Climate Change, Capitalism, and Buddhadharma

Rob Burbea · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Rob Burbea · 57:48

Good evening. I am so glad to have a chance to be with you tonight. It's been quite a while since I've been here, and it's always a treat. I feel honored and glad to be in your presence.

I want to start by thinking about the title I've given tonight's talk, which describes what I'm prepared to discuss: Climate Change, Capitalism, and the Buddha Dharma. So you're forewarned.

Right as we sit here, there has been an epochal event happening all week in Warsaw—the 19th Conference of Parties on Climate Change, with 198 countries coming together to see what agreements can be reached and enforced to slow down the accelerating growth of greenhouse gas emissions. This comes right on the heels of the latest report from the UN's IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which shows the increasingly serious situation we're in. The dates are getting closer by which it will be out of control, and we'll be lucky if we can keep emissions to not much over 400 parts per million and keep the temperature from exceeding 2 degrees Celsius or 3.6 Fahrenheit.

Today, hundreds of people walked out of the meeting. These were representatives from civil society—Oxfam, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, ActionAid, International Trade Union Confederation, 350.org—and the pictures show many young people among them. Why did they walk out? Because of the corporate presence. At the very same time, there is a big coal conference—the coal industry meeting—in Warsaw. The presence of corporations and what they're handing out to delegates is more obvious than ever before.

This may be connected to another report released today showing that the industrialized nations of the North have failed to deliver on their promise to provide 500 billion dollars each year to help developing countries reduce their emissions and adapt to climate change impacts. The whole sense of justice around who's causing climate change versus who's suffering from it is so heartbreaking and ironic. Those whose emissions continue to be generated, who are fearful and reluctant to set enforceable limits, are not suffering nearly as much as those in the global south. We've just seen, right on the eve of this meeting, what happened and continues to happen in the Philippines.

Even if these nations do deliver what they've promised for helping developing countries deal with climate change, it turns out to be only one-fifth—20 percent—of the subsidies they pay to fossil fuel companies. This reveals the grip that transnational fossil fuel companies have on the carbon-emitting nations.

There was a fascinating article in AdBusters the other day by Richard Smith titled "Sleepwalking to Extinction: Capitalism and the Destruction of Life on Earth." He points out that we can't make any real dent in emissions given the obstruction and power of oil, gas, and coal companies—with new coal plants opening every week in China. He ends with a sobering observation: "These giant corporations are wiping out life on earth in the course of a routine business day."

Looking at this political economy, I wonder what the Buddha would say about it. He didn't talk about capitalism, but he did talk about private property. Capitalism is built on the principle of private property—the principle that certain humans can own the earth for the purpose of exploiting it for profit.

I invite you to reflect on what we can find in the Buddha's teachings that speaks to this. My scholarship in Buddhism draws from the early Pali Canon, where our insight meditation practice originates. You know how important the notion of there not being a separate permanent self is in Buddhist teachings—this is called the anatta doctrine. When you really look at it, the Buddha didn't say there wasn't a self. He simply said he wasn't sure there was one, that you couldn't find one, that he'd never seen or experienced one. Within vipassana practice itself, within insight meditation...

It is such an exquisite part of the practice itself that as you attend to what is happening in your experience, moment by moment, second by second, you see a stream of psychophysical events happening. There are thoughts and there are sensations and there are memories. But as you become more and more aware, you can slow down enough to see this stream of consciousness. Nowhere there can you seem to locate a personal self, an abiding self, the one who is experiencing it. You can see experience, but not an I or a self who is doing the experiencing. You can see the stream of these events, thoughts, feelings, but you can't see anybody sort of on the banks of the stream watching it.

So I find that as a practice, vipassana is very linked to this notion of anatta, and liberating—truly liberating. In my own practice, in my own life story, the liberation that comes from understanding that there is not a permanent self. There's not a permanent Joanna that I have to fix or improve or mortify or punish or save or enlighten, or anything. It's because it's just a stream of experience, and what I choose and what I experience shapes that. Certainly, Joanna exists, but she's changing.

