Wise Action for the Earth

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 34:53

The question that really comes to my mind is simply: why do we think that the Buddha can help us understand our ecological crisis, given that he lived in a very different time and place long ago, far away in Iron Age India? He didn't really know anything about the kind of global warming that we're experiencing. He didn't know anything about melting glaciers, melting Arctic seas, melting tundra. For that matter, he didn't know anything about carbon dioxide and its role in heating up the atmosphere, or methane gas doing the same sort of thing. So why do we look to the Buddha for help in this particular situation?

There are a number of answers that can be given, but I'm going to focus just on one of them, because there's one thing that really leaps out for me from the tradition. It's the quite extraordinary parallel that I see—precise and profound parallels between what the Buddha taught about our personal predicament, our usual individual problem of dukkha and how to solve it, and our collective civilizational situation right now with regard to the biosphere.

What I'm pointing at is this: I think that what the Buddha had to say about our problem and what we need to do about it is really very much the same problem that we face collectively in relationship to the biosphere. I'd like to spend the few minutes that I have exploring that a little bit.

In particular, I'm going to give you one particular way of articulating what I think the Buddha was focusing on. I want to emphasize the connection between dukkha—suffering in the broad sense—and our sense of separate self. For me, this is actually the most important teaching of the Buddha: that he sees that the normal sense of separate self, the feeling that I'm inside and the rest of you are outside, that we're separate from each other, is one of the primary sources of our dukkha. It's not just that it's a delusion, but that it's a delusion that causes us to suffer.

In more contemporary language, we can say that the sense of self is a psychological construct. From this perspective, we can see that the Buddhist path is about deconstructing and reconstructing the sense of self. Moreover, because this sense of self is a construct, because it's not actually real, because it's inherently ungrounded, this sense of self that we normally have—feeling separate from others—is inherently uncomfortable, inherently insecure. Or, as I sometimes like to say, this sense of self is haunted or shadowed by a sense of lack.

That's how we normally become aware of it. It's the feeling that I think we all have. We know that we have it ourselves, but we're not aware that everyone else feels the same thing. This feeling that we all have that something is wrong with me. Something is missing. Something isn't quite right. It's one of the great secrets

of life, I think, that we all feel this, but we think it's our own problem. We're not aware that everyone else feels much the same thing.

Where it gets tricky is that we misunderstand the problem. We don't realize where it comes from, this inherently insecure self. We're conditioned by our society, and so we think we know what we lack. We learn pretty quickly from our society: we don't have enough money, or we don't have enough consumer toys, or we're not famous enough, or we don't have a partner, or our partner isn't good enough, whatever. We end up always looking out here, trying to hold on to something that we hope will fill up this sense of emptiness, this sense of lack at our core.

Of course, one of the essential Buddhist teachings is that there's really nothing there that we can hold on to. Everything is insubstantial. Since the fundamental problem is really inside us, it means that anything we might be able to obtain out here is not going to satisfy us. It's a symptom. If you understand your fundamental problem is that you don't have enough money, you're never going to have enough money, because that's a real misunderstanding of what the root issue is.

We can appreciate the Buddhist path from this perspective. Here I'm speaking out of my Zen experience. The Buddhist path is about learning to overcome this sense of separation. In Zen we talk about letting go of the sense of self or forgetting the sense of self. The Japanese Zen master Dogen said that to study Buddhism is to study yourself. To study yourself is to forget yourself. And to forget yourself is to realize your intimacy, your oneness with all things.

He also described his own experience after his awakening when he said he came to realize that his mind wasn't something in here, that his mind was nothing other than rivers and mountains and the great white earth, the sun and the moon and the stars. In other words, realizing that I'm not in here—I'm one of the ways in which all of this, all of you, all of us come together through all the causes and conditions. Overcoming the sense of separation, overcoming the feeling that there's a me inside.

And I think we can see how this empowers what is sometimes called the bodhisattva path. Nisargadatta summarized this beautifully when he said, "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I'm everything, that's love. Between these two, my life turns." Wisdom and compassion—the two pillars of the Dharma.

As we begin to wake up and realize that we're not separate from each other, we're not separate from the world, then we also begin to act in a way that responds to that understanding. We begin to realize that I can't separate my own well-being from yours. And we learn to live in a way that acknowledges and embraces this truth and works for the well-being of everyone.

Everything I've just said on the individual level also applies collectively. This is exactly the same situation we're in now in relationship to the earth. Except it's not the issue of an individual construction, but rather we have together as a species developed this sense of separation, this sense of alienation from the rest of

the earth.

