The Four Noble Truths of Responding to Climate Change

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 1:06:14

This morning I want to continue the exploration of ethical practice. We began that last time with looking more generally at the place of ethics in our practice. We took the ethical precepts last time together. And for those here for the first time, all of the sessions here are recorded and are available on the website dharmaseed.org.

So we explored in some depth this sense of living ethically. It really is about how do we live with integrity, particularly with the challenges of life, the difficulties—individual, relational, in our communities, in our world. How do we live a life of integrity?

Lines from the Buddha from close to 2600 years ago: "One who is virtuous and wise shines forth like a blazing fire." And there can really be tremendous inspiration. Last time, I particularly encouraged us to not take the ethical dimension of our lives for granted. Sometimes we think, "I'm basically, as my sister says, a good human being, good person. And I don't hurt others too much. And I don't lie and steal too much. And basically, okay, you know, I'm here for meditation. I'm here for peace and bliss."

And those are wonderful intentions, but last time I tried to suggest that the ethical dimension of our lives actually is one where there can be very deep practice. It's a challenging form. Traditionally, there was this close relationship between ethical practice, our meditation, and our cultivation of wisdom. Those are traditionally the three areas of training. And last time in particular, I tried to point to the ways that ethical practice really is important in all the parts of our lives and not just, as we often think, in my personal interactions, my face-to-face behavior.

And I suggested that some of the ethical forms of practice at certain times in history actually involve our relationship to larger collective issues. We could imagine, you know, maybe being in the South in the 1940s or 50s, the ethical issue of racism and injustice might be very central for anyone living in that time. And we could look at other ways that the large-scale ethical issues really are very central. And I think that's true in our time.

But even in the time of the Buddha, the understanding of ethical practice, as I emphasized quite a bit last time, has a larger dimension than the face-to-face behavior and really has to do with how we relate to all around us and how we relate to others' behavior that might be harmful. From the Buddha also, "Non-harming is the distinguishing mark of Dhamma," or the path—to live a life of non-harming. And as I mentioned last time, he also understood that as not letting others harm. So it wasn't just what I do, but it's

also what happens in my community and in my world.

An updated version of this from the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh: "Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals." This is Thich Nhat Hanh's restatement of the first ethical precept, that of non-harming. He goes on, "I'm determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life."

And so today, I want to particularly connect this with our relation to the earth—to, again, this large issue that is right there for all of us, which is how do we relate to the growing destruction of the world's ecosystems, and particularly related to climate change. I thought I'd read first some of the statement which I got from the Spirit Rock website about Earth Care Week: "Earth Care Week is an opportunity to come together with our Sangha to both celebrate the natural world and address the major environmental issues of our time, including climate change."

And so, this morning, I want to talk about that ethical response and particularly focus on the issue of climate change, which I've talked about from time to time over the last few years. And I want to frame it in terms of the core teaching of the Four Noble Truths. So we could call this talk the Four Noble Truths of Responding to Climate Change. And it gives a valuable framework.

The Four Noble Truths, probably most or all of you know, is perhaps the core teaching of the Buddha. He identified what he took to be four truths. The truth that there is suffering. The truth that there is a cause of suffering. The truth that there is a way out of suffering, and the fourth truth that there is a path to transform suffering. We could say that the first two truths are about the nature and roots of suffering, and the third and fourth are about the nature and roots of freedom. This is a core teaching.

Interestingly, the original model of the Four Noble Truths, as far as I know from my study, actually was modeled after the typical kind of physician model for diagnosis in ancient India, which is very commonsensical. It's: what's the problem? What's the cause of the problem? What's the solution? And how do we get to the solution?

It's a very simple way to see the Four Noble Truths. Many people have applied this framework to various issues in this way. Ajahn Buddhadasa and a number of teachers in Southeast Asia have sometimes taken the Four Noble Truths into broader frameworks.

So I want to talk about the Four Noble Truths of climate change. I have a PowerPoint presentation for this—this is one of my early PowerPoint presentation dharma talks.