The Buddha Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, are so exquisitely revealing to help us see how in that changing we can grow in our capacity to understand, in our capacity to respond to need, in our capacity for clear comprehension, in our capacity to feel loving-kindness. All of these can grow because these are factors that we can encourage in our stream of being.

But you know what? Even before the Buddha talks about there being no permanent separate self, he talks about mamata, which means "mine-ness." He says, "Watch out." Even before he says watch out for thinking you have a permanent self, he says watch out for the thought or feeling that something can be mine, that something can be yours. That notion of possession, that you can own something, he says produces great suffering and is an illusion, even more than thinking of the self.

And so when he called together his group of wonderful disciples and co-journeyers on the path, all those who gathered around him during his forty years of teaching, and he created a community—a model community that he called the Sangha—you can see that he put that notion to work because there's no private property in the Sangha. And there was equality in the Sangha. It was open to everybody. And it was self-governing. Its decisions were to be taken in what they call in concert, in consortium—everybody sat together to make the choices, to decide where they were going to settle, to decide how they were going to keep their precepts. It was self-governance.

This has been fascinating to me over the years in my own reading of the early teachings. What I want to focus on though, I want to go back to this private property with a story that he told, which illustrates in a humorous way—because it was slightly humorous as he told it. It was a kind of tongue-in-cheek Genesis story. If you're looking for a story of how things began, how the world started in Buddhism, you'll find this. It was called the Aggañña Sutta, and it was in the Dīgha Nikāya.

And I'm going to tell it to you. I brought the scriptures here, and like many stories, it's extremely tedious to read, so I will not try to read it to you. I think that is largely because these were committed to memory. You know that these discourses of the Lord Buddha were remembered for three centuries before they were written down. And so to keep the mnemonics, to help people learn them by heart from generation to generation, there was a lot of repetition, a little bit like nursery rhymes. There's "The House That Jack Built"—you repeat, repeat, repeat in order to bring in new elements. But if you sit down for a quick read in our cultural tempo, it's challenging.

So I'm going to tell it to you. And if you want to look at it later, I have the scriptures right here so that you can see I'm not kidding.

Now, I said it was humorous, tongue in cheek, because the Buddha in his teachings said that there are certain things that you can't know and that are pointless to discuss because they're outside our experience. One is whether there's a God or not. Another is whether there's life after death, whether an enlightened arhat gets reborn. He said you can't tell that from your experience. It was very empirical. And another one—he says you can't talk seriously or debate about the beginning of things because it's not in an empirically verifiable way of understanding.

So the fact that he would begin to talk about "once upon a time there was nothing at all" and then a world came into being—you could know that he was having a twinkle in his eye.

The very reason he told this story was because there was a conversation going on between some Brahmin monks, bhikkhus in his sangha among his followers, who were from the Brahmin caste. The Brahmin caste was the most pure, highest caste in Indian society. As you know, there were the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, and then the Vaishyas and Shudras—these castes were clearly considered one superior and purer than the other.

The fact that the Buddha opened his sangha to people from all castes, even to outcaste people, even to runaway soldiers and runaway slaves, made people quite offended. Some of his followers from the Brahmin caste said, "When we go back to our families and hear what's said about us, people are reviling us and casting dirt and dust upon us and saying terrible things about us because we have joined your sangha which allows people in that are from menial backgrounds—dark-skinned people too, because the Brahmins have paler complexion—and we associate with people who are water carriers, leather workers, escaped slaves."

In Indian lore at that time, the castes were understood from the sacred texts of the Vedanta of Hinduism to have come from the different parts of the body of the great divine being, the Mahapurusha, from whom the world was made. From the head came the Brahmins, from the arms came the warrior class, the Kshatriyas, from the loins came the tradespeople, from the feet came the workers of the soil. This was like our notion of divine right—an organization of society that was divinely and permanently put in place from the beginning of time.

Well, Gautama the Buddha didn't buy into this. There were many things about the Vedantic Hinduism of his time that he didn't accept. And so when they said, "But they tell us that the Brahmins came from the head," he replied, "You want to know about the beginning of things? I'll tell you a story about the beginning of things."

