The Eco-Crisis as a Spiritual Crisis

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 54:12

Today is Earth Day at Spirit Rock, and the theme of my presentation is our ecological situation, which explains that postcard on the bulletin board. Did you have a chance to look at it? If you haven't seen it before, I think it's quite striking. It's like a bit of a wake-up call.

How many of us realized how little water there is? That's all the water in that little bubble—salt water, ocean water, fresh water, glaciers, groundwater, so little. We tend to be misled, I think. We look out at the ocean, which covers well over 70% of the Earth's surface, but we miss the fact that the average depth is less than a mile and a half. In relationship to the Earth, which is 8,000 miles in diameter, it's very, very thin. So we really don't have that much water, and yet all of life is so dependent on it.

The same thing applies to the air. We're inside the air, and so we have the sense of air as kind of endless, boundless, infinite. Yet when we see those videos of astronauts taking off from space, we realize just how thin that layer of atmosphere is around the Earth. Where I live in Boulder, Colorado, we can feel it too. We're only a mile high, but it's thinner there. You go up to Estes Park or Rocky Mountain National Park, you can tell the difference. There's really so little air there. So little water, just reminding us how fragile the earth is.

The theme of Buddhism and our ecological situation obviously suggests questions like: What can Buddhist teachings teach? How can they help us understand our ecological predicament and how to respond to it adequately? That's certainly one of the main things we want to talk about, but not the only thing. I also want to turn that around in line with Buddhism's emphasis on mutual causality. I'm not only interested in what Buddhism has to say about our ecological situation; I'm also interested in what our ecological situation has to say about Buddhism. What does it imply about the way that we understand and practice Buddhism?

The way I'd like to do that is to begin by telling you a story of two icebergs. With apologies to Bradley, who heard it all before last Sunday, these icebergs don't have anything to do with the fact that glaciers are melting and calving off. For me, the icebergs are a metaphor. With an iceberg, only about one-fifth actually sticks above the surface of the water. Four-fifths is submerged. So we see what's here, but it's easy to miss or ignore how much is down below. I think this is a very good metaphor for looking at our ecological situation—the first iceberg.

At the very tip of the iceberg, of course, is the challenge of climate change, global warming, whatever phrase we want to use. As we're all aware, we are changing the atmosphere of the planet. We're warming it with pretty serious consequences. Climate change, global warming—those are unfortunately sort of

neutral terms, aren't they? Almost euphemisms. A lot of people would like a little more warmth. Better terms might be something like climate breakdown or climate emergency, to really give us a sense of what this implies.

We're naturally focused on this because it's happening so quickly. I don't know how many of you read the recent IPCC report. Once again, things are happening more quickly, more urgently than the scientists themselves predicted. The amount of time that we have to really address this seriously is shrinking.

I'm not going to spend our time talking about that, but rather making the pretty obvious point—which I think we all know, but we need to put it in context—that the ecological crisis is not just climate breakdown or climate emergency. That's a very important part of it, which is implicated in a lot of other things, but the ecological crisis is much bigger than that.

When we think about the oceans, for example, we can see how increased carbon in the atmosphere is affecting coral reefs—the acidification, the warming, the reefs get bleached. This is pretty scary when we remember that about 80% of all ocean species are living in coral areas. But climate change doesn't explain, for example, the fact that virtually all the ocean's fisheries are pretty well fished out. This is why those of us who eat fish are eating a lot more farmed fish—salmon and tilapia and things like that—just because there's less in the oceans and what is being caught is smaller and smaller.

Or consider the oceans' incredible pools that have collected of garbage, especially plastic. We have these whole areas of human-made sargasso seas—not of seaweed or something, but of plastic—which fish and other birds and other species sometimes eat to their detriment.

So that's one good example. An even better example—perhaps "better" isn't the right word—but something that stands out even more for me is the fact that we are now in the midst of the sixth great extinction event in Earth's history.