This is an overview of the Four Noble Truths of Responding to Climate Change. I want to express gratitude to three people who have deeply influenced this presentation. One is Bob Doppelt, who has been a key figure in bringing together dharma teachers around the issue of climate change, based in Oregon. He was very kind to let me use some of his slides, and I've taken many of them. Some I've modified slightly, but

much of this material comes from Bob.

I've also benefited from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who has his own version of the Four Noble Truths related to climate change, which I've learned from tremendously. My approach is somewhat different, but his insights have been invaluable.

I also want to thank Sarah Shadler, who I worked with for several years and who now lives in Massachusetts. She worked for many years with Friends of the Earth in San Francisco. About four years ago, we offered a full day in Santa Cruz devoted to practice and climate change, and I have benefited from her insights and some of the material we developed together.

We start with the first two truths, which I could call the bad news. This is the most serious issue facing us—possibly a 3.5 Celsius temperature rise by 2035—and it will increase all other problems. There is a huge gap, as most of us know, between the scientific reality and the political response. Everyone is being and will be affected. We all will be dealing with this for the rest of our lives, and humans will deal with this for the next few hundred years.

The good news—these are the third and fourth noble truths. In our practice we often face the bad news first and then get to the good news. There is cause for optimism. There is a great opportunity for transformation—economically, ecologically, socially, and spiritually—toward a sustainable and just world. There's tremendous potential, and many people are connecting the dots.

Secondly, we actually have the knowledge, skills, and technology to reduce warming to manageable levels. People know what to do. It's not technically difficult at all, though it would require great mobilization. The challenge is political and social, not technical.

Third, tremendous progress is underway. Rapid positive changes could occur with the right efforts.

Let me take us through the four noble truths individually, and then we'll have time for discussion.

The first noble truth calls us to look honestly at the nature of the problem. In our practice, the first noble truth invites us to look carefully at the nature of suffering as it appears in our individual experience, our relational experience, and in the world.

In the Buddha's teaching, it wasn't just about examining the different truths, but there were tasks connected with each truth. The Buddha said that the truth of suffering needs to be understood—embraced or entered into. This is not easy to do. We don't look at suffering from a distance; we enter into it.

Here, the realities of climate change must be understood. Some of this will be familiar, but for some of you, much of this may be new territory.

So first, let us examine the basic physics of climate change. This is the well-known greenhouse effect: incoming solar radiation strikes the Earth, and infrared radiation radiates outward from the Earth's

surface. When greenhouse gases—particularly increased CO2 in the environment—are present, this outgoing radiation is absorbed. It's as simple as that. The infrared radiation becomes trapped in the Earth's atmosphere and reflects back to Earth, and the process accelerates. More radiation is trapped in our environment, and the Earth grows warmer. It's as simple as that—not particularly profound physics.

For the last 10,000 years, the Earth's temperature has remained relatively stable. This stability has allowed civilization to develop. You can see this temperature stability since the last ice age. While there is much detail in the scientific data, the basic picture shows relative stability for the last 10,000 years—which is changing now. We are altering a 10,000-year pattern.

We know that global temperature correlates with CO2 levels. When there is more CO2, temperatures rise. The data shows parts per million of CO2 and how it has accelerated tremendously in the last fifty years after relative stability. We are familiar with these numbers—350 parts per million, 400 parts per million. Today we are over 400 and rising rapidly. This represents the highest concentration of carbon in three million years, and it has happened extraordinarily quickly.

We have seen a large increase since World War II—a total increase of close to one degree Celsius so far, with most of it occurring in the last two decades. Emissions have risen 61% since around 1990. The evidence appears consistently in our headlines: 2007 was the second warmest year, 2008 the eighth warmest, 2010 tied for warmest on record, and 2012 became the warmest year in U.S. history. Things are changing rapidly, and they are moving in one direction.

Here we see Arctic sea ice change between 1979 and 2007—roughly 39% less ice in the Arctic by 2007. This represents a total area five times the size of the United Kingdom lost in terms of ice. Again, this is not attributable to the sun or other non-human factors. Virtually all scientists agree this results from human activity.