Collectively we feel separate. We feel that the earth is something we can exploit and use and abuse in whatever way to satisfy our own needs and wants. But we don't feel a sense of responsibility or obligation because it's just there. It's not us. It's like a convenience store for us to draw from.

The other side of that is a collective sense of alienation that I think we as a civilization have. We're not sure what it means to be human. We're not sure what it means for us as a society, what we should value, where we should be going.

The comparable problem that occurs individually also manifests collectively. We look out and try to grab something that we can hold on to, some security. The collective version has become our industrial growth society, this preoccupation with never-ending technological development, increasing industrial economic growth. These things in themselves could be very valuable as means—they give us the ability to do things. But what's really happened, because we don't know what else to value, because we don't know where else to go, we've become stuck on the means. We have made the means into the end.

So technological development in itself, economic development in itself, becomes the whole meaning and the goal of our collective life. And yet we can sense that there's something really inadequate about that.

The parallel holds. We're still preoccupied with trying to secure and control ourselves. What we really need to do from this perspective is to begin to wake up, to begin to overcome this sense of separation that we feel between ourselves and the rest of the world.

Just as I, as an individual, if I start to wake up and realize that my well-being isn't separate from your well-being, and if I'm concerned to follow a kind of bodhisattva path—so that I want to live in a way that asks not what's in it for me, but what can I do to make this situation better—the same thing is true collectively.

It's become clear that at this point, we as a species need to wake up. The ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis. The Earth is really calling upon all of us to wake up or get out of the way. And what that wake-up involves is realizing that we cannot separate our own well-being from the well-being of the whole.

To wake up means to experience our non-duality with the earth—not only our source, not just our home, but our mother, a mother from whom we never really cut the umbilical cord. As we begin to wake up to this, we realize again that we can't separate our own well-being from its well-being.

This is the kind of understanding that we're reaching toward—realizing that the meaning of human life, especially at this particular point in history, is acknowledging and living in a way that sees our task in life as the well-being of the whole earth. This is the answer to this larger question: What is the meaning of human life? The meaning of human life is to realize the whole earth is our body and that we have this bodhisattva responsibility to work for its well-being.

If we do that, then the process of healing that will occur will also transform us as much as the planet.

I've given you a lot of concepts in a very quick way. I want to finish with a few lines by Rumi, who described this so well in a poem he wrote called "The Worms Waking": "This is how a human being can change..."

There's a worm addicted to eating grape leaves. Suddenly, he wakes up—call it grace, whatever—something wakes him, and now he's no longer a worm. He's the entire vineyard and the orchard too, the fruit, the trunks, a growing wisdom and joy that doesn't need to devour.

He doesn't become the vineyard. He realizes that he's always been the vineyard.

And that's our task. We don't need to become part of the earth, but to realize that we've never been apart from it.

David and I are teaching a retreat in the upper area now, and it's wonderful to come down, even though normally this time is nap time. But as David said, it's a time to wake up.

This sense of parallels between the individual and collective predicament that David was speaking about is in some ways a new way of seeing, but it's also been known for a long time. This is from Shantideva's eighth-century text, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*: "This entire world is disturbed by insanity due to the exertions of those who are confused about themselves."

This entire world is disturbed by insanity due to the exertions of those who are confused about themselves. It points to the predicament, but I think David's talk and this passage from Shantideva also point toward how we move, how we begin and continue acting.

I know we've already started with James's presentation, really bringing the focus onto action. Later this afternoon, the panelists will be particularly concrete about specific actions that help us respond to climate issues. What I want to focus on in this short time is how we can approach this work.

I think it's helpful in terms of acting to see that something new is being asked of us—to respond to these crises with a deep connection of inner work and inner inquiry with outer response. We may be imagining a kind of being, if we want to call it the new bodhisattva, that hasn't really been in our world in a very full way.

What I want to point to is this vision of training and action, and really the importance of connecting the inner and outer aspects. I believe that without inner resources we won't be able to respond adequately. Without the resources of awareness and kindness and joy and equanimity and wisdom, we'll burn out, we'll get discouraged, we'll succumb to negative emotions. We need these inner practices, I think in part due to the largeness of the problems.

And yet if our spirituality doesn't go outward, in a way we may be only embracing privilege as much of

the world burns. These are challenging imperatives for all of us to look at. It takes a lot of looking into how we use our energy, what's important, whether we feel called to this vision.

