Right Action on Climate

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 49:44

I was sitting there listening to the different teachings, poems, and songs, feeling very deeply moved by the depth of love and connection to this earth. As each person spoke, you could see behind me the beautiful leaves of the trees, the sun shining on them as they made their food. Those leaves nourishing the tree—all happening right now as we sit here.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a very rural part of Wales, an ancient land where the land is still considered sacred. When the military tried to take over what was known as the Sacred Mountain, the local people came out—the religious people, the farmers, and the ordinary folks—and they demanded that this land be given back, declaring it sacred. After discussions, demonstrations, and some very strong-willed Welsh folks making their voices heard, the land was returned.

This is still considered sacred land. I realize there aren't so many places in the Western world where we really understand the sacredness of this earth, so I feel very fortunate to have grown up in a place where that is understood. It's as though we are reclaiming something. We Western people who have valued so highly the intellect, individualism, and progress are beginning to remember again where we come from and the sacredness of the earth.

It may sound a little funny to hear a Buddhist nun talking about the sacredness of the earth, because the Buddha speaks about the emptiness of all things. Everything is impermanent. Nothing belongs to us. It's all empty. When I was thinking about what to speak about today, what came up for me quite strongly was the apathy in the Buddhist world around the climate change issue—there's a lot of resistance to looking at it.

I realize that all of you are here because you're not resistant, but many people have reasons why this is seen as not relevant in the Buddhist world. There's the sense that all things are impermanent, so of course the earth is going to die at one point. Of course we're going to die at one point, so why bother? Why bother getting involved?

It could also be not knowing how to deal with the emotions it brings up. I've had a lot of things evoked through this day. I've been very moved in many positive ways, and also heartbroken to hear about Alberta and heartened to hear about Nebraska. There can be a sense of not wanting to go there, not wanting to go into that emotional realm, but to stay centered and calm and equanimous because it looks like a safe place to dwell. But it isn't a safe place to dwell if one isn't open to the realities of what is going on in the world.

There's a story that comes to mind from the suttas, from the Buddha's time. The Buddha was visiting a group of monks who had been living together for some time. He would travel around and visit different

monks and nuns who were practicing together in India, checking how they were doing, if they were on track. He went to this group of monks with Venerable Ananda, his cousin, attendant, and spiritual brother. Since you have to walk everywhere, he walked to this place and found among this group of monks one monk in a hut who was sick, lying in his own dysentery. The other monks were out doing what they were doing—going on alms rounds, meditating—and this monk was just lying there in his own excrement, abandoned.

The Buddha, who more than anyone in the world understood the empty nature of all things—the fact that this body, these feelings, these thoughts, perceptions, and sense experience are not me and mine—understood this more profoundly than anybody else on the planet. His response to this monk lying there in his excrement was to ask his attendant to go and get some water. Then with his own hands, he bathed this man. He bathed him, cleaned off the dirt, changed the sheets, made him comfortable.

Then he went to the monks and asked, "Why is this man lying here like this?" They said, "Well, you know, he's sick. He can't do anything. He's of no value, so we're just leaving him there. He'll die. We can't do anything about it."

The Buddha strongly scolded those monks and said, "He is your family now. You've gone forth. He is your family. You must take care of him until his last breath."

This story really touches me. The Buddha, who so deeply knew the emptiness of all things, also so deeply knew the importance of taking care, of loving, of caring. He lived those two truths.

When I think of that story, somehow for me it has a kind of parallel to the situation we are in now on this planet Earth, where we've taken so much from her. We've mined and cut off tops of mountains and poured poisons into the earth to extract more gas.

I mean, it's insane, really, what we're doing. We've been doing it for a very long time, and over the decades we've become more conscious of what we are doing. I think at one time it wasn't really clear, but the mass scale of the destruction that we're causing as a human race is known, and yet we're still doing it.

And I see that as like that monk who's lying there in his own excrement—we're leaving the earth in that state. And do we want to do that? Are we just going to leave it like that and say, "Well, there's nothing I can do about it. It's all too much. I'm just going to get on with my practice"? Or are we going to turn and get our hands dirty?