By extinction event, I mean a period when most of the species on Earth disappear. There have been five previous extinction events. The last one may have been 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs disappeared. What's special about the one we are experiencing right now is that it's happening more quickly than any of the others, apparently. And it's the only one caused by a particular species—one particular species. That is to say, us, of course.

The Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson has estimated that by the end of the century, as many as half—half—of all the plant and animal species on earth could either be extinct or so weakened that they will disappear soon thereafter. That's within the lifetime of our children and grandchildren. Truly something almost incomprehensible.

No one really knows how many species there are—maybe between three and five million, something like that. Most of them haven't been identified and named. But they are disappearing, hundreds or thousands every day, according to the scientists, because of what we're doing to the planet, particularly to the habitat

of so many of these species.

As I was rummaging through my notes, I found this poem that really brings it down for me. You know, "extinction event"—okay, it's a concept. But actually bringing it down to the feeling level is this poem by Sam Hamill called "The Book of Endings." Have any of you heard it? I've adapted it slightly. I want to read most of it with slight changes because it really touches on this point so clearly—just how quickly it's happening and what it means.

So here it is, "The Book of Endings":

Sometime while you listen to this poem, a species will disappear. A species as vast as your life and the lives of all your ancestors will no longer exist. A species that's found its own ways of eating, of moving, of hiding from predators. A species that meets itself and makes love in the bark of a tree, or on the leaves of the canopy, or in the humid dirt.

And it's come with us for millions of years. For millions of years, it's watched the night and day follow each other. It's breathed with the frogs. It's wrapped the stars around it like a blanket.

At the beginning of this poem, there may have been three or four of that species left. But now there's only one. And if you hear this poem again, it will be another species, another story of four billion years telling itself for the last time.

Wherever life began, it was all of us there, as it is now, in this unknown last one. It's bored into wood. It's carried water in its back. It's drunk the dew from its back in the desert. It's fed its young with strips of leaves, built homes out of bark. It's caged the sky into a song. It's spoken in ways no human has heard.

It has emerald wings. It has sapphire wings. It has wings of night.

You will never see it. It's already gone.

So the ecological crisis isn't simply climate change. There's a lot more going on. And that's what brings me to what's below the surface. The fact is, when we look at the totality of our effects on the earth, we can't really just pick out something like changing our energy sources. We really have to acknowledge that the fundamental issue is something about the way our civilization is working.

We have an industrial growth society that is really at the heart of it. That's the nature of our industrial growth society. That is to say, it keeps growing, it keeps needing to extract more resources from the earth at great cost, and it keeps spewing more and more pollutants and waste out into the water, the air, the land. Fundamentally, it's this whole basic orientation, along with increasing population, that's really the fundamental cause.

I spoke yesterday about corporate capitalism, but it's not just capitalism.

Capitalism is just one form of this industrial growth society. During the time of the Soviet Union and in

pre-capitalist China, they were doing the same sort of thing, with the same emphasis on growth. I'll have more to say about that later, but that's the fundamental point I think we need to realize: we're not going to really resolve the ecological crisis without looking very deeply into the whole orientation of our society. Again, something I think that we all, for the most part, know, but I just want to remind us of that in terms of this iceberg. And I'll have more to say about this industrial growth society a bit later.

So that's the first iceberg. What do you think the second iceberg is? The second iceberg is Buddhism.

At the top, in relation to what we're talking about—and there's no moral implications here, but the top, the visible part—I would include socially engaged Buddhism, such as we're concerned about here in our retreat. I think it's worth mentioning that in certain ways, it is itself in crisis. A number of socially engaged organizations have disappeared or are having a lot of trouble. Buddhist Peace Fellowship, that both Donald and I have been associated with, is now beginning to sort of resuscitate, but it basically collapsed for the most part in terms of members and financial support. Zen Peacemakers, Bernie Glassman's organization, basically had to sell off their places, and it's just down to Bernie himself. Network of Engaged Buddhism in England, founded in part by my friend Ken Jones, has pretty well collapsed. Socially engaged Buddhism institutions and organizations are not in very good condition.