I think also of something Bill McKibben said in relation to climate change. I want to read a passage from something he wrote, which I think is very supportive of the notion that we need to help train and ourselves become these new bodhisattvas—these new beings dedicated to inner awakening and responding to the needs of the world at the same time.

He says: "If those of us who are trying really hard are still fully enmeshed in the fossil fuel system"—as most of us are; how many came by carpool? Good, very good. How many came by bicycle? How many walked? Very good. You know where I'm going with that one—"it makes even clearer that what needs to change are not individuals, but precisely that system. We simply can't move fast enough one by one to make any real difference in how the atmosphere comes out.

"Here's the math, obviously imprecise. Maybe 10% of the population cares enough to make strenuous efforts to change. Maybe they reduce their emissions by 15% if they do all they can in their homes and offices and so forth. And then, well, nothing much shifts. The trajectory of our climate horror stays about the same.

"But if 10% of the people, once they've changed the light bulbs, work all out to change the system—that's enough. That's more than enough. It would be enough to match the power of the fossil fuel industry, enough to convince our legislatures to put a price on carbon."

And talking with James, he said there's been some other studies which show that if only 7.5% of the population is really active and engaged, that becomes a critical mass. What I'm suggesting is that part of that 7.5%, and a very important part of that 7.5%, will be what we might call new bodhisattvas—those who are trained and skilled in the inner work and are also responding outwardly. We will connect with people from other spiritual traditions, with secular activists, with ordinary people, but there's something very important to contribute from those who can have that combination of inner and outer training.

I mentioned the bodhisattva, so I want to say a word about this ideal. Traditionally, the bodhisattva is the one who comes to awakening but is dedicated to helping others—not necessarily, in the Asian context, by addressing the structural problems of society, but perhaps more through kindness, through helping, through the large heart. That's why I speak of a kind of new bodhisattva.

Many of you know from the Zen tradition those beautiful lines: "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them. Delusions are endless, I vow to overcome them. The Buddha way is unsurpassable, I vow to master it." What does that look like in the contemporary world?

The training for the contemporary bodhisattva involves, first of all, many of the inner practices that we're very familiar with. The bodhisattva needs to be able to work with the mind and the heart and the body, and be able to track when difficult thoughts or negative thoughts arise. When fear arises, they are

someone who knows fear. When anger arises, they know anger—what it is, where it comes from. They can have empathy, but can also respond skillfully.

Through our mindfulness practice, through our wisdom training, through our development of the heart in loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and forgiveness, we learn how to respond to fear, how to respond to crisis. We become people who bring calm to a difficult or dangerous situation. The bodhisattva, through having done the inner work, has the equanimity to stay balanced when others are unbalanced. The bodhisattva is not afraid of suffering and is not afraid of pain because they have had training in how to be with what's difficult. Of course this is ongoing—I'm not saying that after this training all fear is gone. But can you see how this is exactly what's needed for our times? To have people who really have those capacities.

The bodhisattva also knows how to respond skillfully. There are what we might call intermediate trainings that the bodhisattva develops. The bodhisattva has skillful means and knows about skillful speech, has trained in wise speech, and knows how to speak in difficult situations without making things worse, without being reactive. The bodhisattva is very well trained in knowing how to work with conflict. The bodhisattva has been through several diversity trainings and knows how to be with a range of people, perhaps having spent time in a range of communities.

The bodhisattva has trained in—and not just trained but had a lot of fun—loving the earth more. There are whole series of ways to be, ways to train, ways to learn to connect more deeply with the earth on all sorts of levels: through our gardens, through really knowing the earth better, being immersed in it. Much of the energy to respond comes from cultivating love for the earth. That's where a lot of the energy comes from. We get training in community and community action. We get training in all sorts of other approaches that help us to act skillfully in various areas.

The bodhisattva, I think, also acts where there's a particular calling and vocation. I'm reminded of a very beautiful, powerful, and simple analysis of what's needed for transformation from Joanna Macy. She says that the Great Turning has three aspects.

The first is holding actions to prevent further damage. This is very crucial—the province of traditional activism. It's very necessary for many of us to act in that way at certain times, and for all of us sometimes.

The second is to analyze our institutions and develop alternative institutions that are sustainable. This is crucial. This isn't just about protest, right? A true transformation...

requires vision, requires other ways of doing things, and many of us are already exploring this in terms of alternative agriculture, economics, medicine, law, education, and so forth.