It's not easy to turn towards the situation we're in. And Ayya Santussika very soon will tell us some of the ways we can meet and address the situation we're in. It's not easy. We have to get our hands dirty. It might smell bad. It might make us feel a little bit difficult and turn our stomachs sometimes. Or we might feel that we can't quite manage it. It's frightening. We don't feel that we've got the means, the skills. But just take a step. Just take a step, and things start to open up. People start to connect together. And even if you feel you really can't do very much, like this beautiful song that you sang—if we sing together, then we

have great strength. We can do great things.

To me, this is an ethical issue. There's no doubt that this earth had a beginning. It's going through a process and it will have an end. This has always been the case. There's no doubt that each one of us who has been born and is going through our life will die. There is no question about that. So this isn't about eternal life or making things last forever. This is about responding in an ethical way, in a loving way, in a compassionate way. And holding that truth of emptiness, holding that truth of impermanence while we do it.

So we're not doing it in a desperate way or in a frightened way or trying to make everything all right. But we're doing it out of love and compassion, out of responsiveness. Because it simply is the right thing to do. And because once we know the state of the situation, we can't really get on with our life. We can't really just go home and pretend it's all fine. We can't. This is where the anxiety comes from. This is where the addictions come from. Because we're trying to not feel the enormity of the situation.

So using the skillful means that the Buddha gave us, we need to turn and look and face and step into the situation that we are in. And like I say, the Buddha spoke about world expansion and world contraction. There's a whole sutta about the demise of the human race through following greed, hatred, and delusion. We're witnessing it. We're in the midst of it. And then also the whole planet Earth falling apart and then coming into being again. And this happens. This is natural.

But there's also what we're doing, what the human race has done and is doing that is speeding up that process so rapidly. So that's the part that we can meet and respond to. So I hope that between us we'll be able to offer some suggestions of how each one of us can respond.

Now, I wanted to speak a bit about the crisis which is building up and that this crisis has a purpose. If we have enough resilience to turn towards what is happening inside and outside of ourselves, if we can really recognize that what's going on is not just like a coincidence, but we are in a certain stage of the evolution of consciousness and the external situation actually comes to our aid to create that sense of pressure which we seem to need in order to have enough sense of urgency to really pay attention.

And it's not the first time. Since this planet is spinning and since there's life on this planet—over three billion years—there have been always again and again phases of great pressure, which have been creating such a shift that new forms of being came into life.

And we as a species now, we have that opportunity to use the situation to renew ourselves, to renew our ways of relating to life, to come out of that myth of separation which we have been living in. In terms of the evolutionary progression, we are not doing anything wrong. This is exactly how it's supposed to be. But we can't stop here at this point. We have to keep going because otherwise we will simply disappear from the face of the earth, and the earth will of course go on and other life forms will follow. So it's really up to us what we want to do with the situation we have.

I really think the most important thing is to develop the inner strength and the resilience so that we can use what's happening for the benefit of ourselves and for all beings we're living together with on this planet. How can we do this? The most important thing is to develop the resilience to take in what's happening. And in order to have that resilience, I think we have to try as best we can to live a life which is congruent with what we know to be true.

Because if we increase that congruency, we'll have an increased sense of self-respect, a sense of strength, a sense of peace. And then from that increased sense of strength, we have increased opportunity to make a difference. It's a spiral which can lead us towards an ever greater sense of connectedness.

James, you were speaking about this morning how in the beginning, for two years, you thought you didn't know what to do, and you felt confused and depressed. Then you started, made one step and another step, and connected with some people. And suddenly, seeing we are not alone in this, and there are so many people actually who are waking up to this, and if we work together, we can evoke energies and powers which are far greater than the sum total of the beings who are together in this.

I really have strong faith in that because this process of life evolving on the planet has been going on for so long. I don't have to sort it all out, I don't have to have a plan, but I have to get out of the way and I have to look through my own confusion and my own distortions which I'm getting hijacked into by those strong emotions.

So it's very important to have a good practice so that we can stay centered, but not centered in a way that we are cutting off—because this is not really centeredness, this is just escapism. Being truly centered means to let all of that come through me and to honor the pain, as Joanna Macy says, to honor my pain for the world and not think that there's anything wrong with it. But then not stopping there, going down with the pain, getting all depressed. That's just the first step.