I want to contrast that with the success of the mindfulness movement, which in the last couple of years has literally exploded in terms of its visibility, its impact, and the fact that so many—literally millions of people now—are doing mindfulness and benefiting from it.

I mentioned in the discussion period of my first talk the distinction we might make between service and activism. In a way, I think BPF was a victim of its own success in the sense that social engagement in terms of service—helping homeless people, prison work, hospitals and hospices—is generally accepted as an important part of the Buddhist path for many people. But when we look at activism, that is to say, challenging structures of oppression, it becomes a lot more complicated. As I quoted David Chernikoff saying, in his experience, a lot of Buddhists, maybe most Buddhists, are conflict avoidant. We don't want to go there. We find that uncomfortable. We find it easier to turn to our practice.

In a way, I think this points to something distinctive about Buddhism. We Buddhists have our own way of addressing and resolving the ecological crisis. When we think about the ecological crisis, what happens? Anxiety comes up about the future, about what's happening, certain types of thoughts and fears and so forth. And we have a way to deal with those. We meditate. We meditate and we've learned to let the anxiety go. The problem disappears, right? We've learned how to do that.

That is a kind of response to the ecological crisis and other social engagement issues. In terms of our own connection to them, that is a way to deal with them. But of course, it's not a way that's actually addressing them. It's dealing with them subjectively.

So I see this as the top part above the surface. In particular, I'm concerned about some aspects of how

mindfulness is being promoted from a socially engaged perspective. I'm reminded of something that this influential European philosopher named Slavoj Žižek said. He's very well known, quite a character, quite a performer. For some reason he's become interested in Buddhism. What he says about it sometimes suggests he doesn't know that much about it, but he's a very acute observer of the cultural scene.

And what he's concluded is that Buddhism is the perfect ideology for twenty-first century consumer capitalism. Because it helps us deal with the stresses, the anxieties of daily life, our jobs, and so forth. So we can have a very intense, difficult job. It's very hard to keep everything together—job, family, and so on. But if we can meditate, if we can be mindful, it helps us find a way to cope with all that. And that's what he's referring to—that mindfulness, as he sees it, is becoming this grand coping mechanism that helps us cope with our lives, helps us fit into society better.

This brings me to the bigger part of the iceberg, the part that's below the surface, which is what we need to look to if we want to understand the role of social engagement in Buddhism now. What do I mean by this?

I think that this kind of uncertainty about social engagement, about the role of mindfulness in society, points to a deep-seated ambiguity within the Buddhist tradition itself—in particular, about the nature of awakening or enlightenment. I think there's a kind of uncertainty there that we're experiencing now, and it's an uncertainty that really does need to be clarified if we're going to move forward.

What do I mean by this ambiguity? If you go back to the Pali Canon and to the earliest texts we have of what the Buddha has to say about awakening—there's a lot of text, so it's not always easy to put together—but it's very clear the way the tradition, the Theravada tradition, developed. Nirvana ultimately is about not being reborn. To be born is to suffer in this world of samsara, this world of suffering, craving, delusion. And the ideal is not to be reborn at all. That's the ultimate goal.

In other words, the idea is not to fix up this world, but to check out of it, to escape it. In which case, maybe we don't need to worry too much about what's going on here, because the idea is to get away from it. And if we label it samsara, then the implication is we shouldn't waste our time trying to fix it up.

In contrast to that, in contemporary—especially Western—Buddhism, we can see another stream that doesn't see the role of the Buddhist path as escaping this world, but rather sees it much more involved with changing our minds so that we harmonize better, so that we fit in. So the jagged parts of our mind, our afflictive emotions and ways of thinking that cause a lot of suffering for us—if we can get a handle on them, then we can fit into society better and we can play our roles better.

But in that case, too, it's not about changing society, is it? It's about fitting into society. In other words, neither of these ways of understanding awakening really helps us focus on transforming the world. The one wants to escape this world, the other wants to accept and fit into it. And the question is: Which of those should we understand as the goal of the Buddhist path, or is there, in fact, another version?