The people who knew him and his teachings well knew that he was joking because he had made it clear that you can't know the beginning of things.

Now, having taken too long telling you that, I will proceed to tell you the story.

At the beginning of things, he said, all was just dark and undifferentiated. All the beings were luminous and floating around, weightless and indistinguishable, totally the same one to the other. They were little bits of light wafting about over a dark and undifferentiated expanse.

Then, gradually, a kind of scum appeared on the waters below them—like a skin coming over milk as you heat it. The beings got curious about it. They looked at this substance, and it began to glow a little bit. They reached down and tasted it. It was delicious. "Oh," they said, "what a wonderful savor it has"—like honey.

It was so good that more and more of them began to taste it. The more they took of it, the more they wanted it. As they ate more of it, things began to differentiate. The surface below them began to be more earth-like and solid. They began to look more differentiated themselves. They began to lose their luminosity as heavenly objects appeared—a moon and sun and stars.

The more they ate, the more they began to look different from each other. Then they began to notice each other and compare: "She looks better than her. I look better than her." Discrimination arose from this comparing.

That reminds me of my friend Wes Nisker, who told me something that helped me so much. He said, "On the way to becoming a Buddha, according to the scriptures, one of the last imperfections that clings to the end is comparing mind—the temptation to make comparisons, which always can get you into trouble, especially when it's reflecting on yourself."

Well, as this comparing arose, the delicious substance they were eating disappeared. They bemoaned it: "Oh, the savor of it! Oh, wasn't it delicious? But where did it go?" All of this is in the sutta, if you think I'm making this up.

It's all there in the text—how they would cry out, "Ah, the savor of it!"

And so then something else appeared. As the land grew more solid, mushroom-like growths sprouted from it. These intrigued the beings, who were all looking quite different now, and they began eating these mushrooms. They were so good—just out of this world delicious. And so they continued eating, and then...

As they did, they became so differentiated. Some were quite gorgeous, some were rather homely. They had grown so different that there were males and females. When that happened—whoa! Lust arose, you know, and you know what early Buddhism thinks about that.

So pretty soon, those delicious mushrooms went away. What came after that were vines and creepers. The land was getting solid now, so green things were growing. But they were equally delicious when the beings ate of them. The beings were getting heavier with all this eating, walking around, and as they became all the more discriminating of each other—passing judgments on each other, forming cliques and developing clubbiness among themselves—when that happened, all those vines and creeping greenery went right away.

But now in its place, after a while, rice grew. Now you have real land, real soil, and delicious rice growing. This rice grew without any husk or chaff, so you didn't have to work to eat it. What you harvested grew right back again—what you took in the morning would grow right up again by afternoon and evening. So it was all you wanted, forever and ever.

You'd think that would be a pretty perfect situation. But then what happened was that one being—they said a rather lazy one—thought, "Oh, you know, I don't want to have to get up and go out to gather rice for every meal. Why don't I just take enough for two meals—my breakfast and my supper? I'll just take it all at once, and then I won't have to get up again to gather rice for supper."

And so that idea began to spread. Others thought, "Well, that's clever," and they began to harvest rice for two days at a time, then more and more people for four days at a time.

When that happened—when hoarding began—the whole situation changed. The rice didn't grow back. It stood as stubble. They had to wait and grow it themselves by the sweat of their brow. They had to winnow it, and it had husks that they had to remove. This meant there was scarcity.

So at this point, something very determinative happened. They said, "Well, I may not have enough, so I am going to build a wall. I'm going to fence this off. This is mine." And people began to build fences and walls to delineate their property.

When they did that, the next step followed—and the Buddha laid it out clearly. One person went over the wall and took some of his neighbor's rice. When he was told not to do that, he said, "I didn't do it. It wasn't me, it was him." And when they told both of them, "Don't do it again," they went over anyway.

So finally, thieving arose, lying arose, scolding arose, admonishments arose, and then violence—beating people up so they wouldn't take rice from the neighboring plot. And this, said the Buddha,

all arose because they thought they could own their plot. It came with private property—theft, violence, lying, stealing, admonishment, and scolding.

