



Can Buddhists Come Together on Climate Change?

by Bob Doppelt

Climate change will devastate the global economy, cause widespread conflict, and displace millions of people—this is how the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change summarized its latest report released in March. Numerous other recent scientific studies have similarly sounded the alarm about the tremendous suffering that lies ahead if climate change is not addressed.

Despite these clear warnings, it would appear that many in the Buddhist community are reticent to engage the issue. Individually, more than four hundred Buddhist teachers have signed a document titled “The Earth as Witness: International Dharma Teachers’ Statement on Climate Change,” but how many are using the platform they have within their own communities to rally others to action? How many sanghas are taking up this pressing work as community practice? In my experience, many in the Buddhist community feel they should remain focused on the dharma and that sanghas should not take an active role in issues that seem political.

Climate change, however, is unquestionably a dharma issue. The roots of the problem are ignorance and delusion: ignorance about how it is that life exists on our planet, and the delusion that we can continue unbridled fossil fuel and material consumption without grave consequences. Since we strive as Buddhists to cut through ignorance and follow a path that can relieve suffering, the path by which climate change can be skillfully confronted is, by definition, an expression of dharma practice.

In my book *From Me to We*, I describe five commitments, each based on fundamental dharma principles, that I believe can establish the shift in consciousness required to diminish climate change.

THE FIRST COMMITMENT:

SEE THE SYSTEMS YOU ARE PART OF

The first and most important commitment each of us must make is to openly recognize the context in which we exist. In order to effect meaningful action on climate change, we must acknowledge the truth of our interdependency with all ecological processes and living beings. This is the dharma principle of dependent origination, or emptiness. Everything is interconnected—all things arise due to multiple causes and conditions. The principle of *shunyata*, the insubstantiality of all phenomena, also applies. There is nothing solid, no separate or permanent self, no actual “me.” There is only “we”—complex interdependent process and organisms.

A simple way to expand your awareness of the systems you are part of is to physically map them. You can, for example, map your food system. Be specific about the many human and ecological interactions that combine to produce the food you eat. Great harm can occur when we fail to account for those interrelationships.

THE SECOND COMMITMENT:

ACCOUNT FOR ALL THE CONSEQUENCES OF YOUR ACTIONS

“We reap what we sow”—this, of course, is the principle of karma. Our actions have consequences. To reduce our contribution to the climate crisis, we must account for the full impact of our activities on the climate and on the other systems that created and sustain life on Earth.

You can examine your map and identify how your use of fossil fuels contributes to warmer temperatures, altering precipitation and other natural inputs that make your food possible. Consider how those changes affect the lives of people worldwide.



BOB DOPPELT facilitates the Dharma Teachers Climate Collaborative and directs The Resource Innovation Group. He is the author of *From Me to We: The Five Transformational Commitments Required to Rescue the Planet, Your Organization, and Your Life*.

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

THE THIRD COMMITMENT: DO NO HARM

After determining how your activities might affect the systems you inhabit, you must decide how to respond. “Do no harm” is the principle of *sila*—our duty to live a moral and ethical life. It also includes *ahimsa*, our vow to interact nonviolently with all living creatures.

In practice, this requires continuously reducing your negative impact on the climate. You might decide to eat only local, sustainably grown organic food produced and delivered without fossil fuels. Or you could advocate for policies that eliminate fossil fuels and the greenhouse gases they emit into Earth’s atmosphere.

THE FOURTH COMMITMENT: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Many scientists have concluded that humankind’s impact on the environment has become so great that our

actions, not natural processes, will now decide the fate of life on Earth. This means that we are now the trustees of the planet.

As trustees, not only must we do no harm but we also have a responsibility to “do good” by restoring natural systems and helping others. The principles of *karuna*, caring for all life, and *mudita*, taking joy in the well-being of others, lie at the heart of this commitment. Restoring soils and supporting policies that expand the availability of clean, renewable energy such as wind and solar are examples of how you can be a trustee.

THE FIFTH COMMITMENT: CHOOSE YOUR OWN DESTINY

Herein lies the key to all of the commitments. Social change happens only after many people overcome their illusions, seeing reality for what it is and breaking free from convention. The principle of *prajna*, or wisdom, explains

this commitment—we can choose to exercise the wisdom that leads out of suffering.

ALTHOUGH all change starts at the individual level, the reality is that wide-scale change will not be possible without changes in policy. Some might see such work as outside the role of the sangha, but I disagree. Actively exploring as a Buddhist community how to effect change in the political realm is now one of the most vital ways bodhisattvas can actualize the teachings in their lives.

Climate change is the defining issue of our time. Buddhists have a responsibility to seek solutions. It won’t be easy. But if we follow the teachings of the dharma and make the commitments needed to significantly cut emissions, climate change can be reduced to manageable levels. Suffering can be minimized. Future life on Earth can be preserved. 