And that's what I really want to point to. That's what I did point to very briefly in my first talk on Friday.

You remember I said a little bit at the very end about sense of self as a construct, haunted by sense of lack and so forth. This is a third understanding of the Buddhist path, which to me personally makes the most sense. And it also fits into the task of socially engaged Buddhism best.

That is to say, the challenge of awakening is to realize that the world as we normally experience it, including ourselves as we normally experience ourselves, is a construct. It's a psychological, social construct—a construct that can be deconstructed and reconstructed, which, as I understand it, is what the Buddhist path is all about. And when we are meditating, for example, we are deconstructing, or rather letting the self be deconstructed.

So what I'd like to do in the rest of the time here today is go back to that fundamental understanding, say a little bit more, try to flesh out this basic understanding of how I understand what the Buddhist path is doing, and then relate it to the larger kind of social transformation or social reconstruction that's necessary. Because I think you can see how these two fit together. If the Buddhist path traditionally is about personal deconstruction and reconstruction—experiencing the world and ourselves differently—there's also the possibility, in fact the necessity, to do that socially. We can see more clearly how the personal transformation and the social transformation end up being two sides of the same thing.

Are you with me so far? Does this make sense?

So let me say a little bit more first about our individual situation. And then on the basis of that, I want to point out what I think are some really extraordinary parallels—precise and profound parallels—between this individual predicament, such as Buddhism is talking about, traditionally talking about, and our collective predicament today in relationship to the biosphere. Because I think they're the same predicament. The one is the microcosm of the macrocosm. If we really understand this way of articulating what Buddhism is about, then we can see that the ecological crisis is just a larger version of the same thing.

So let me start by saying a little bit more about this individual predicament. As you may remember, the basic claim is that the sense of self—that is to say, the feeling that there's a me inside and somehow I'm inside and the rest of the world, including you, outside, that there's a kind of boundary between inside and outside—that this sense of separation is a delusion.

That this is the fundamental construct—not only the fundamental construct, but at the heart of our dukkha, our suffering. In a way, it's a kind of necessary construct as we grow up. I'm not saying we don't need a sense of self. The problem arises insofar as the sense of self really feels separate from others.

The way I understand it is to say that this is at the heart of our dukkha: the feeling that there's a me inside and the rest of the world is outside. And the reason that's dukkha is that this constructed sense of self—this supposed me inside—in an important sense, is a delusion. It doesn't have any reality of its own. It's a construct made of mostly habitual ways of thinking, feeling, acting, reacting, remembering, planning,

intending. In other words, processes. It's the way these processes work together. But there's no hard core of self inside them. There's no thing inside. There's no pure consciousness or something that's real in there.

And that points to the real dukkha involved: not having any reality, this sense of self is inherently uncomfortable because it's inherently ungrounded, insecure. I know this is a bit of a stretch. The way I tend to understand this is to say that we normally experience this fundamental dukkha as a sense of lack—the feeling that something is wrong with me, something's missing, something isn't quite right.

All of us have this sense of lack. We tend to think it's our own problem. We don't realize that everyone has it to some extent. It becomes especially acute in adolescents when they're losing the identity that the family provided and constructing their own identity. They're very vulnerable to the opinions of friends. This construction of identity is a response, a way of coping with this. But it doesn't really resolve the fundamental issue. The sense of self is haunted or shadowed by the sense of lack.

Where the real problem occurs is the way this gets inverted. The problem isn't that there's a sense of lack—if we know where it really comes from, then we know how to deal with it. The problem is we're conditioned by society to understand the lack as something out here. What do I lack? We learn pretty quickly growing up in this society that what I lack is I don't have enough money, or I don't have enough consumer goods, or I'm not famous enough, or I don't have a partner, or my partner isn't good enough, and so forth. We're encouraged to look out here and to find something out here.

