

Climate Crisis: A Personal Reflection

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 17 min read

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Work for the best : Prepare for the worst.

Once the report came out from the UN scientists giving us about 10 years to mend our ways or face the destruction of the planet as we know it, the temperature around Climate Change is measured in the now named Climate Crisis or Climate Emergency. Even so, the last COP meetings in Madrid deepened the crisis with their inability to agree on viable agenda to end global warming. More and more people are alarmed, and understandably especially the young. This brings with it all the negative mental states of anger, anxiety, grief and waiting in the wings, despair.

There is already a lot of literature concerning a Buddhist response to Climate Crisis and this is but a personal response, reflections which have helped me come to terms with what is happening.

Firstly, the need to see the 'bigger picture', a wider perspective. The Crisis may bring untold suffering and in a comparatively short time the deaths of billions of people, not to mention all the other creatures. So it is as well to remember that all are individual deaths. Each will die in their own way. Some will die in peace, others in despair. We do not die each other's death.

What is more, we are all going to die anyway! And some will peacefully, some not so. Even if the Crisis is averted, every human being and all creatures living now will eventually die. It is the scale and possible manner of death that horrifies, not the individual experience for there are millions of people dying every day and many also in dreadful circumstances.

David Attenborough, who presented all those wonderful nature programmes, warned of the loss of civilisation as we know it. This is another death. But there is nothing remarkable about that. Civilisations have come and gone – Mohenjo-Daro, Mesopotamia, Egypt – and all those lesser ones wiped out in the last 500 years since the expansion of European civilisation. It's just we think ours is supreme and would a terrible loss. In many ways we are superior – scientifically, technologically, even artistically, but ethically? It was the pre-industrial civilisations that flourished a Buddha, a Moses, a Socrates and a Lao Tse.

And then there is destruction of life on earth, but that will not include Gaia herself. She will continue to bring forth life. There have already been five extinctions. And each time there has been a regeneration and there has been one creature to survive who then developed even further in the next flourishing. It would seem each time there were even more sophisticated beings. Homo Sapiens is the crowning glory so far. But who knows what she will produce after a few million years? I get the sense Gaia is becoming more canny with every collapse and that, of course, works well with Darwinian Theory. The cockroach has survived all extinctions! But my money is on the

frog who got through the last one. As an amphibian, it has that adaptability and spawning creates so many tadpoles. It may be that in millions of years' time, we may be taking rebirth again as Frogo Sapiens. And if I am right, Frogo may be even more sophisticated than we are – Superfrogo. But will it be any different. Not at all. They will still suffer from greed, aversion and delusion. And the whole round will start again, though considering their super abilities, they will probably bring about their demise even more quickly. This is the world of Samsara – the world of ongoing vagabonds.

And we must not forget that the sun is also time bound. There will come a time when it explodes into a supernova and that's the end of Gaia. That exquisite pale blue pearl, tiny amidst the vast cosmos, will fade into a wandering rock. This is the teaching of impermanence, anicca: everything that manifests will perish; nothing remains; nothing is reliable.

These are not contemplations easy to accept, but they give a basic platform to work from.

If we are indeed heading to our self-made destruction, why are people so reluctant to do anything? Even deny the science?

There are many factors that have driven us into this crisis: economic, social, ecological, but the underlying cause is ethical - greed. The world is in the grip of Consumerism, a religion we all follow to some extent or another. And this issues from the deluded desire to seek true happiness in the sensual world. We know intellectually it is not possible since everything changes, nothing lasts, but even so we try. We build walls of safety around us by acquiring wealth, fame and power. We hold tight onto what we have. We fend off those who would undermine us or run away from them. Rooted right there in our entrancement with the world is the cause of our inability to let go of the simplest of habits. In the extreme we will rather kill than give up a treasured dependency – addictions of every description. Even if we determine to give up our morning tea or coffee, we will be proud to do it once, even a few times, but for good? No that's too much! And this crisis is asking us to change our very lifestyles.

Anyone who has done a week retreat knows the first three days to be blood, sweat and tears until we have adjusted to the routine, very different from our ordinary daily lives. Yes, we can change, but it may take outer conditions to make us do so. Already hurricanes are wiping out the Bahamas, seas swamping islands, typhoons emptying cities and fires consuming whole forests and their creatures. But it hasn't touched the majority – and especially the majority of the richer nations. And therein lies our paradox. We don't usually do anything until it really hurts and by then it may very well be too late.

Added to all this is denial. There are those who simply don't want to think about such things (and who can blame them such is the feeling of impotency?) and there are those whose investment in the status quo will not allow them do so. So, even as this human world is rent with regional wars, local political upheavals and fundamentalists, we are chained to a neo-liberal economic system that has no social responsibility.

