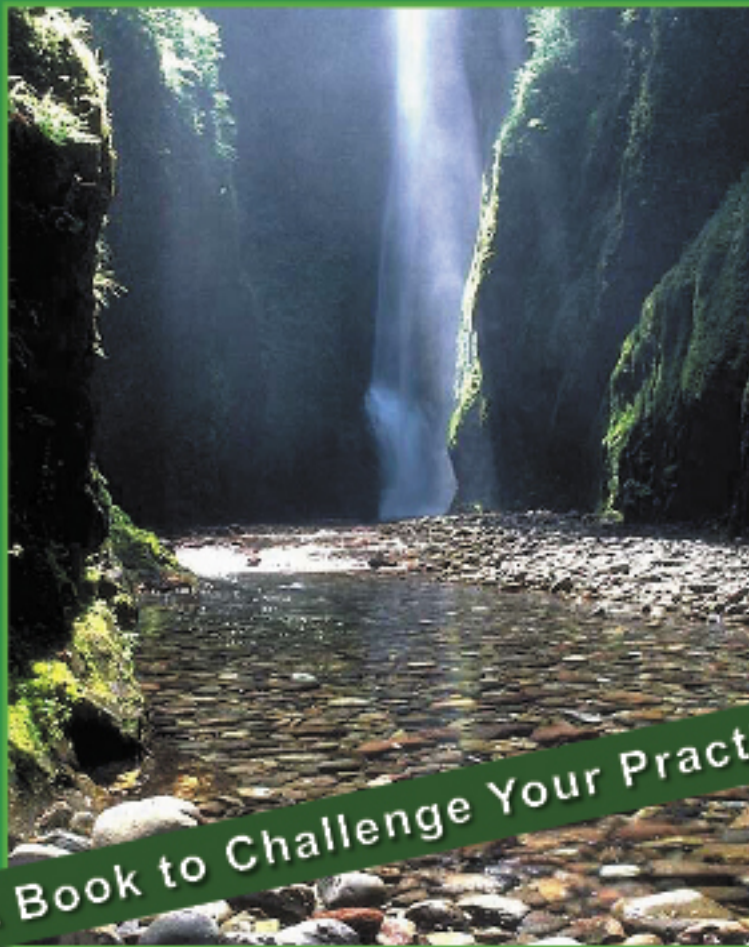


# GREEN DHARMA



A Book to Challenge Your Practice

**Georg Feuerstein  
& Brenda Feuerstein**



# **Green Dharma**

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## PREFACE

The present book grew out of the same environmental and social concerns that we raised in our previous and related work, *Green Yoga*. Because many Dharma practitioners still do not consider the Buddha's teaching as a form of Yoga, which it is, they might also not be inclined to pick up *Green Yoga*. Therefore it seemed to us that a book specifically written for a Buddhist audience would be justified.

Our intention behind writing this book is twofold: first, we wanted to paint in broad strokes a realistic picture of today's environmental collapse, including the juggernaut problem of global warming; second, we wanted to highlight the important principles of the Buddhist teachings (the Dharma) inasmuch as they are especially relevant in dealing wisely with the environmental crisis.

Amazingly, many well-educated people are still ill informed about the planetwide environmental devastation that is occurring as a result of human activities. We have had people assure us that they were familiar with "all" the details, but then their lifestyle suggested otherwise. We believe that anyone who truly understands what is unfolding before our eyes will radically modify his or her approach to life. We are living in a moment in history that is equivalent to war time, except that the future of human civilization, even the future of Earth's biosphere, is at stake.

While the present work reiterates some of the evidence mentioned already in *Green Yoga*, we also have included additional, often more recent and also more alarming evidence. Since writing *Green Yoga*, the enormity of the present environmental crisis has become more obvious. The situation is far worse than scientists thought even a couple of years ago. In their 2008 book *Climate "Code Red,"* published by Friends of the Earth, David Spratt and Philip Sutton have shown that we should treat global warming as a very serious emergency.<sup>1</sup> We anticipate that this will soon become clear to everyone.