So then the beings gathered and said, "We need to elect one among us to give punishment when needed and admonishment when needed to keep order." They chose someone they called the maha samatha—the great elected one. Everyone could vote, and this person would maintain order. In this way, the Buddha explained, organized society came into being.

He proceeded to show how this led to a division of labor that characterized what came to be called castes. But he emphasized that caste did not arise from divine decree or from some great sacred body. It emerged from the activity between people according to the dharma of paticcasamuppada—dependent co-arising, the central teaching of interdependence that lies at the heart of Buddha's doctrine.

What captivated my attention when I first read this forty years ago, and strikes me powerfully now as I share it with you, is this question: what spiritual teacher has actually traced human social suffering back to private property in this way?

I tell you this because we find ourselves in a desperate situation—all life on earth hangs in the balance. Those reading the latest IPCC reports from the UN, the most recent scientific assessments, are genuinely terrified. The outlook appears very bleak. If we cannot forge enforceable agreements, this effort will fail just as Copenhagen did, just as Doha did last year. But now we're failing at a point where we may be hitting the skids.

The young people and civil society representatives who walked out of the great stadium in Warsaw today, where the climate talks are meeting—their departure speaks volumes. When we try to stop the greenhouse gas emissions belching forth in such accelerating quantities, with fossil fuel companies still clinging to their subsidies and their private holdings, we face a profound challenge.

As Richard Smith writes in his powerful piece on Common Dreams, we are being asked to face our mortality as a species. We're asked to confront the demise of our brother and sister species, and of our planet as a home for conscious life. And we're asked to examine our habits of thinking we can own

things—it comes right back to that fundamental delusion.

If we think this is too basic, too much to ask of us, perhaps we're at a time when there's simply too much at stake. There's growing conversation about gift economy, wonderful creative thinking around sacred economics. At the urban farm where I spend much of my time in East Oakland, teaching and offering workshops, they operate largely on gift economy principles. People are beginning to see that we can reinvent what it means to relate to each other as human beings.

May we have the moral imagination and love for life to begin to reinvent together.

My chime just rang, indicating an opening for the next ten minutes for any comments you might want to make or questions.

"So what happened at the conference when people walked out?"

"What happened at the conference today when people walked out?"

We'll find out. That happened today.

"Did they call off the session or did it just keep going?"

Well, it was not the official government delegates, but what we call civil society—the non-governmental organizations, the likes of us working for the planet—that walked out. There are some pictures of it. So that'll be very interesting. But it shows how desperate, yet maybe determined and fierce people are becoming. Maybe it's time for this kind of action.

"Do you have any suggestions for how to talk to people about this overwhelming crisis without making people shut down, run away, or unfriend me on Facebook?"

I think we can assume that there's caring, because even though what's hard is that in our country—not nearly as much in Europe—the mass media carries very little about it. There was none of this in the New York Times today. When I looked through all the main features of the New York Times online, today and every day this week, there was nothing listed. Now, it might have been on a back page, but I was just looking at their main features online.

People are not going to be persuaded by an argument we make. If people think we're trying to persuade them, resistance immediately rises—this is my experience. But there are two strategies that I find create openings.

The first is to simply state how you feel: "You know, I've just been reading about what's going on, or I've been hearing about this, and I'm worried sick. How do you deal with this? These reports make me sad." That's a feeling. Nobody can contradict you. That's a fact—I'm feeling worried, I'm thinking about my grandchildren. And then that might be enough.

Or you could say, "How is it with you? How do you handle it?" With genuine curiosity. People can smell a mile away if you're trying to change them, don't you think?

"I'm wondering if you have any recommendations about local groups or organizations that we could join to do some of this work."

Well, I'd like to draw from suggestions here too. I've been very impressed by 350.org. And I know that some of the churches are getting involved—there's a whole series coming up at the Presbyterian Church in Marin. So there's more and more happening.

There's an appeal coming from Vipassana movement practitioners the world over, starting in England, asking teachers to give teachings on climate change. In response, you can go to a website like One Earth Sangha—One Earth Sangha. That's a great source of guidance.

All right, come on—what about locally? Who knows? Come on.