If we can hold steady with it and recognize that we are not alone in that, it starts to change because it's the dark night, and then that pain transforms into a strength. And then from that strength, we can give our gifts. We don't have to sort it all out. You just do your thing.

And if you don't know what your thing is, then I have a whole list of things. I'm always the sister with the list. So I gave my list to you. You'll see it on the side. It's not only mine—we worked together to create concrete action. And I'm going to talk about concrete action after we get the presentation up.

But I want to tell you that I've gone through lots of phases too with regard to this whole area, including the phase where I'm being told, well, be careful. That was a warning, I think. Be careful—you might get to be known as the activist nun. Is that so bad? Right action on climate, what can we do?

Your list is in front of you. My fondest wish is that when you take this list with you, you'll circle some items and you'll make a commitment.

Now, I don't know if you've heard the word *adhitthana*. *Adhitthana* is a Pali word, and I was just told today that the *adhi* part means higher, and *tthana* means to stand on or a foundation. It's a way to stand higher. So an *adhitthana* is like a commitment, except it's a commitment you don't put down. You give yourself a time frame, you keep it for that period, and you do it.

There are a number of things on this list, and I want to talk through them just to give you an idea that maybe you're already doing some of these things. You probably are. But there might be some others there that would be a stretch. They certainly were for me a stretch, and it took a commitment to go ahead and do it.

One of the first steps is to become knowledgeable about this area. You've gone a long way with that already, but I wanted to recommend three sources that are worth looking at. One of the papers that I was quoting from this morning is from the American Association of Advancement of Science, and it's called "What We Know." That's worthwhile to read. Watching the "Do the Math" movie that's put out by Bill McKibben and 350.org is very worthwhile. You can find it on Vimeo. This article by Margaret Klein, who's a climate psychologist, was really helpful to me: "Our society is living a massive lie about the threat of climate change and it's time to wake up." This is what really helped me understand how to live in climate truth and how to tell the truth, because at first it's hard to break the ice on that and actually talk about it with people.

Speaking in line with truth means that if somebody says, "Oh, this is natural, these changes happen," then I got the courage, thanks to Margaret, to step up and say something about that in a kind way, in an informative way, in a way that gathers in rather than alienates, hopefully. I'm still practicing on that. Speaking up when people say things that you know are not true, connecting the dots between climate change and the conditions we're experiencing.

Someone said to me, "But they're having really cold weather over there." And of course, that's the problem with calling it global warming. Most climate activists now call it climate change. One friend told me in Canada they're calling it climate weirding. So really just speaking out—like Margaret in her article, she says, if someone said, "Isn't it weird weather?" What if, you know, if that's on Facebook, what if forty-five people wrote back and said, "That's climate change, honey."

This is, I think in some ways, the most exciting time in all of human history. Now, why would I say that? Not because I'm into drama. But it's exciting because it's the very first time ever that everyone on this planet, all human beings, are facing the same threat. Always before it's been one group against another. One group stands to gain and another group stands to lose. And even the people who think they're gaining aren't really, because the world that is being created is not going to be nice for anybody.

So what that means is we can gather people in. We can talk to the people around us. We can talk to the people we're connected to. And we can talk to the people we're not connected to.

I was invited up to Canada to do some teaching. I was invited to British Columbia—to teach in Port Townsend, Washington first, and then Salt Spring Island and Victoria. And then from there, I was going to Alberta. I was going to teach the Dhamma. I went with the themes love, devotion, and determination. So I taught a daylong on Salt Spring Island on that topic, and when I opened the floor for questions, the very first question was about climate change: How do we bring those teachings into climate change?

I don't think they were prepared for what they got. And that night in Victoria, someone in the back of the room said, "I heard you talked about climate change on Salt Spring Island." I'm like, "Were you there?" "No?" "Great, fine."

The British Columbians assured me, "We're very progressive. We're very in touch with environmental issues—we always have been. But everybody east of us wants the tar sands."