It does look bleak! And the situation may arise where nothing can stop runaway global warming. There is a telling event in the Buddha's life. King Pasenadi of Kosala was a dedicated disciple of the Buddha. His son, Viddudhabba was not so. He had married into the Buddha's clan, the Sakyas, but they thought his caste was too low for them and they tricked him into marrying a slave girl. The king came to know of it and in a rage, took his army to destroy the Sakyas. The Buddha was able to intervene three times. And three times the Viddhudhabba turned back. But on the fourth time he set out, the Buddha said he could do nothing. He accepted that Viddhudhabba would exact his revenge. Kapilavatthu, the Sakyan capital was razed to the ground and many killed. No doubt the Buddha went to console his people who founded another city. Even the Buddha could not stop the karmic consequence of Sakyan duplicity.

We may now be tempted to think that humankind is hopelessly lost in delusion; that nothing can be done. But acceptance is not resignation. That leads to despair. Acceptance brings a realistic appraisal of the situation and so reveals possibilities. But those of us dedicated to the Dhamma have deeper reasons to combat global warming.

The Buddha told us this was the best of rebirths. The human condition offered the most fruitful circumstance for liberation. Even for those who do not believe in rebirth or transcendence, living according to the Dhamma brings beneficial results in the here and now. Considering the preciousness of this human birth we owe it to ourselves to take advantage of this opportunity.

Firstly it is an opportunity to work with our deepest fear - coming to terms with death. Many will know the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross who pointed to five stages in the dying process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. This is not a linear process, nor is death the only time we would go through such a process. We might experience all or some of these stages when someone close to us is dying. And even if we lose our mobile phone! Contemplating our death is one way of getting in touch with these reactions and working with them. The fear of death is the measure of our delusion. Our insight practice will make us feel at ease with the fear and finally undermine that fear. And that releases energy to engage in the struggle against global warming. It is also an opportunity to recognise our limitations as the Buddha did with Viddhudhabba. We can only do what is in our power to do. Beyond that we may be able to influence others. But beyond that is only frustration and burn out. To recognise our limits is again to be realistic so we do not fall into reactions of false guilt and shame.

Secondly, it is an opportunity to grow in virtue. To acknowledge we can do something, no matter how little, brings with it a moral obligation. We have to do what we can, not just for our own benefit, but also the benefit of all. Even in a situation where everyone is perishing, we still have a moral obligation to help others. It may be we can only offer donations, write letters, send emails. It may be we can only send out metta. But we can always examine our own carbon footprint by questioning what we buy, how we use electricity, how warm we keep the house and the use of the car and planes – even how much water we boil when we want a cup of tea. It is not about getting

neurotic over these, but just recognising what is sufficient and what is indulgence or carelessness. Thirdly it is an opportunity to grow in insight and liberate ourselves from suffering. And here we come across the great paradox of the spiritual life. If whatever we do, is done solely with the aim of liberating ourselves, we are doing it for selfish reasons. This is the do-gooder syndrome. We simply end up scoring points, convincing ourselves that such have been our meritorious deeds we are bound to be liberated by them. Instead, they have all increased the sense of the deluded self. This is true even for retreatants. If we practice just to liberate ourselves, it becomes a self-centred practice. If we practice also for the benefit of others, it becomes a communal act. It gives a greater incentive too. The Great Doubt came to the Buddha as he sat under the Bodhi Tree. The doubt was fuelled by the isolation of doing it for himself and Mara, the Tempter, suggested he drop the whole escapade and return to his family and lay life. But he grounded himself by touching the earth and the Earth Goddess rose to reassure him that he had perfected the virtue of generosity. He wasn't 'striving diligently' just for himself, but for all beings.

When our actions are for our own benefit, then we should acknowledge that as self-care, not selfishness. And when we act on behalf of others, we should not consider that as not caring for ourselves. The extent of our generosity is an indication of our 'selflessness'. In the same way, where we find negativity, we act towards its opposite. Where we find anger, we generate forgiveness and undermine resentment. Where we find resistance, we develop patient forbearance and where we find suffering, we offer assistance as best we can. And it is contemplating the Dhamma that all beings, no matter how evil, how foolish, will eventually liberate themselves from suffering, that will transform despair into hope.

This is all best done in community. It is with others, whether the wider movement of Extinction Rebellion or a small local group of activists or a virtual group that we will find moral support, opportunity for concerted action and comfort of heart.

Whatever happens we must seize the opportunity to develop our spiritual life. The way lies in paradox. The more we give, the more we receive; the more we protect others, the more we are protected; the more ready we are to face disaster, the more we are fearless in our endeavour to save all beings. Even in the most dire circumstances, liberation is at hand.

So we should do what we can to bring an end to the crisis. But it is as well to consider failure and steel ourselves for such an outcome. And here the contemplation of kamma and death are the most powerful healers for such contemplations will help us greatly undermine despair.