The data comparing observed changes in surface temperature with the sun's energy output shows solar energy remaining fairly constant while temperatures have not remained constant at all.

There exists virtual consensus about virtually everything I have mentioned so far. Some say 95%, some say 97% of active climate scientists agree on all of this.

Where is this leading? We have almost a one-degree Celsius rise, and the target aimed for by various international climate organizations is not to exceed two degrees Celsius. But two degrees Celsius—the political figure around which there is agreement—remains very dangerous. There have already been major impacts with less than one degree. The political agreement people are aiming for is actually quite dangerous. One degree would be safest, but is now impossible. 1.5 degrees may be the best target to aim for, as many suggest.

The impacts at two degrees Celsius affect all aspects of our life: water, ecosystems, food, coastlines, health, and other systems. Profound effects occur even approaching two degrees. We can see this vulnerability

already—while we cannot know with certainty about the drought in California, we know we are extremely vulnerable to droughts. There is profound vulnerability around water and different effects on ecosystems. The global food supply is extraordinarily vulnerable, and there are numerous health issues as well.

There are also significant justice issues. We know the effects of climate change are not borne equally. Generally speaking, the people and places that caused the problem experience far less impact than others in the world. Climate change has much greater impact on what we call the global South, creating major issues of justice and equity that have become an increasing concern.

Consider deaths attributed to climate change—the red areas on the map show the most impact, which falls mostly in Africa. There is also a disproportionate effect of climate change on women. Oxfam reports that 85% of those who die from climate change-related disasters are women, who generally have fewer resources, less mobility, and less ability to cope with famine, flood, drought, and other challenges.

The climate data reveals a stark reality about limiting warming to two degrees Celsius—it's extremely challenging. The crucial factor is cumulative emissions rather than emission rates, since CO2 lingers in our atmosphere for over a century. For a reasonable chance of success, the United States must achieve extraordinary reductions: 40% by next year, 70% by 2020, and over 90% by 2030, sustaining these cuts for several decades. Yet global emissions continue rising rather than falling.

This leads me, along with many others, to conclude that only mass mobilization offers a path toward meaningful solutions.

Some might wonder whether we could simply adapt to greater warming. But consider where we're headed without intervention—perhaps four degrees Celsius of warming. Scientists describe this scenario as "hell on earth," marking the end of stable civilization. We would experience the highest temperatures in 30 million years, sea level rises inundating coastal cities like San Francisco, drought affecting 40% of inhabited land, half of all known species extinct, widespread and novel illnesses, hundreds of millions of climate refugees, and resource wars.

Current projections show us on track for six degrees of warming under business-as-usual scenarios—a path leading beyond even this hellish description.

Perhaps we should pause here to breathe with all of this information. It's overwhelming. As we examine the causes of climate change, I invite you to draw upon the resources of the Fourth Noble Truth—the path itself. Our meditative practices offer skillful means for working with the distress that arises from truly seeing our situation.

How many of you notice some form of distress in your body or heart right now? Let's acknowledge what's present. I'll share a technique from Joanna Macy's work, which provides crucial tools for engaging with such distress. In one of her exercises, people express what they're experiencing, and we respond together

with "we hear you," because isolation intensifies suffering.

Would anyone like to share what you're experiencing, perhaps in a single sentence?

"My heart hurts."

We hear you.

"I regret that I didn't do anything sooner."

We hear you.

"Fear of being a victim."

We hear you.

"Fear for my children and grandchildren."

We hear you.

"I feel some terror and also a frozen quality. Shock, maybe."

We hear you.

Practices for working with distress, fear, numbness—these form part of our essential toolkit. Those who understand how to engage with these emotions have vital roles to play. The meditative practices we cultivate prove absolutely crucial. This points us toward the Fourth Noble Truth.

Now let's take a briefer look at the Second Noble Truth—the causes of climate change. This exploration will be relatively concise, offering my particular perspective, though many would share these observations. We'll examine both outer causes of climate change and what we might call inner causes—our attitudes and behaviors.