So I wondered what I would encounter when I landed in Calgary—tar sands central. What I found were people who were very much opposed to the tar sands. One social worker, wife of a minister, both retired after thirty-five or forty years in their work, told me, "No people of faith want the tar sands."

I started learning that we can very easily think: those people over there, those people with that political leaning, those people with that religion, those people with those ideas—they're outside the group that's going to understand. When people realize what's happening, I realize it takes more than talk. But there's a point at which people understand, and some of them understand now more than we know.

So I've noticed in myself when I start thinking, "Well, I can't talk to them about that," I just override it. Do it anyway. It's very surprising.

*Invite people to commit to take action.** One of the most wonderful things about this work is participating in these organizations. Every time I do it, I am uplifted. I am so impressed with how peaceful the people are doing these actions, how loving, how much people care about the planet and the beings on it. And they're not all Buddhists—some of them are, but it doesn't matter. We connect at the heart level about all of what's going on.

Doing things together is fun. It's exciting. It relieves and absorbs the anxiety and the fear. So you can connect. These groups have my contact information and they send me things online, and I sign the petitions. Then I go out and participate in rallies. You can do that too.

You'll know which groups resonate with you when you read what they write—whether it has a really peaceful, loving sound or if it has an edge to it. All of these actions need people who will come out with a solid, peaceful base. So you're really needed in this, coming out with your practice, being a source of stability. This is really important.

The online petitions make a difference, and then you can write actual letters. Ayya Santacitta and I walked across the bridge when Nurses United came out in the thousands and spoke out against climate change

and their concerns for human health. Walking across the Golden Gate and back was wonderful with my dharma sister. It's good to do things together.

We can persuade our government. It's important to write letters—the ones you send through regular mail have more impact. We can meet with our officials. You can create a relationship with your representatives, with your officials at every level. Go to their office with a group of people with concerns.

Those people are concerned too, and they're under a lot of pressure to do other things than the right thing. So what do you do when a friend is doing the wrong things? You bring equanimity and you try to help them get on the right track. We can feel that way about everybody.

There's an action coming up that's going to be important. The hearings will start in June and July at the California State Assembly for a bill called SB 52, the California Disclose Act. This is a very important part of the whole picture because disclosure of who's paying for political ads is crucial. We need clean money in the political process, not the translation of great wealth into great power in our government. So this is an important piece. You can find out more at cadisclose.org.

We need to resist business as usual.

And I know that may sound like a tall order because we're all kind of caught in this web. However, we can do everything that we can to speak out against the continued extreme fossil fuel extraction in all of its forms. We can even write letters to companies. You know, there are some companies that really do care, and they're really doing sound environmental things, and then there are other companies who are greenwashing. Greenwashing is when they say the right words, and they act like they're going green, but they do exactly the wrong things—they're really doing it as a ruse. So you have to notice that and watch out for it. That's another reason why it's really valuable to be connected with activist groups because you learn what's really going on. You've got friends who are seeing things. You get to understand what's actually happening.

This was the rally against fracking. We want fracking banned in California. The fossil fuel companies are salivating over the Monterey Shale. The Monterey Shale is on the San Andreas Fault. Fracking is creating earthquakes in places like England and Arkansas where they never had earthquakes before. Fracking is hydraulic fracturing. They force, with great pressure, millions of gallons of water down these wells with toxic chemicals and break apart the rocks below in order to get the natural gas or oil out of there. It poisons the land. It poisons the water. The last thing we need to do in California is send millions of gallons of water down a fracking well. And the water is contaminated—it cannot be recovered. The land gets contaminated.

If you've watched Gasland, anybody? And Gasland 2? Josh Fox told us on a conference call not long ago, preparing for this rally, that everywhere he goes where there's fracking, fossil fuel industry people walk out with money in their pockets and the land—the people's property—is destroyed. It's just destruction in

their wake. Josh Fox got involved because he was minding his own business, living on his little place in Pennsylvania when someone knocked on the door and wanted to lease his property for fracking. When he started looking into it—he's a filmmaker—he found out how horrible this is and then made these films. They're great. He really helps us understand what's going on. These are things that the fossil fuel industry doesn't really want us to understand.