These two Discourses by the Buddha on kamma and death will greatly help us if we make these contemplations a daily practice. A few minutes of reminder is enough. Whenever we do this sort of exercise we should balance it with Metta practice and qualities of Nibbana which are listed below.

These texts are downloaded from Sutta Central

AN 5.57 Upajjhathana Sutta: Subjects for Contemplation

Translated by Sujato Bhikkhu

“Mendicants, a woman or a man, a layperson or a renunciate should often review these five subjects. What five?”

‘I am liable to grow old, I am not exempt from old age.’ A woman or a man, a layperson or a renunciate should often review this.

‘I am liable to get sick, I am not exempt from sickness.’ ...

‘I am liable to die, I am not exempt from death.’ ...

‘I must be parted and separated from all I hold dear and beloved.’ ...

‘I am the owner of my deeds and heir to my deeds. Deeds are my womb, my relative, and my refuge.

I shall be the heir of whatever deeds I do, whether good or bad.’ A woman or a man, a layperson or a renunciate should often review this.

What is the advantage for a woman or a man, a layperson or a renunciate of often reviewing this: ‘I am liable to grow old, I am not exempt from old age’? There are sentient beings who, intoxicated with the vanity of youth, do bad things by way of body, speech, and mind. Reviewing this subject often, they entirely give up the vanity of youth, or at least reduce it. This is the advantage for a woman or a man, a layperson or a renunciate of often reviewing this: ‘I am liable to grow old, I am not exempt from old age’.

What is the advantage of often reviewing this: ‘I am liable to get sick, I am not exempt from sickness’? There are sentient beings who, drunk on the vanity of health, do bad things by way of body, speech, and mind. Reviewing this subject often, they entirely give up the vanity of health, or at least reduce it. This is the advantage of often reviewing this: ‘I am liable to get sick, I am not exempt from sickness’.

What is the advantage of often reviewing this: ‘I am liable to die, I am not exempt from death’? There are sentient beings who, drunk on the vanity of life, do bad things by way of body, speech, and mind. Reviewing this subject often, they entirely give up the vanity of life, or at least reduce it. This is the advantage of often reviewing this: ‘I am liable to die, I am not exempt from death’.

What is the advantage of often reviewing this: ‘I must be parted and separated from all I hold dear and beloved’? There are sentient beings who, aroused by desire and longing for their dear and beloved, do bad things by way of body, speech, and mind. Reviewing this subject often, they entirely give up desire and longing for their dear and beloved, or at least reduce it. This is the advantage of often reviewing this: ‘I must be parted and separated from all I hold dear and beloved’.

What is the advantage of often reflecting like this: ‘I am the owner of my deeds and heir to my deeds. Deeds are my womb, my relative, and my refuge. I shall be the heir of whatever deeds I do, whether good or bad’? There are sentient beings who do bad things by way of body, speech, and mind. Reviewing this subject often, they entirely give up bad conduct, or at least reduce it. This is the advantage for a woman or a man, a layperson or a renunciate of often reflecting like this: ‘I am

the owner of my deeds and heir to my deeds. Deeds are my womb, my relative, and my refuge. I shall be the heir of whatever deeds I do, whether good or bad.’

Then that noble disciple reflects: ‘It’s not just me who is liable to grow old, not being exempt from old age. For all sentient beings grow old according to their nature, as long as they come and go, pass away and are reborn.’ When they review this subject often, the path is born in them. They cultivate, develop, and make much of it. By doing so, they give up the fetters and eliminate the underlying tendencies.

‘It’s not just me who is liable to get sick, not being exempt from sickness. For all sentient beings get sick according to their nature, as long as they come and go, pass away and are reborn.’ When they review this subject often, the path is born in them. They cultivate, develop, and make much of it. By doing so, they give up the fetters and eliminate the underlying tendencies.

‘It’s not just me who is liable to die, not being exempt from death. For all sentient beings die according to their nature, as long as they come and go, pass away and are reborn.’ When they review this subject often, the path is born in them. They cultivate, develop, and make much of it. By doing so, they give up the fetters and eliminate the underlying tendencies.

‘It’s not just me who must be parted and separated from all I hold dear and beloved. For all sentient beings must be parted and separated from all they hold dear and beloved, as long as they come and go, pass away and are reborn.’ When they review this subject often, the path is born in them. They cultivate, develop, and make much of it. By doing so, they give up the fetters and eliminate the underlying tendencies.

‘It’s not just me who shall be the owner of my deeds and heir to my deeds. For all sentient beings shall be the owners of their deeds and heirs to their deeds, as long as they come and go, pass away and are reborn.’ When they review this subject often, the path is born in them. They cultivate, develop, and make much of it. By doing so, they give up the fetters and eliminate the underlying tendencies.

For others, sickness is natural,
and so are old age and death.

Though this is how their nature is,
ordinary people feel disgusted.