As the title *Green Dharma* suggests, in looking at the situation, we are focusing on an exclusively Buddhist context. In particular, we have drawn from the sayings of the

Buddha as recorded in the Pali Canon, especially the Basket of Discourses with its five divisions, but also have cited his words as recorded in the Mahayana literature. Among the Buddha's notable epigones, we have especially favored the Dharma presentations of old masters (in chronological order) like Shantideva, Atisha, Milarepa, Je Tsongkhapa, and Shabkar, as well as contemporary masters like H. H. the Dalai Lama, Chatral Rinpoche, and Thich Nhat Hanh.

Because we wanted to make our book as accessible as possible also to relative newcomers to Buddhism, we have deliberately avoided burdening our presentation with technical matters and jargon and have banished references to the endnotes.

We found it personally helpful to juxtapose the mostly alarming and even eerie scientific evidence on worldwide pollution, global warming, and the Sixth Mass Extinction against the clarifying wisdom of the Buddha Dharma. Anyone who truly understands the magnitude of the devastation happening around us today is prone to experience shock, anxiety, and perhaps depression unless he or she has a reliable spiritual compass. The Buddha's Dharma points toward true north and in our own case has given us the kind of larger and deeper perspective without which we would feel lost in witnessing our modern civilization's strange suicidal impulse that is leading us closer and closer to the brink of biosphere collapse.

With this book, we wish to provide fellow Dharma practitioners with a necessary and sobering overview of the fateful developments of our troubled era and to encourage and indeed urge them to adopt a truly sustainable lifestyle as part of their Dharma practice now. All too often, practitioners confine their Dharma practice to solitary, perhaps even self-cherishing meditation, turning a blind eye to ethical, socio-cultural, and political matters that affect them and everyone else. In this book, we are pleading for an urgent about-turn based on the teachings of the Buddha himself and of subsequent great Dharma masters.

The Buddha was a great healer of human hearts and minds. If he were walking on the Earth today, he would unquestionably also have revealed himself to be a healer of our planet. He always regarded the Dharma as medicine. It still serves this noble function in terms of our individual suffering. We, furthermore, believe that even 2,500 years after its

appearance in the world, the Dharma can help heal our planet by providing moral and spiritual guidance.

Today's environmental crisis is so severe that we cannot disregard it if we want humanity and other species to survive or even if we simply want to forestall serious difficulties for ourselves in the years to come. Responding appropriately to the environmental crisis is a moral imperative, because our indifference or inadequate response would only increase the suffering of our fellow beings now and in the future. As we will show, there is no contradiction between contemplation and dharmically based social action. In fact, they form an integral interdependence.

We are members of a civilization that has strayed from sound values, attitudes, and behavior. We cannot allow our lives to be governed by principles that, if we were to inspect them closely in light of the Dharma, we would find unwholesome, ignoble, detrimental, and not conducive to enlightenment. Ours is a crassly materialistic society, which is preoccupied with pleasure and wealth and gives moral values little more than a nod, if that. These two conventional goals dominate even much of the so-called spiritual sector, which has become an industry. No wonder, our contemporary civilization is riddled with social problems, and, despite all the comforts and luxuries with which we pad our lives, genuine happiness or its pursuit is rare to find.

The unprecedented opulence of our civilization is maintained by an equally unprecedented ruthless exploitation of the natural environment, which is now in danger of collapsing. Our extravagant modern lifestyle, which in the span of just 150 years has had a devastating impact on planet Earth, is earmarked for failure. Some would argue that it is pathological. A radical turn-about is essential for the regeneration, indeed the survival, of the natural world and thus the continuation of our human species.

If we, as Dharma practitioners, cannot live sanely, who will? And, more than ever, sane living is mindful, ecologically sustainable living, which takes great care of the Earth and all sentient beings sharing the same home world with us. As Dharma practitioners, we simply must find the will, courage, and compassion to voice the pain of billions of fellow sentient beings on this planet who are constantly deprived of essential life space and who are inexorably driven into oblivion.