Several aspects comprise the Second Noble Truth in relation to climate change—these collective causes of climate-related suffering.

First is the long-scale process we might call the objectification and desacralization of the natural world. This worldview permitted people to see the Earth as merely stuff existing for our purposes—a complex development that formed part of the causal chain, treating the world as essentially dead matter simply there for our use.

Second is our dependency on fossil fuels, interlinked with the powerful influence of fossil fuel corporations. We must state this bluntly: the long-term economic plans of these corporations are fundamentally incompatible with civilization's survival.

This stark reality was powerfully illustrated in an article by Bill McKibben published in Rolling Stone

about two years ago, where he demonstrated that the long-term economic plans of fossil fuel corporations are fundamentally based on extracting and burning resources that, if used, would take us far beyond critical tipping points. That's precisely what I mean when I say their plans are incompatible with civilization's survival.

We also see the perpetuation of a consumerist, individualist culture with extremely high fossil fuel consumption, including the intensive consumption of meat, which requires enormous energy to convert grains into animal protein. These are further collective causes embedded in what we might call "business as usual" – the free market or neoliberal economic system with its familiar characteristics: financial deregulation, free trade agreements, privatization, the decline of public services, lowering of corporate taxes, and cuts in public spending. All of this operates on the principle of short-term profits rather than long-term economic stability, ecological sustainability, and economic justice.

This entire system of business as usual is intimately connected with climate change, alongside the domination of political systems and mass media by corporations invested in maintaining this status quo. We also see a profound lack of climate justice in relation to indigenous peoples, communities of color in the developed world, and the global South. As I mentioned earlier, those who suffer most from climate change didn't cause the problem, while those who caused it are impacted far less.

Then we encounter what we might call the inner causes of suffering related to climate change. Here we can return to the traditional Buddhist analysis of the roots of suffering: greed, hatred, and delusion, which manifest clearly in our current crisis.

We observe pervasive greed – evident in businesses, corporations, and financial institutions, but also, to some extent, in all of us through our attachment to certain comfort levels. One of the most challenging aspects of examining climate change causes is recognizing our universal implication. This isn't simply about "them" – while some bear greater responsibility than others, we are all implicated to some degree.

There's also what we can identify as self-centeredness, privilege, and arrogance operating at individual, national, social, racial, and cultural levels. Many countries and peoples live in self-centered, privileged bubbles, unaware of others' suffering, which prevents the natural empathy and compassion that would arise if we truly understood the scope of pain being experienced. From my perspective, and certainly from the Buddhist tradition, I deeply believe in the fundamental goodness of people and the inherent goodness of our hearts. However, when we lack accurate information, those good hearts remain untouched. When we live in bubbles, unaware of suffering, transformation cannot occur.

There's also widespread fear and anxiety among much of the population – certainly in the United States – among poor, working, and middle classes over economic security, housing, terrorism, and countless other concerns. Additionally, we see considerable ignorance and denial, which we could categorize under several headings: apathy, distraction, preoccupation with whatever captures our attention – even something as innocent as the Giants making it to the championship series.

I couldn't help but notice, after the climate march in Washington, when I compared the inches of coverage in the San Francisco Chronicle devoted to the climate march versus the 49ers game that same Sunday, the ratio was approximately 40 to 1 in favor of sports coverage. While this is complex, the reality of distraction is undeniable.

We also encounter skepticism and outright denial, with a substantial percentage of people still believing that global warming simply isn't happening. Denial remains a tremendously powerful force. In a way, I suspect that what I've shared about what's actually occurring isn't entirely new information for most of you, yet somehow we don't act on it. We continue to live – myself included, despite my intentions – in a kind of bubble. Denial is a crucial aspect of this entire situation, but it's something that can be worked with and penetrated.

Now we arrive at solutions. Much climate change work unfortunately ends with the first two noble truths, which I find decidedly unuplifting. Here we want to engage with the third and fourth truths, which truly examine possibilities.