And the third aspect of this great transformation is to shift consciousness—to be able to help others come to a different understanding, very much following what David was saying. So this may be to train us to have a different relationship to our body if we're yoga teachers or Qigong teachers or nurses or doctors. It

may be to help people in meditation, to see things differently.

All three of those are necessary. And what I particularly got out of her understanding is it's not like we all have to do the same thing, but we have to go where we're called. We have to go where the gifts are, where the calling is, where the energy is. And it might be in one of those three areas primarily. But the important thing is to connect all three together.

So I might be a yoga teacher teaching a different way of being with the body, but I want to stay connected with those who are helping to prevent further damage. And I might, a certain percentage of my time, be an activist. Maybe most of my time I teach a different relation to the body.

And I think there's that calling which we have to have, very much like that beautiful statement—kind of paradoxical—from Howard Thurman, the African-American theologian, who said, in response to a young man... This was a man who had been a lifelong activist, started the first interracial church in the San Francisco Bay Area. And a young man asked him, "What should I do with my life?"

You might imagine he would say, "Well, we really need people at the church," or "Here's the movement now." And he said, paradoxically, "Don't ask what the world needs. Rather, ask what makes you come alive, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

And so I'll leave us with that and invite us to look for and demand training to connect our inner work and our outer response, because that's what the world needs and it also makes us come alive.

Thank you.

And we wanted to leave a little bit of time for any questions or responses. We understand there hasn't always been so much time so far during the day. I noticed there was one question in the back, one gentleman there, or comment.

"I just noticed how difficult it is sometimes to speak what we're trying to say, and how often we have duality in our language and we articulate a relationship with the earth when really we are the earth."

Thank you for that. Actually, especially difficult for a philosopher like me, which is why I wanted to end with that poem, because it's the poets, it's the artists, it's the musicians who do a lot better real articulation of that than somebody like myself. So use language differently. People say, "How do we relate to nature?" Say... It's here.

Other observations, reflections, questions? Could be from something earlier in the day that hasn't had time or space yet. Please, Susan.

"The name of the Rumi poem, was it 'The Worm is Waiting'?"

No. The title I have, and I'm not sure it's his original title, is "The Worm Awakes."

"The Worm Awakes. Thank you so much."

You're welcome.

In the far back, to my left at the back.

"Thank you for your talks. And one thing that has occurred over the years is that I often felt that now I've got it, and if I can just explain it to the other people, you know, in a good way, they'll get it and go with me, whether it's the women's movement or whatever it is, you know, you get an understanding. Nothing could be further from the truth. And very often the frustration... So I think in these efforts, you have to be resilient and have to be able to take failure again and again and again and keep on."

Great. Thank you. And remember the 7.5% understanding, because we don't need to reach everyone. At a certain point, it becomes contagious.

"So this is a share from something that happened earlier where I don't remember who was talking about holding hands. And it makes us stronger. And there's a beautiful song in Spanish called 'La Cancion es Urgente'—The Song is Urgent. And one of the things, and I sing, so I love that song. And it says... No, just one line, and it says, so it's urgent, it's 'la cancion es urgente, es un rio creciendo, una flecha en el aire, es amor combatiendo,' and there's a part that says..."

"Que si vamos cantando, no podrán detenernos" - if we're singing together, they cannot stop us.

This beautiful line captures something essential about the power of collective practice, of sangha, of coming together in dharma. When we join our voices - whether in literal song or in the song of our shared commitment to awakening - we create something unstoppable, something that transcends our individual limitations.

The urgency of the song reflects the urgency of our practice. In a world filled with suffering, with division, with forces that would separate us from our deepest wisdom and from each other, there is indeed something urgent about coming together. There is something urgent about remembering that we are not alone in this journey toward freedom.

When we practice together, when we hold hands as this community has been exploring, when we allow our individual streams of mindfulness to merge into a river of collective awareness, we discover a strength that no external force can diminish. This is not mere sentiment - it is a profound spiritual truth that communities of practice have known for millennia.

The dharma itself is urgent in this way. It calls us not just to individual liberation, but to the recognition that our freedom is intimately connected with the freedom of all beings. When we sing together - when we practice together, sit together, walk together in mindfulness - we embody this interconnection. We become living proof that separation is an illusion, that love truly is combating the forces of division and despair.

This is the gift of sangha, the third jewel of our refuge. In coming together, in sharing our practice and our commitment, we discover that the path to awakening is not a solitary journey but a collective song - urgent, unstoppable, and filled with the power of love in action.

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