The tragedy is that since this looking outward is a symptom of the basic problem, nothing we can ever get out here can ever really resolve the fundamental problem, which is an internal one. If it's money that we want, if it's money that we think is going to resolve our sense of lack, we can never have enough money. Because you can get a lot of money, but you're still going to have your sense of lack. And that's true whether it's money or fame or any particular consumer goods.

What Buddhism does in this context is offer us the path to actually resolve the sense of lack. Here's where I fall back upon my own Zen training and my own Zen way of articulating it. In the Zen tradition, we talk a lot about forgetting the sense of self, letting go of the self. The great Japanese Zen master Dogen said: "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to realize your intimacy with all things."

In the process of focusing on our meditation practice, whatever it may be—as my Zen master Yamada Koen said, "Zen practice is forgetting oneself in the act of uniting with something," uniting with whatever it is your meditation is focused on. That moment of forgetting oneself and realizing that I'm not in here—rather than being something inside here that's looking out at the world—I'm simply one of the many countless ways in which all of this is coming together right here and now. That's what Zen describes as kensho or awakening. It's not inside separate from outside.

The great Japanese Zen master Dogen also described his own experience when he said: "I came to realize clearly that mind is nothing other than rivers and mountains and the great wide earth, the sun and the moon and the stars." Mind isn't somehow in here separate from the world. All this, all of you, are my mind. And of course, that's equally true for each and every one of us. In the Zen tradition, the emphasis is that each of us has exactly the same nature as the Buddha.

It's just that the Buddha realizes it clearly and lives in a way that accords with that realization.

All this was summarized much better than I can by a Vedantan teacher named Nisargadatta, who said: "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything, that's love. Between these two, my life turns."

When I look inside and see that I'm nothing—wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everyone—that's love. The two pillars of Buddhism: wisdom and compassion.

I think this also points to the whole idea of the bodhisattva path. Realizing that we're not separate from others calls for this kind of reorientation, so that instead of asking, "What's in this situation for me?" we turn it around and ask, "What can I do to make this situation better? How can I respond to it?" That is one way of encapsulating what the Buddhist path is about.

What I want to do now is point to the quite striking parallels between this articulation I've just given you and our collective situation in relationship to the biosphere. In this case, the self doesn't refer to the individual anymore, or to the kinds of selves I was talking about yesterday—men, women, American, Chinese, whatever. Here, the collective self is humanity as a whole, or if you like, human civilization.

This too is a construct, isn't it? It's our collective social construct. Just as the sense of self is a kind of psychological construct, we can say human civilization is our collective construct with the same sense of separation, the same sense that we, as people, are separate from the earth. We still have this same sense of what we could call alienation.

Now, I think it's important to see that human beings didn't always have this sense of separation. If you go back to the earliest cultures—before the Greeks—you remember I referred in my first talk to the Greek idea that we can change the way we organize things if we don't like it. We can change our social structure, our political and economic systems if we want.

Prior to the Greeks, people basically didn't realize that. For the most part, people accepted their social structure, usually very hierarchical. They accepted that as just the way they accepted everything else. It was considered natural. That's just the way things were. So if you're an Egyptian living in Egypt, the guy at the top of the social pyramid—the pharaoh—he's not just a political ruler, he's a religious one. That's all part of the way the cosmos is organized. The social structure is part of the eco-structure. It's just the way things are.

And there's a sense of being embedded. If you live in that society, you have a kind of social security in the sense that you know why you're there. You know what your role is when you're born and grow up. You know what your job is. And interestingly, for many of those cultures, human beings and human society had an important role to play in keeping the cosmos working.

A good example is the Aztecs. We know they had this practice of dragging large numbers of war captives to the top of their pyramids and cutting out their hearts with an obsidian knife and offering them to the sun god. Why did they do that? Because they felt they actually needed to do that to keep the sun god on his course. That's a rather extreme example, but it's very common that people in those cultures knew why they were there. They had a role to play—even if we think it's very deluded—they nonetheless had a role to play in the cosmos, which we do not. We lack that kind of social security.