The third noble truth reveals the possibility of a sustainable, more just, wise, and compassionate world if the roots of climate change suffering are genuinely addressed and transformed. This directly follows the third noble truth in traditional practice, which affirms that deep peace and freedom are possible. Accessing that profound peace and freedom is, I believe, crucial for addressing climate change, because we need extraordinarily powerful spiritual resources to remain present with this situation. The spiritual practices of all traditions will play a vital role in this work.

It's essential to maintain a vision recognizing that this represents humanity's greatest challenge. We need to reduce emissions by 70% by 2020 – some experts suggest this means 8 to 10% annually in the West. Yet this is achievable. We can accomplish this by making substantial cuts in energy use and emissions through various means.

For example, many of you probably know that Germany has transformed its energy landscape over the past decade, moving from 6% renewable electricity to 25% renewables. The United States remains at only 4%. During certain periods, Germany has achieved remarkable feats—in some months drawing 74% of their electricity from renewable sources. Such rapid transformation demonstrates what becomes possible when there is collective will and vision.

This reveals the second crucial point: we can increase clean renewable energy very quickly when we commit to doing so. Germany has proven this path forward. We can also dramatically expand sequestration—the capturing of carbon in plants, forests, and agricultural systems, and possibly through what's called geoengineering, though this remains controversial. These approaches, combined with building our capacity for resilience, form the vision of where we need to go.

In terms of our path of practice, we must somehow increase wise view, compassion, and skillful action

faster than the increase in dukkha. As I've mentioned, we possess the knowledge, skills, and technologies to make this transformation work. There is genuine reason for hope in this vision.

Applying these practices and moving toward these technologies will bring tremendous benefits as we learn to live in an ecological way, creating pathways to a truly sustainable world. The critical threshold remains 1.5 degrees. Large-scale changes could occur rapidly if enough people shift their perspective, particularly if widely promoted cultural narratives increase dissonance with current practices, and if we can demonstrate greater efficacy and benefits.

Here at Spirit Rock, for instance, our building plans include making the center completely self-sufficient in terms of energy. Imagine if all new construction followed such principles. As I've mentioned, this is already happening in various countries.

There's also tremendous potential to move toward a more just world. Because business as usual proves incompatible with addressing climate change, we have an unprecedented opportunity to transition to a different, more equitable economic system. This would require a significant movement, but we could actually develop an economic system based on local, just, and sustainable approaches to economics.

This transformation fundamentally involves shifting toward more local power and reducing the dominance of international corporations. We can see this happening already—many municipalities are reclaiming their energy systems and demanding clean energy. This is occurring throughout the United States and extensively across Europe. Most cities in Germany now operate their own local energy grids. In Berkeley, where I work with the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition, people are actively researching these possibilities. Similar initiatives have already begun in Marin County over recent years. We're witnessing a fundamental transformation in how we generate and distribute energy, and there's much reason for hope.

Now, are you ready for the Fourth Noble Truth? The Fourth Noble Truth addresses the path of transformation itself. I've organized this into three levels: personal and individual changes, community and local changes, and national and international steps we can take.

On the personal level, the meditative tools we cultivate remain absolutely crucial for the long term. The ability to remain present with difficult situations, to meet conflicts with compassion, wisdom, and skillfulness—this capacity becomes essential for sustained engagement.

What steps can we take personally? First, we can develop deeper understanding. We can study the problem and its roots more thoroughly. We can grasp the necessity of moving toward a vision of a sustainable and more just world, and truly commit to following that vision. We can cultivate our sense of the interdependence between our individual actions and what unfolds in the world. This cultivation of wisdom and understanding stands at the very center of our practice.

This perspective comes from a statement issued by an international group of Dharma teachers that I participated in creating, released at the beginning of this year.

From this point forward in history, we must all acknowledge not only the external causes of climate change, but also the internal mental drivers as well and their consequences. To be wise, we must also individually and as a society adopt the firm intention to do whatever is necessary, no matter what the cost, to reduce the climate crisis to manageable levels and over time stabilize the climate.

