortions. If we stay with our inner practices being primarily private and our outer action following models of activism that have been prevalent in the past, I don't think that works.

Without that practice connecting with response to the world's needs, we run the risk of our beautiful practices becoming, in a way, a wonderful, privileged peace while the world burns.

I wanted to read something from a text by Bhikkhu Bodhi from a few years ago, where he said: "It seems to me that we Western Buddhists tend to dwell in a cognitive space that defines the first noble truth largely against the background of our middle-class lifestyles—as the gnawing of discontent, the ennui of oversatiation, the pain of unfulfilling relationships, or in Buddhist theory as bondage to the round of rebirths. Too often we do not focus on the suffering of the world."

Many of the teachers I worked with in Asia, people like Sulak Sivaraksa, and liberation theologians from Latin America, expressed real concern about the future of Buddhism—that it might become, in their words, a kind of escapism.

Yet we also know that traditional, or prevalent modes of action and activism are also very subject to distortions. There's an occupational hazard for people who want to do good: to be self-righteous, to be attached to their views, to be unskillful with challenging emotions—particularly anger—and often to be fueled exclusively by anger. To demonize the enemy, to find themselves burning out and not really able to sustain for the long haul, to lack those qualities of equanimity, and to not be able to be skillful with the immensity of difficulty or suffering.

So guess where activists learn how to correct those possible distortions? Learn about attachment to views, working with difficult emotions? They learn that in the Dharma—right here.

You see that there's such a joining that's really called for. This connection points to something new—the imagination of the earth is coming up with a new kind of being. It's really the bodhisattva of our times that would be able to respond deeply but have the inner skills to do so for the long haul, to be able to be with difficulties, to keep that sense of freedom of mind even with very challenging situations.

My own sense is that this is actually an evolutionary development—something that's being called forth because without those being connected, I don't think we have the resources to really pull off what needs to be done.

And it's very much the spirit of the Buddhist bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is being reborn in our times. Remember who the bodhisattva is? The being that is dedicated both to awakening and to helping others. That makes a commitment: no matter what happens, I will be there for other beings.

From the Theravada bodhisattva tradition: "Crossed, I would cross others. Freed, I would free others. Tamed, I would tame others. Calmed, I would calm others. Comforted, I would comfort others. Purified, I would purify others. Awakened, I would awaken others. Oh, may I awaken to supreme perfect enlightenment and bring well-being and happiness to all beings."

And from the Zen tradition, the Bodhisattva vow:
"Living beings are infinite. I vow to free them.
Delusions are inexhaustible. I vow to cut through them.
Dharma gates are boundless. I vow to enter them.
The Buddha way is unsurpassable. I vow to realize it."

What I find is really being invited is our own way of doing that. And I want to say very directly that for me, this means really finding our own place to be active.

It doesn't mean everyone becomes an activist. I remember that beautiful response from the African-American theologian Howard Thurman, when asked by a young man, "What should I do?" Howard Thurman had created the first interracial church in the Bay Area in the 1940s and was very active. This was near the end of his life, and you might have thought he would have said, "We have this project that needs people. Why don't you do this or that?" Instead he said, "Don't ask what the world needs, but ask what makes you come alive, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

It's another way of saying what Paul was expressing in terms of being in love with life—ask what makes you come alive. And I think very much of Joanna Macy, my dear sister's teaching, which has stayed with me for a very long time. She says that the great turning, which is what we're in the midst of, has three dimensions. Some of us are drawn to one, some to another, and some to yet another. We all find our place where our gifts are. This is a very important point, because this is not about everyone having to be on the

front lines, but really finding where we are, where our gifts call us in the turning.

She said that there are three aspects of the turning. First is what she calls holding actions to prevent further damage. There's a lot of that needed—a tremendous amount. Second is really seeing how our institutions work and developing alternative institutions. This would be developing environmental education in the schools, different kinds of medical approaches, new approaches to parenting or community—really doing things in a way that is sustainable in whatever field we feel drawn to. Very crucial.

And the third is a shift in consciousness, really having one's action be part of this shift towards that sense of interdependence, towards that way of being that is sustainable—whether it's teaching yoga or teaching meditation. What I find crucial is that it's very helpful for all three of those to know that the others exist and to be connected. Some people will be activists, but it's really good to know that part of that turning is a shift in consciousness. I just want to name that because this isn't about telling everyone, "You should do this, you should do that." What's being called for is to feel that inner calling and know what that inner calling is.

So what kind of inner responses are we talking about? I think a lot of it is very connected with what Bob was saying in terms of those principles. I think a lot of it is to really make those connections between inner and outer, very much like Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1950s and 60s, coming out of a traditional monastic life in the presence of crisis.