So this rally—this is Sacramento, the Capitol building—and there were 3,000 or so people who showed up. A friend of mine who works with the government, actually working hard on this clean money issue, said when 3,000 people show up, government officials pay attention. Every time I go to one of these things, I think, wouldn't it be great to have 30,000 people out here? We could have 30,000 people out here. Nobody would be able to ignore that.

A lot of people say, "But I'm not an activist." And that's okay. You don't have to be an activist. All you have to do is show up and walk around with your friends and smile and be peaceful and happy. You might want to carry a sign or not. New York did it, we can too. Grassroots organizing—that's all there was to hold fracking out of New York State, and they're still holding it out of New York State. There's no fracking in New York State at this time. It's a moratorium and not a ban. They need a ban, but Pennsylvania's got fracking all over, just across the river. So it's not because the fossil fuel industry hasn't been wanting to get into New York, it's because the people have said no. And that's what we need to do in California—say no. You get all these signs: Americans against fracking, Californians against fracking, farmers against fracking. Don't think you don't belong in this.

The world watches California. Recently, a number of us involved in the Dharma Teachers Climate Group had a conference call with Kumi Naidoo, who's the executive director of Greenpeace International. Fantastic person, fantastic organizer, fantastic human bodhisattva. One of the things he said—among many important things—was, "If the United States goes to renewable energy, I guarantee China will follow." That was really encouraging, because a lot of people say, "Well, it doesn't really matter that much what we do, because there's China, and there's India." The world still looks to the United States, whether we like it or not, whether it's a good idea or not.

We have the ability to move to entirely renewable energy. This is part of what's so frustrating—we can do this, but we're not, for the reasons we talked about before. And if the world is watching, guess who watches California? It's the rest of America. How many other things have we started over here? So we have this wonderful opportunity. We have a responsibility. If 30,000 Californians came out in Sacramento, the world would notice.

You never know where these nuns might go. Oh, do you know who that is? Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi. This was mentioned before. He doesn't usually wear a cowboy hat, but he told me he went to this rally in Washington, DC to stop fracking. He said it was so incredibly hot, he couldn't stand it, and someone gave him a cowboy hat. I love that photo.

He's one of my heroes because he's got the Dhamma down in his bones. He knows more about the Pali Canon than anybody I know on the planet. He can tell us everything about why we should be doing this, every reason that's in the Dhamma, and he's out there doing it. Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi is probably the foremost translator of the Pali texts into English. He's also the founder and chairman of Buddhist Global Relief. He's an amazing man.

Now there are many personal choices we can make in our own lives. Taking every opportunity to reduce the use of fossil fuels. Reduce, reuse, compost, recycle. Someone handed me a piece of paper as I walked out and suggested a book called *Meatonomics*. Fifty-one percent of climate change comes from animal agriculture, and government subsidies for the meat industry exceed those for the fossil fuel industry. I'd like to know more, but I do know I've been a vegetarian for a really long time. I would encourage any reduction in meat we can make.

And buying local and organic. Agriculture is a very heavily fossil fuel oriented and chemical oriented business. We need to really support organic local farming. We need to support the people who have a different vision about business—a different vision about how we can relate to each other.

When you find someone like that, give them your money. There's a woman I know who has a nail salon, and the way she treats the people who work there, the way she treats her customers, it's really exemplary. I went to a print shop one day, and the way the person operates with the customers—you know that they put people above profit. There are larger companies that do this. Patagonia comes to mind. Credo Mobile, if you haven't switched from AT&T yet, they'll even buy out your contract.

This is important—noticing this new vision that we need to make into a reality about how we interact with each other, how we trade with each other, how we work together.

And gratitude is the best attitude. This gratitude for having people in our lives to share this with, for having the opportunity to go out and make a difference, for having the opportunity to call our representative and have the staff person on the phone say, "Thank you so much for calling. We're getting a lot of calls about this. I am so happy to pass this on to Representative so-and-so." It's very uplifting and encouraging.