If I were to be disgusted
with creatures whose nature is such,
it would not be appropriate for me,
since my life is just the same.

Living in such a way,
I understood the reality without attachments.

I mastered all vanities—
of health, of youth,

and even of life—
seeing safety in renunciation.
Zeal sprang up in me
as I looked to extinguishment.
Now I'm unable
to indulge in sensual pleasures;
there's no turning back,
until the spiritual life is complete.”

Many of you will be familiar with my own development of the contemplation of sickness, disease and death:

This body is subject to disease.
This body of a nature to fall ill.
This body has not gone beyond sickness.
This body is subject to ageing.
This body has not gone beyond ageing.
This body is now in a process of ageing.
This body is subject to death.
This body has not gone beyond death.
This body will die.

A.N Book of the sixes

20. Mindfulness of Death (2)

Translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu

I have heard that at one time the Blessed One was staying at Nadika, in the Brick Hall. There he addressed the monks, “Monks, mindfulness of death—when developed & pursued—is of great fruit & great benefit. It gains a footing in the Deathless, has the Deathless as its final end. And how is mindfulness of death developed & pursued so that it is of great fruit & great benefit, gains a footing in the Deathless, and has the Deathless as its final end?

“There is the case where a monk, as day departs and night returns, reflects: ‘Many are the [possible] causes of my death. A snake might bite me, a scorpion might sting me, a centipede might bite me.

That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me. Stumbling, I might fall; my food, digested, might trouble me; my bile might be provoked, my phlegm...

piercing wind forces [in the body] might be provoked. That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me.’ Then the monk should investigate:

‘Are there any evil, unskillful mental qualities unabandoned by me that would be an obstruction for me were I to die in the night?’

If, on reflecting, he realizes that there are evil, unskillful mental qualities unabandoned by him that would be an obstruction for him were he to die in the night, then he should put forth extra desire,

effort, diligence, endeavour, undivided mindfulness, & alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskilful qualities. Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavour, undivided mindfulness, & alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head, in the same way the monk should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavour, undivided mindfulness, & alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskilful qualities. But if, on reflecting, he realizes that there are no evil, unskilful mental qualities unabandoned by him that would be an obstruction for him were he to die in the night, then for that very reason he should dwell in joy & rapture, training himself day & night in skillful qualities.

“Further, there is the case where a monk, as night departs and day returns, reflects: ‘Many are the [possible] causes of my death. A snake might bite me, a scorpion might sting me, a centipede might bite me. That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me. Stumbling, I might fall; my food, digested, might trouble me; my bile might be provoked, my phlegm... piercing wind forces [in the body] might be provoked. That would be how my death would come about. That would be an obstruction for me.’ Then the monk should investigate:

‘Are there any evil, unskilful mental qualities unabandoned by me that would be an obstruction for me were I to die during the day?’

If, on reflecting, he realizes that there are evil, unskilful mental qualities unabandoned by him that would be an obstruction for him were he to die during the day, then he should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavour, undivided mindfulness, & alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskilful qualities. Just as when a person whose turban or head was on fire would put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavour, undivided mindfulness, & alertness to put out the fire on his turban or head, in the same way the monk should put forth extra desire, effort, diligence, endeavour, undivided mindfulness, & alertness for the abandoning of those very same evil, unskilful qualities. But if, on reflecting, he realizes that there are no evil, unskilful mental qualities unabandoned by him that would be an obstruction for him were he to die during the day, then for that very reason he should dwell in joy & rapture, training himself day & night in skillful qualities.

“This, monks, is how mindfulness of death is developed & pursued so that it is of great fruit & great benefit, gains a footing in the Deathless, and has the Deathless as its final end.”

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the Blessed One’s words.

Metta Practice

Make up your own phrases and offer them

to those whom you see frustrating attempts to bring the Crisis to an end

to those working towards bringing the Crisis to an end.

Nibbana

It is the Unformed, the Unconditioned, the End, the Truth, the Other Shore, the Subtle, the

Everlasting, the Invisible, the Undiversified, Peace, the Deathless, the Blest, Safety, the Wonderful, the Marvellous, Nibbana, Purity, Freedom, the Island, the Refuge, the Beyond. S43.1-44

Reading

Climate Crisis:

This brings in the Discourses and is a very fulsome treatment of the situation.

Mindfully Facing Climate Change by Analayo Bhikkhu

Still the classic for Metta:

Loving-Kindness : Sharon Salzberg

Lots of books about death!

Living in the Light of Death : On the Art of Being Truly Alive : Larry Rosenberg

Mindfully Facing Disease and Death : Analayo Bhikkhu (based of Discourses)

For a thorough exploration of Nibbana and the Path leading there, see:

The Island : Ajahn Passano and Ajahn Amaro

Mind Like a Fire Unbound : Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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