This is what he said: "When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who are suffering? After careful reflection, we decided to do both."

That's what this is about—both. To go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. "We call it engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. We must be aware of the real problems of the world. Then with mindfulness, we will know what to do and what not to do to be of help."

Very crucial. And so we can really look at those core principles of our practice.

And I discover that when working over the years with training programs to connect inner work with outer response, our core understandings of the Dharma are often given only in individual interpretations. Our practice develops beautifully in an inner way, but the challenges arise in how we bring our practice into the relational realm and into the collective realm.

Another issue with our practice—and this is offered as a completely loving critique of our beautiful practices, as well as a self-challenge—concerns how we approach the traditional three trainings in the Dharma: ethics, meditation, and wisdom. We tend to emphasize meditation most strongly, while not

always emphasizing ethics and wisdom with equal depth. This happens partly because we primarily teach meditation, bringing in the other trainings but not always with the same thoroughness.

When we examine ethics, for example, and very much as Bob was expressing, we commit ourselves to non-harming—but how do we extend that commitment to all aspects of our lives? How do we truly examine our ethical commitment in terms of future generations? Are my present actions harming or tending to harm future generations? Are they harming people in other lands? We know the impact of climate change falls especially on those who are not causing the problems. This is our challenge: How do we look more deeply?

In our wisdom practice, how do we truly see causes and consequences? This requires looking deeply into these core teachings: What are the roots of suffering? How do I understand the structure of self? What kind of self am I? We know that we are very conditioned in this culture—not uniformly, but we tend to maintain a very self-centered self, even as we're meditating. One can be a very deeply self-centered meditator trying to deconstruct the self. There is tension there—do you sense it?

How do we understand that our times are calling for this self-centered, hyper-individualized self to become an interdependent self? This is challenging. It's very difficult sometimes to know what to do in terms of outer response.

Some things we can be very clear about. Looking at Spirit Rock, for example—I've spent the last week reviewing all the documents, and there are beautiful ways that Spirit Rock and its capital campaign are totally dedicated to green buildings and greening everything on the land. It's truly amazing. I was also inspired by attending meetings of the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition, which offers a beautiful, precise analysis of Berkeley's carbon footprint. Someone at the UN called it a model for all cities.

Their analysis was very precise: here's the footprint from transportation—people coming and going from Berkeley; here's the footprint for housing and all its different needs; here's the footprint from waste. Transportation accounted for 46% of the footprint. Berkeley voters committed the city to reduce its carbon footprint by 33% by 2020 and 80% by 2050—which may not be quite enough, but represents significant change.

Our challenge is that we can do wonderful things where we have control—for example, at Spirit Rock with housing, usage, and everything from how we use paper. But what's really challenging? Transportation. This is where we confront our own habits, convenience, perhaps privilege.

To see this graphically: How many of you came here today in a car with one or two people? How many came in a car alone? How many came by bike? How many walked?

What I feel every community needs to do is assess its carbon footprint. Transportation proves especially difficult because it involves the lack of nearby public transportation and would require genuinely encouraging carpooling. But that's challenging, isn't it? Do you feel yourself bumping up against our

habits? What would it truly take?

Some people say that in the long run, pulling this off requires a mobilization akin to the mobilization after Pearl Harbor.

If we really thought this was of concern, how would we act? How would we act? And what would we look at in terms of our own behavior? This, for me, is very challenging. And I can feel a little uncomfortable, which I think is healthy.

In terms of responses—outer responses—just to name them, I think we all know there are many responses we can implement in our households that can be quite beautiful, and we can reduce our carbon footprint. I've been reading a book called *The Low-Carbon Diet*, which promises to help us lose 5,000 pounds a year—because the average American consumes 55,000 pounds of carbon annually. We can very easily cut that. Sweden, which I believe has a higher standard of living than us, consumes 15,000 pounds per person. We consume 55,000. There's so much we can do on a household level, and I think this is within our control. This is accessible.

We can also act in our communities. As I mentioned, already a huge amount is being done. I think everything that's easily within the control of Spirit Rock is being acted upon. The harder things like transportation will take a little more work and some action, I believe.

It's also encouraging to know—this is what I believe—that the large-scale collective solutions are actually pretty clear. Those of you who've read Lester Brown know they're quite straightforward. There's an outline of what needs to be done to reduce by 80% by 2020: increase energy efficiency, shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy, stabilize population and eradicate poverty, restore the earth, feed people. Under each of these, he has fifteen specific actions. So it's quite clear.