Part of wise understanding is clarity of intention. Then there's the ethical training, in particular where our ethical commitment is to respond to harm, to do less harm ourselves and to respond to harm and suffering in the world, to have that come out of compassion. Again, from the dharma teachers' statement: we need to make a firm moral commitment to adopt ways of living that protect the environment and help restore the Earth's ecosystem and living organisms. There are all sorts of personal actions—that's why I gave the handout that has numerous ways that one can, in one's own household with one's own consumption, make changes.

There's also the training in meditation. Remember, the traditional trainings are in wisdom and understanding first, in ethics, and in meditation. The training in meditation is something that we can actually offer those in the larger movement to address climate change, because the qualities or the capacities of mindfulness, equanimity, patience, working with difficult emotions, are all invaluable. They're particularly capacities that we've all cultivated, and so there's a very important role in sharing those. We know that without training in those areas, it's very difficult. There's a crucial role there and we can do that both individually and also through these wonderful group forums for working with challenges that Joanna Macy and others have developed.

One of the best books to read, if you want to read one book, is called *Active Hope* by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone. It's in the bookstore: "How to Face the Mess We're In Without Going Crazy." Very beautiful book. And Joanna is 85 now. Study with her. Go work with her. Soon. Right away. She's wonderful. She sometimes teaches at Spirit Rock.

What can we do on a local basis? There are all sorts of things we can do with the local sangha. I think the large-scale changes, in a way, are the most difficult. The political, the working on the level of the larger economy—those are harder. There's tremendous impact possible at the personal and local level that everyone can do. That actually can happen often very quickly. That doesn't solve the problem fully, but it goes hand in hand with the others, with the larger scale issues.

So there are all sorts of things we can do: have study groups that are local, be in local organizations, work with our local governments. I'm very pleased to go to the Berkeley meetings and there are people—the mayor has come, there are people from the city of Berkeley government who go to all the meetings. It's right there. If you want to look, there's a website for the Berkeley Climate Action Coalition that I think the UN said if every city in the world, in the country, did this, it'd be tremendously helpful. So there are options locally, in one's community, with one's family, and so forth.

This is from the dharma teachers' statement: "Buddhists can join with others in their sanghas, and our

sanghas can join hands and hearts with other religious and spiritual traditions, as well as secular movements. In this way, we will support each other as we make the necessary shifts in perspectives, lifestyles, and economic and institutional systems. History shows that with concerted, unified collective effort, changes that at one time seemed impossible have time and time again come to pass."

That's very helpful. That's part of the vision. We know that at one time the Soviet Union was thought to be continuing for another hundred years. It fell very quickly. South Africa, apartheid—there are a lot of examples of that. Things can happen very, very quickly.

So all sorts of local and community things: having workshops, sharing your knowledge, working in all sorts of areas—community, agriculture, all sorts of things are called for. I think probably there are places for all of our gifts. It's not like everyone has to do everything, but we just see where we can help and see what could be helpful.

One statement that I appreciated a lot was from Bill McKibben, who's one of the main leaders in climate work, as most of you know, and he said that if 15% of the population get it totally together with recycling and their own personal energy use, nothing will change. But if those same 15% become active, everything will change. And some people think it's even less.

I've heard figures suggesting that the American Revolution occurred with just 3.5% of people being very active. There have been studies connected with Stanford indicating that if 7% of the population really gets mobilized, major change can occur. So the question becomes: will I be part of that 7%?

And it doesn't necessarily take a lot of time. I found it helpful to quantify it and ask: do I have two to four hours a week to devote to this? If 7% of the population committed two to four hours a week, I think it will happen. That's not so much, right? Maybe it means going to one less movie. Does that make it easier? You can still go to movies.

The national and international level, as I mentioned, is the hardest. But that's where this larger mobilization is necessary. So it could mean coordinating with different groups, connecting with local groups that are working on climate change. There's special value for interfaith groups. There was a lot that happened in New York with interfaith groups on September 22nd.