That's the important point I want to stress. You see, what's happened in the modern world—and it really comes out of this Greek realization—is that we realize our social structure is something we're free to change if we want. But the other side of that freedom is a kind of anxiety that we don't really know what it's all about. We don't know why we're here. We don't know what kind of society we should have. We don't know what role we have to play in the larger order.

In fact, science seems to tell us that we don't have any role to play. It's just a matter of amusing ourselves or enjoying ourselves as much as we can, if we can, as long as we can while we're here. Human beings have no special meaning on the face of the planet.

Can you see the parallels with the anxiety, the individual anxiety here? Feeling separate, there's a kind of insecurity. I want to say that not only is there a sense of lack at the core of each of us individually, there also seems to be a kind of collective sense of anxiety or lack. We don't really know what it's all about.

And here's where it gets really interesting. How do we respond to this? What's our way of dealing with this? Well, remember first of all what we do on the individual level. We misunderstand the source of the problem and we try to secure and ground ourselves by grabbing onto things out here—money, fame, whatever. And as Buddhism emphasizes, everything's impermanent, everything's insubstantial. There's nothing we can secure ourselves with out here.

What's the comparable response of our civilization as a whole to this fundamental anxiety? I think the answer is pretty clear once we ask the question in that form. I think it's our preoccupation—or even you might say our obsession—with never-ending technological and economic development. We have become obsessed, you could say even sort of demonically obsessed, with more and more. More technological growth. To what end? More and more economic growth. To what end?

Well, again, we can't imagine what the end would be. We can't imagine a point where we have enough technology and we just say, "That's all we want." Or we have enough economic growth and we say, "Okay, no more." We really can't conceive of that, which makes me wonder: Is it that we're trying to get

somewhere, or is it rather that we're kind of running away from something inside? To use the phrase that I think I used yesterday, why is more always better if it can never be enough?

So I think that we, as a civilization as a whole, are trapped in a kind of response which I identified earlier as industrial growth society—that our whole way of living on this earth is to understand that what it's all about is more and more technology, more and more growth. And somehow, because we don't know what else to do, it's like technology and economic growth and resources can be really valuable. But the trap is because we don't know what other ends are of value, we have become stuck in the means. It's like we've made the means into the ends. And because the means don't work very well as ends, we can never have enough. We're kind of trapped in this spiral and we don't know how to get out of it.

And yet this, more than anything else, seems to be what is destroying the planet. Because, of course, the biosphere is limited. The planet has very limited possibilities for growth, and yet we seem to be trapped into a system that has to keep growing—as I said earlier—if it's not going to collapse. And inevitably, sooner or later—and I think it's now—we're going to reach the point where this project of never-ending growth is going to run up against the boundaries of the biosphere. And that's exactly what's happened right now. That is the source, or that's another way of describing, the ecological crisis.

I hope you can see the parallels. One more parallel, actually two more. Just as we can't get rid of the self, according to Buddhism, because there never has been a self—we can wake up and realize that the self was a construct to begin with—likewise, we can't return to nature. That's not the solution here. We can't return to nature because we've never left it.

Really. We have the illusion of separation, but in fact we've never been apart from it. We're very good at creating environments like this one, a very fine hall, where everything we look at sort of reflects our activity, our manufacture. And yet if you think about it just a little bit, you can see that everything here is natural. It's just been—the form has been transformed in some way. Where does my paper come from? Where do the light bulbs come from? Where does the carpet come from? Where do the walls come from? We can see they're all derived from the natural world. All we have done is organize them in a certain kind of way.

And this is even more true, or we can see it more obviously, I think, with our bodies. Have we ever separated from the natural world? Maybe astronauts for very, very brief periods. But basically, of course, it's the nature of our bodies that they are microcosms of the larger macrocosm.

So our breathing—our breathing in of oxygen and out of carbon dioxide—is connected with what the plants are doing. The water and the food that circulates in us and passes through us, that's all part of the greater circulation that forms the biosphere. So our bodies have never been separate from the natural world. We're just very good at creating the illusion of that separation.