"Do you really not know?"

This is wonderful! You have found out you don't know. What a great place to start. Then you don't want to stay in ignorance.

So you go out and find. How about for investing? What kind of investment can you make for your retirement fund that doesn't contribute to harm? There are options that exist, though they require effort. Socially responsible investing has various organizations and investment companies focused on ethical choices. You can simply search for "socially responsible investing."

I have a nest egg, and I have people help invest it for me. I simply tell them: no nuclear, no fossil fuel, no investments that cause harm. You need to be explicit about your values. And there's divestment—joining programs to get organizations, universities, and colleges involved, working as alumni to pressure for divestment from fossil fuel companies. Students are doing this, and alumni can participate too.

I think it's important to recognize the difficulty of the international community coming to any agreement, period. When you look at the World Trade Organization and the failure of the Doha rounds, the rise of protectionism in the last decade, it's very difficult to imagine countries that couldn't even agree on farm subsidies and basic everyday issues coming to agreement about climate change. For countries producing greenhouse gases to take responsibility and for affected countries to be compensated seems nearly impossible given how the international system works. It's incredibly complicated, and it may be an illusion to expect meaningful agreements from such bodies.

The other thing to recognize is the power of multinational corporations. They are incredibly powerful—more powerful than states. I think the only way to begin having traction is to build civil society from the ground up.

One concrete suggestion is mass gathering in Washington—bringing numbers bigger than anything we've seen so far. We've got to stop the subsidies. We can sit and moan, or we can show up. This requires being ready to bring your life to a screaming halt in other respects, to prioritize this action.

There are success stories around the world in the carbon credit movement. Indigenous societies have completely rejected carbon credit deals with multinational corporations. We're seeing native indigenous communities who may not be highly educated or wealthy, but they understand what this is about. They act with incredible force against multinational corporations. There's success happening right now in the Amazon, in Latin America, just from grassroots organizing by indigenous people. Of course, multinational corporations, working through the governments of those countries, are putting up a big fight. But there are success stories we can learn from.

There are efforts to counter programs like REDD, where carbon credits are used problematically. There's pressure on Governor Brown to stop using that approach in California. There's much that can be done.

I'm struck by what you're saying about grassroots action because it's really difficult. There's overwhelming evidence of climate change's devastating effects—Hurricane Sandy, the tornadoes that swept through the Midwest with incredible destruction, the devastation in the Philippines. It has to start at the grassroots level.

I imagine those families who experienced tornadoes in the Midwest, who lived through that destruction, will eventually stand up and say "this is enough." They don't have any choice but to make the connection because the devastation keeps coming, episode after episode. Maybe I'm being idealistic, but I sense some sort of uprising coming—not just in Washington D.C., but in the communities devastated by climate change effects. I don't know enough about what's happening in local communities, but I think that's where real change will happen.

We've reached our closing time, and that's a good note to end on. I've become very interested in the experience and concept of peer support in social change. This crisis is too big, too scary, too immense for the response needed to be faced alone. If I try to look at it by myself, it's far too overwhelming.

But just with one other person or a small group to sit down together and say, let's find right here in the East Bay where we see work on climate that speaks to our heart and mind. You look here, I'll look there, and then we report back together to see what seems big enough in scope that it's not just some futile effort.

So I'd like to close with remembering that the Buddha said when we go forth, we go forth together. We go forth for the welfare of all beings, for the happiness of all beings—and that includes the future ones as well. And he said you do it as a sangha.

Maybe this sangha—you decide to have a group that will meet and report back. Why not? Why not put a paper out at the table and say, who wants to meet so we can report back in two weeks after Thanksgiving

with ideas of what we at this sangha can do? Even if there are two people, go ahead. But maybe there'll be more.

So now, as the time for our closing comes, let us share the merit of this. Because everything that has come up indicates our sense of belonging to this sacred living planet. Everything that we have questioned betrays our caring for life, our feelings of responsibility for it. So this has been a beautiful moment for us, and we take the merit of that and share it with all beings.

May all beings be happy.
May all beings be safe.
May all beings find ways to serve life and each other.
May all beings be free.

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