

Dharma Teachers International Collaborative on Climate Change



The Earth as Witness: International Dharma Teachers Collaborative Statement About Climate Change

Today humanity faces an unprecedented crisis of almost unimaginable magnitude. Escalating climate change is altering the global environment so drastically as to force the Earth into a new geological age. Unprecedented levels of suffering for all life on Earth, including human, will result. Significant reductions in greenhouse gases and other actions will be needed to reduce climate change to manageable levels. But more fundamental changes are also needed, and this is where we can draw guidance from the rich resources of the Buddha's teachings, the Dharma. This statement briefly describes core Buddhist insights into the root causes of the climate crisis and suggests ways to minimize its potentially tragic consequences.

As a starting point, the Dharma states that to formulate meaningful solutions to any problem we must first acknowledge the truth of our suffering. As shocking and painful as it may be, we must recognize that without swift and dramatic reductions in fossil fuel use and major efforts to increase carbon sequestration, global temperatures will rise close to or beyond 2 degrees C. This increase will lead to injury and death for millions of people worldwide and the extinction of many of the Earth's species. Millions more will experience severe trauma and stress that threaten their physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. These stresses will, in turn, trigger social and political unrest. In a grave injustice, low-income communities, poor nations, and people systematically subjected to oppression and discrimination, who contributed little to climate change, will initially be harmed the most. Even worse, as frightening as it is, if we fail to make fundamental changes in our energy, manufacturing, transportation, forestry, agricultural, and other systems along with our consumption patterns with utmost urgency, in mere decades irreversible climate shifts will occur that undermine the very pillars of human civilization. Only by recognizing these truths can we adopt a meaningful path toward solutions.

The Dharma teaches us the origin of our suffering. The majority of the world's climate scientists are unequivocal that on the external physical plane climate change is caused by the historic and ongoing use of fossil fuels and the greenhouse gases they generate when burned. Destructive land management practices such as clearing forests also contribute by reducing nature's capacity to sequester carbon. The Dharma informs us, however, that craving, aversion, and delusion within the human mind are the root causes of vast human suffering. Just as these mental factors have throughout history led to the oppression, abuse, and exploitation of indigenous peoples and others outside the halls of wealth and power, craving, aversion, and delusion are also the root causes of climate change. Climate change is perhaps humanity's greatest teacher yet about how these mental forces, when unchecked

in ourselves and our institutions, cause harm to other people and the living environment. Led by industrialized nations, the desire for ever- more material wealth and power has resulted in the reckless destruction of land and water, excessive use of fossil fuels, massive amounts of solid and toxic waste, and other practices that are disrupting the Earth's climate. However, by acknowledging and addressing these internal mental drivers, we can begin to resolve the external causes of climate change.

The Dharma offers hope by teaching us that it is possible to overcome the detrimental forces of craving, aversion, and delusion. We can use the climate crisis as a catalyst to acknowledge the consequences of our craving for more and more material wealth and the pursuit of power and realize we must change our assumptions, attitudes, and behaviors. We can use the climate crisis as a catalyst to educate ourselves about planetary processes so we understand that the Earth has ecological limits and thresholds that must not be crossed. By learning from our mistaken beliefs and activities, we can create more equitable, compassionate, and mindful societies that generate greater individual and collective wellbeing while reducing climate change to manageable levels.

Finally the Dharma describes a pathway of principles and practices we can follow to minimize climate change and the suffering it causes. The first principle is wisdom. From this point forward in history we must all acknowledge not only the external causes of climate change, but the internal mental drivers as well, and their horrific consequences. To be wise we must also, individually and as a society, adopt the firm intention to do whatever is necessary, no matter what the cost, to reduce the climate crisis to manageable levels and over time re-stabilize our planet's climate.

The second Dharma principle is ethical conduct, which is rooted in a compassionate concern for all living beings in the vast web of life. We need to make a firm moral commitment to adopt ways of living that protect the climate and help restore the Earth's ecosystems and living organisms. In our personal lives, we should recognize the value of contentment and sufficiency and realize that, after a certain modest level, additional consumption, material wealth, and power will not bring happiness. To fulfill our wider moral responsibility, we must join with others, stand up to the vested interests that oppose change, and demand that our economic, social, and political institutions be fundamentally altered so they protect the climate and offer nurturance and support for all of humanity in a just and equitable manner. We must insist that governments and corporations contribute to a stable climate and a healthy environment for all people and cultures worldwide, now and in the future. We must further insist that specific scientifically credible global emission reduction targets be set and means adopted to effectively monitor and enforce them.

The third Dharma training, and the one that makes all of the others possible, is mindfulness. This offers a way to heighten our awareness of, and then to regulate, our desires and emotions and the thoughts and behaviors they generate. By continually enhancing our awareness, we can increasingly notice when we are causing harm to others, the climate, or ourselves, and strengthen our capacity to rapidly shift gears and think and act constructively. Mindfulness increases awareness of our inherent interdependency with other people and the natural environment and of values that enhance human dignity rather

than subordinate people, animals, and nature to the craving for more material wealth and power.

As we each awaken to our responsibility to follow the path described in the Dharma to help us protect and restore the planet and its inhabitants, we may feel awed by the immensity of the challenge. We should take heart, however, in the power of collective action. Buddhists can join with others in their Sanghas, and our Sanghas can join hands and heart with other religious and spiritual traditions as well as secular movements focused on social change. In this way we will support each other as we make the necessary shifts in perspectives, lifestyles, and economic and institutional systems required to reduce climate change to manageable levels. History shows that with concerted, unified, collective effort, changes that at one time seemed impossible have time and again come to pass.

When we come together to celebrate our love for the natural world and all of the beings that inhabit it, and when we take a stand to counter the forces of craving, aversion, and delusion, we reclaim our own inner stability and strength and live closer to the truth, closer to the Dharma. Together, we can seek to ensure that our descendants and fellow species inherit a livable planet. Individually and collectively, we will be honoring the great legacy of the Dharma and fulfill our heart's deepest wish to serve and protect all life.

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