There are all sorts of possibilities for taking firm stands in relationship to investments in fossil fuel companies. There's a term—divest and reinvest—which has to do with where do I put my money? There's a lot that can be done there. Where's my money? Where's my institution's money? Where's Spirit Rock's money? Where is my college's money? I think there was a turning point where people saw that the economic plans of the fossil fuel corporations are incompatible with resolving these issues. It's really as simple as that. And so those approaches are very effective.

One could work politically for certain candidates, help change the story, work on education, work on different ways of understanding, and so forth. Again, from a technical point of view, the changes that are

necessary are not hard. What's necessary is having enough people who are willing to respond, be verbal, get out there, and commit to that change—to make what actually could happen tomorrow, if there was political will, happen.

Countries can turn around. One of the people who writes a lot about this, Lester Brown, who has very clear solutions right there in books, says there are different scenarios. One of them is to have something like a sense of what this country did after Pearl Harbor—total mobilization where everyone felt important to be involved. And things did change. Things happened. All sorts of things happened. That may be what's necessary.

So the question is: what's one's part in this?

I'll finish with three quotations from Buddhist teachers. This is from Bhikkhu Bodhi, who has been very active and wonderful to be a colleague with on the climate group. He says: "If we let our hearts be stirred by compassion, we will see that we have no choice but to act to solve climate change and to act in ways that will truly make a difference and determine our future destiny."

Secondly, from Joanna Macy, this is from the book *Active Hope*: "What's catching on is commitment to act for the sake of life on earth, as well as the vision, courage, and solidarity to do so."

And lastly, from the Dalai Lama. Many of you know Heather Sundberg, who just came back from India a few days ago, and she had two opportunities to study with the Dalai Lama. She said she would be with him and just be crying, but he brought together this deep inner development with the deep commitment to the world. And this is how I'll end.

Then we can have some questions. We can keep recording with the questions.

So the Dalai Lama: "This small blue planet is our only home. If we do not respect it, the entire planet and billions and billions of species will be affected. This is a question of life, a question of survival for the entire planet. We need full cooperation based on a clear realization that we are all one. Each and every individual's future depends on the entire humanity, especially right now."

So we have some time for any reflections or observations or questions. And we'll use the microphone. Thank you for your attention.

I appreciate it. Maybe many of you already know there's an excellent group called 350.org in Marin. They need more people. And elect Larry Bragman—he's all about this. One of the handouts lists many groups, websites, and talks connecting with our meditation practice, and you can find this resource list on the Spirit Rock website under my name on the teacher page. If you want to share it with others, they can download it there.

"Hi, I'd like to inform the Sangha that today at the San Rafael Theater there's a movie at 2:30 called Racing to Zero. It's about what San Francisco has accomplished with recycling and composting."

This area can actually serve as a model. As Germany models many approaches for the world, we too can be a model. Things travel east—the wind blows east. We know all sorts of cultural changes have already begun in California. Why not this one?

"Hi, I'm Mary. I want to encourage all of you to investigate the National Citizens Climate Lobby, citizensclimatelobby.org. We are a vast, rapidly growing national organization of citizen volunteers teaching ourselves how to lobby and develop relationships with our members of Congress in every congressional district in the country. Those of us in the Bay Area are somewhat lucky—we live in this embarrassment of riches, so we're preaching to the choir when we approach our own congressional representatives. But what we're actively doing in all the Bay Area chapters is developing chapters of the Citizens Climate Lobby in conservative Republican districts in the Central Valley, because this isn't a partisan issue, as we all know. Our belief is that as citizen activists, we can transform political leadership. We will make it happen. For example, every member of Congress assumes that for every letter they receive in their office, there are 10,000 people in their district who share that same belief. So we believe it's a truly transformative way for active, regular citizens like us to meet in Washington with every member of Congress every year and develop these kinds of relationships at that level. So it involves both our own personal transformation—I'd never lobbied in Congress until this year—and a political one as well. I encourage you to check out CCL."