And then, of course, things break down when, for example, we don't know how to deal with the massive

amounts of waste that are produced by our bodies and by our society as a whole. So it's not a matter of returning to nature. It's waking up to the fact that we've never been apart from nature.

And that really seems to me the heart of the challenge that we face today. Here I'm reminded of another poem—actually two poems. The first is a very short one by Rumi, which again I think expresses very well the individual transformation that this path is about. It's a poem called "The Worm's Waking."

This is how a human being can change. There's a worm that's 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.

What's he pointing to there? It's not that the worm becomes the vineyard. He's always been the vineyard. He just realizes that he's not separate, that he's one of the things that the whole vineyard is doing.

And the second poem, I think, articulates really beautifully this experience of realizing that we're not separate from the natural world. It's from a poem by David Whyte called "Everything is Waiting for You." And I'm just going to read part of it:

"Your great mistake is to act the drama as if you were alone. To feel abandoned is to deny the intimacy of your surroundings. Surely even you at times have felt the grand array, the swelling presence and the chorus crowding out your solo voice.

You must note the way the soap dish enables you. Or the window latch grants you freedom. Alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity. Put down the weight of your aloneness and ease into the conversation. The kettle is singing even as it pours you a drink. The cooking pots have left their arrogant aloofness and seen the good in you at last. All the birds and creatures of the world are unutterably themselves. Everything is waiting for you."

Everything is waiting for us. This sense of separation that we have, both individually feeling sort of trapped inside this anxious, alienated, lonely sense of self, and this sense of separation that we as a species feel, collectively separated from this bountiful earth—both of those senses of separation are delusions.

And what seems clear at this particular point in history is that we not only need to address the individual delusion, such as Buddhism has traditionally emphasized—this path to overcome my individual sense of separateness. But it's also, I mean, I think this is the meaning of the ecological crisis. It's like the earth is challenging us to grow up or get out of the way.

The fact that when China produces coal smoke, it doesn't just stay over China, but circulates around the world—it's reminding us that everyone and everything is interconnected and that we have to be able to find a way of living together that acknowledges that.

In other words, it really does seem that just as I concluded yesterday—you remember the parallels

between our individual three poisons, greed, ill-will, delusion, and the collective institutionalized version: institutionalized greed as our economic system, institutionalized ill-will as our militarism, institutionalized delusion as education and media.

And I concluded by saying that if it's true they are institutionalized versions of the three poisons, then we really need to look upon them as part of a spiritual crisis—our collective spiritual crisis. This isn't something separate from our spiritual lives, but rather a larger version of the same spiritual problem.

When I think of our ecological situation in this same light, when I appreciate the parallels I've tried to briefly draw out between our individual sense of separation—how we misunderstand, how we respond in ways that just make things worse, how we need to wake up and realize our non-duality and live according to that—when I see the parallels between this individual predicament and our collective sense of separation, with the anxiety and alienation that accompanies it, the way we respond with our preoccupation with industrial growth, more and more technology, more and more economic expansion—if we really see these parallels, then I think we have to acknowledge that the ecological crisis is not just a technological or economic or political or social challenge. It's also fundamentally a spiritual challenge.

This is the macro challenge. If our individual predicament is the microcosm version of our larger collective ecological predicament, then the ecological crisis itself is simply a larger version of the same spiritual crisis. And just as a spiritual path such as Buddhism shows us how to wake up from our individual predicament, we need to understand that our ecological crisis too requires this same kind of awakening—but on a collective scale.

This brings us back to what we keep returning to, what we keep saying again and again: ultimately we cannot separate the two. We cannot separate personal inner transformation from the larger social and ecological transformation. They are inextricably linked. That's the profound challenge we are faced with—recognizing that the path of individual awakening and the path of collective awakening are not two separate journeys, but one seamless movement toward wholeness.

This is our calling: to see that healing the delusion of separation within ourselves and healing the delusion of separation that underlies our ecological crisis are the same work. The dharma invites us into this larger understanding, where personal liberation and planetary healing are revealed as two faces of the same truth.

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