A woman from Sacramento raised a question that touches the heart of our daily dilemmas: "We recently had a solar company come out to look at our house, and they said we could have solar, but we'd have to cut down these trees. I'm not willing to cut down my trees because they shade my house. If I cut down the trees that shade my house, then my house will get hot, and then I can use my solar to run my air conditioner." She continued with other examples—electric cars where you still struggle with where the electricity comes from, rebates to replace perfectly good refrigerators with more efficient models, the endless analysis of cloth versus disposable diapers that concluded there was no clear winner. "So I'm constantly having to choose what is the greater evil," she said. "Sometimes I don't feel like there are good choices." She kept her trees, by the way.

I think those are true dilemmas for all of us who care. My personal take is to do the best you can without worrying about it too much, and put your energy into the big pieces. Because it's not individuals who are going to say no to the fossil fuel companies. It's not even individuals putting solar on their houses—though it's important to do if you can. I'm not trying to minimize individual action. But we need to put pressure on our government to make the changes, because it's governments that are going to say no to these big interests. That's where the real power lies. So pay attention to what you can do, but don't get too bogged down in the small details.

Someone recommended a helpful resource: there's a book called *Cooler Smarter* that the Union of Concerned Scientists put out within the past year. You can get it from their website. The book goes through all those dilemmas and uses data to tell you which way to go, which can help navigate these everyday choices.

Another person added practical wisdom about contacting businesses: "You can also do this with your local grocery stores or coffee shops. If they're having practices that you don't like, let the upper people know—not the staff because they're not in a position to do anything, but if you take the time to write an email or a letter, and if there's enough of you, that makes a difference."

Finally, someone mentioned an organization that hasn't come up yet: movetoamend.org. They're working to amend the Constitution so that corporations are no longer treated like people with the rights of people. This addresses one of the fundamental structural issues we've been discussing—how corporate power shapes our political and economic landscape.

And this is an organization that Pachamama is deeply committed to. I just completed the Game Changer Intensive with Pachamama Alliance, and they strongly recommend this as one of the organizations that could make a tremendous difference if we unite behind this movement. They demonstrated how corporate rights have evolved far beyond their original intention. Originally, in the nineteenth century, corporations were established to serve specific needs and then dissolved once those needs were met. Over time, legislation gradually granted them increasing power. Now they wield more influence than individual citizens, creating what amounts to an oligarchy.

We've faced oligarchy before and successfully dismantled it through antitrust laws in the early twentieth century. We can accomplish this again through peaceful means.

Let me share two additional practical steps. First, anyone with bank accounts can transfer their money to credit unions and small local banks that invest in their communities, rather than supporting the big five banks that fund mountaintop removal and coal expansion.

"I'm glad you brought that up. Is divestment included in that list? I think I missed it in the presentation."

"It is there, though I didn't read it aloud. Divestment from fossil fuels is crucial, along with moving money into credit unions and local banks so funds are invested locally rather than in practices harmful to our

planet."

"I have another question about presenting this to people. Meat eaters are often very dedicated to their diet and might easily dismiss this message if told they must stop eating meat. Frankly, I don't understand why that's necessary. How does reducing meat consumption help address climate change?"

This is indeed a recommendation, and I understand your concern. I think it's more effective to suggest people simply try eating less meat. The issue with the meat industry is the tremendous methane production from livestock and dairy operations. Methane is actually a more harmful greenhouse gas than CO2, though it doesn't persist as long in the atmosphere. As global population grows and people in countries like China and India gain more discretionary income, they're consuming more meat and dairy. This means we're raising far more animals than ever before, while simultaneously clearing forests for grazing and feed production.

"What about eggs?"

"I was wondering the same thing."

Consider also the vast quantities of feed grown for livestock. If those grains fed humans directly, it would be far more efficient. When cereals go to animals to produce eggs, milk, or meat, we lose what people could eat directly. It's inefficient and involves tremendous cruelty—the way these animals are confined resembles slavery.

I want to emphasize that I'm not insisting people stop eating meat, dairy, and eggs entirely, but reducing consumption helps both the planet and our personal health. When we choose what's healthy for our bodies, it tends to benefit the planet as well.

There's a wonderful documentary called "Fed Up" premiering this Friday and Saturday at the San Francisco Film Festival before opening nationwide. It promises to spark an important movement.

"Can we take one more question?"

We have to finish now. Thank you so much for your interest and for listening.

To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org/donate.

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