I'll add that this theme is very dear to Sylvia's heart. Some of her first teaching at Spirit Rock was developing a series called "Citizenship as Spiritual Practice." Anyone attend that? It was some time ago, but she says that's really how she was raised.

Other questions or comments? We could also stay with the experiential level if you'd like—just what one's feelings are.

"Though I live in Tiburon at this moment, I'm from Louisiana. My family's all there, and I'm moving back to Louisiana, where oil is king. Most politicians are in the pockets of big oil companies. People barely recycle, much less compost. There is some solar there, but it's few and far between. So I guess, first of all, maybe I'm asking for some love and light coming my way so that my beliefs, which are very strong in this area, don't lead me to feel disgust. I'd rather feel compassion for people who live either in ignorance or greed. There's a lot of both. I know there must be pockets of people who feel very differently. If anybody knows of any of those pockets, please let me know. Or maybe through the national organization, there's some way that I can connect?"

"What part of Louisiana will you be in?"

"We'll be moving to New Orleans."

There are some very good people there—very good people in New Orleans and around Tulane, I believe, as well. I think a key thing is to stay connected. You can stay connected to people in the Bay Area, so you

don't feel isolated. Joanna Macy has a wonderful phrase. She says it's really necessary in difficult times to have "rough weather networks." It's a beautiful term. To really stay connected—and that can be inspiring.

Know that this work is long term, though denial can evaporate surprisingly quickly when the moment is right. There are many people, particularly those affected by Katrina, who have witnessed these forces up close and been deeply educated by the experience. Much of what I discussed regarding economics rings true in what happened there—it was connected to climate change, but also very much related to the decline in public infrastructure. In many ways, it was more a political and social disaster than a natural one.

The main thing is to stay connected. There will be plenty of people to connect with. And continue your metta practice for difficult people—this is something we uniquely bring to these challenges. It's possible to be firm and oppose certain policies, even institutions, while maintaining care and compassion without demonizing. This becomes especially valuable when things intensify and the tendency to polarize grows strong.

We explored this in our July and August sessions on working with difficult circumstances, including examining our tendencies to polarize. I remember once joining a retreat at Los Alamos National Laboratory where we met with nuclear scientists developing weapons. We tried to encounter them as human beings in an empathic way. Not everyone in our group could do that, but it was profoundly instructive.

This becomes part of our practice: To what extent are we writing people off, polarizing, judging, or demonizing while still being firm in our stance? We have models for this—in Buddhist tradition and figures like Dr. King.

[A brief discussion about local political candidates ensues, followed by disagreement among participants]

How do we hold this kind of disagreement with our practice? These challenges, while real, will likely be much less difficult than future ones we'll face. When people hold different views while seemingly working toward the same ends, how do we work with that? This is precisely what our practice can offer.

It's not easy. We're always getting lost and finding ourselves again. But there's a particularly rich set of resources available when we look to what I was calling the fourth noble truth—the path. These tremendous inner resources and understanding need continuous development so we can work skillfully with such moments.

As a teacher, I don't make political endorsements. The question becomes: How can we discuss these matters as a community? This itself becomes wonderful practice. The key is remaining empathic, understanding where people come from at their best, and connecting there.

Even with those who might head fossil fuel corporations—and this is what I discovered working with

nuclear scientists—there's often some kernel of genuinely good intention we can connect with. This represents extremely advanced practice, but the principle remains: watch the tendency in difficult times to be reactive, to blame, to judge.

And yet, how do we still act in a strong and firm way? I think that may be the koan of our times. That's a way to say it—it's kind of the question of our times. How do we do that so that we don't lose our humanity in trying to save humanity? So that's really the koan, the challenge.

So let's end by inviting ourselves to see what is the intention that's there for you. What one intention do you have at the end of this morning session? It might not even be related to the talk. Maybe something was sparked that's important for you. What's your intention?

So I'll finish with the dedication of merit, a traditional practice. The Dalai Lama says, "We need full cooperation based on the clear realization that we are all one." May our time together be of benefit to everyone, including ourselves.

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