Of course, what's challenging is that our leaders are not doing this at all, or very little. How do we find ways to respond at all of those levels in our own ways—personal, community, and that larger level?

Bill McKibben said something very interesting in an article a week or two ago. He said that if 10 or 15% of the population develop impeccable, sustainable ways of being in their own personal lives, it'll be nice, but not much will change. If those 10 or 15% of people choose to be very active with the horizon of helping to shift the larger systems, everything will change.

That really calls forth the bodhisattva. I want to finish with this, and maybe do a little exercise.

As we connect this inner work and deepen it, seeing more and more how to have it flow into the different parts of daily life and into our actions, what can inspire us? I was thinking of the bodhisattva figure.

The bodhisattva figure knows several things—these are really our training areas. First, the bodhisattva knows freedom—knows the freedom of awareness from having practiced, knows how mind states are temporary and can be worked with, knows where he or she gets stuck and how to work with that, and can

increasingly touch freedom even in the most challenging situations. The bodhisattva has that training.

The bodhisattva also has the training of knowing how to be with suffering, knowing how to be with difficulties. This is our training—we have to train in this. We have to keep training. The bodhisattva knows how to be with suffering and can be skillful with one's own suffering, with other people's suffering, and is ultimately not scared of suffering, not scared of pain. That's a training we have to have deeply in these times.

The bodhisattva has skillful means—all sorts of tricks, all sorts of ways of working with challenging situations. I think ultimately, in our own being and among the people we know, we have to really encourage this combination of the inner work and the outer response. We have to see where am I called to respond in this area of climate change.

May people who are active gain the gift of dharma practice, and may that give them tools that let them act while avoiding those distortions and problems which are so pervasive. This is very, very crucial.

So I want to invite you to reflect for a moment on that Howard Thurman quote and ask: what makes me come alive in the context of our day? Where are you called right now in terms of your own response? This could be at a personal level, in your community, or helping with the collective issues. What one or two trainings, further practices, or actions are calling you right now?

Take a moment now to find a neighbor and share what pulls you, where you are called particularly in light of our theme for the day. Turn to someone near you and spend just a few minutes sharing what's there for you.

I'd love to hear from a few people about what's calling you right now.

"I'm really called to look at investments and examine what's causing damage and what's beneficial."

Beautiful. Thank you.

"I was thinking how much easier it was for me to answer the question on a day like today, with all these wonderful community organizations present. I'm thinking about not only doing something but joining a community."

Yes, plugging into existing communities and organizations. Thank you.

"I think one of the most common organizations people belong to that's so powerful are churches. Churches are right on the cusp of acknowledging this crisis, but they need to take that further step. Many of us can help them along in that way. The concept of God has often been very disembodied, but there's change happening, and I don't think it has to be that way. There is movement, but we could encourage that."

So being more active in one's community, particularly in churches, synagogues, temples, or meditation centers like Spirit Rock.

"I work for the Marin County Bicycle Coalition, focusing on transportation. One of the things I was called to do a few months ago was to ride the Climate Ride—a 300-mile bike ride down the California coast from Eureka to San Francisco. I am not an athlete. I'm usually the last person in group rides, not one of those fast, energetic riders. So this is a big challenge for me, but it's to raise awareness about climate change and promote bicycling for transportation. I'm raising money for the Marin County Bicycle Coalition. If you'd like to help me out, please find me."

Thank you for that commitment.

I want to end with three very brief passages that capture this marriage of inner and outer, inner response and outer response, and bringing that into the world.

The first is from the Jewish tradition, from the second century. Rabbi Tarfon said: "It is not upon you to finish the work. Neither are you free to desist from it."

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The second passage comes from Odo Sessho Roshi, the Zen teacher who guided Gary Snyder in Japan. He offered this profound simplicity: "Listen to this with a big mind. In Zen, there are only two things. You sit and you sweep the garden. It doesn't matter how big the garden is."

Do you understand? Whether our garden is our own backyard or the entire Earth, the practice remains the same—we tend what is before us with presence and care.

Finally, these words from Dina Metzger, her poem called "Song":

"There are those who are trying to set fire to the world.
We are in danger.
There is time only to work slowly.
There is no time not to love."

In these lines lives the essence of dharma practice—recognizing the urgency while maintaining the patience, holding both the danger and the love, working with deliberate care rather than frantic desperation.

This is how we bring our practice into the world: not trying to finish all the work, but never giving up our part in it; sitting in meditation and sweeping whatever garden we find ourselves in; working slowly with great love, even when—especially when—the world feels like it's on fire.

Thank you.

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