This book, then, is looking at the environmental catastrophe from the wise perspective of the Dharma. At the same time, considering the environmental plight can sharpen our appreciation of the Dharma and spur our practice.

We can only hope that our readers will consider the evidence and take appropriate action without further delay. We ourselves regard today's planetary emergency as a great opportunity to renew and deepen our commitment to correct practice of the Dharma, which includes compassionate action for the benefit of all beings. Hopefully, many others will come to share this view as well.

Georg and Brenda Feuerstein

ENDNOTE: PREFACE

1. See David Spratt and Philip Sutton, *Climate "Code Red": The Case for a Sustainability Emergency* (Fitzroy, Australia: Friends of the Earth, 2008).

<http://www.carbonequity.info/climatecodedred/summary.html>.



## *CHAPTER 1*

# **THUNDEROUS SILENCE**

One day, as on many days, Gautama the Buddha sat with 1250 disciples in a shady mango grove near the town of Rajagaha, the capital of ancient Magadha, which existed in the area of the modern Indian state of Bihar.<sup>1</sup> He and his disciples enjoyed sitting in what we would now call wild forests. They were quietly meditating. You could hear a pin drop. For the Buddha this was simply a natural expression of his supreme enlightenment. For his disciples, it was an opportunity to be spontaneously drawn into the master's extraordinary state of consciousness.

The mango grove's owner was one of the Buddha's wealthy lay disciples, Jivaka Komarabhacca, who was a minister of King Ajatasattu Videhiputta. The king felt restless and asked his ministers to recommend an ascetic who could offer him solace and wisdom. Various names were suggested to him, but he dismissed one after the other. Turning to Jivaka, the king wondered why he had remained silent. Thus prompted, Jivaka naturally recommended his own teacher, the Buddha, whom the king consented to visit.

Jivaka brought King Ajatasattu to meet the Buddha, but as they entered the grove, the ruler grew increasingly apprehensive. He interpreted the unusual silence in the vicinity of the Buddha in his own worldly way, seeing it as the silence before a murderous attack on him. He had not brought weapons or soldiers to protect him. Feeling more and more troubled, with his "hair standing on end" from terror, the suspicious ruler inquired from his well-meaning guide the reason for the forest's utter silence. Jivaka assured the king that no evil-intentioned assailants were hiding behind the trees or in the bushes.

We can readily understand and appreciate the king's worries as the reasonable concern of a powerful worldly ego, who, under normal circumstances, had good reason to worry about his safety. But this was not a normal circumstance. The Buddha's presence guaranteed that something else was going on, that a different principle was at work. We could say that the Buddha and the monastic elders seated with him had thoroughly

transcended the ordinary worldling's "fight or flight" syndrome. For them, there existed neither friend nor foe, and the palpable aura emanating from them was one of utter tranquility and peace.

King Ajatasattu relaxed his self-centered worries for the moment and bravely stepped into the glade where Sakyamuni Buddha, the sage of the Sakya clan, and his monastic disciples were immersed in peaceful meditation. He approached the Buddha, made obeisance to him, and then sat down as quietly as possible to one side. When it was appropriate to speak, he asked the questions he had come to ask of the sage.

The king started by questioning whether the life of a homeless monk had an immediate, visible result, as do other professions. The Buddha knew that the king had put the same question to other sages before him, and therefore invited his majesty to tell him what their answers had been. One ascetic recommended nonaction as the best way to avoid negative results. Another ascetic told the ruler that karma just runs out like a ball of yarn that has been released on a downward slope and thus there was no comfort to be had. The king listed other ascetics and their responses, but admitted that he had found them unconvincing.

In Socratic fashion, as he was wont to do, the Buddha kept on quizzing Ajatasattu until he had prepared the ground for his own response. The Buddha patiently expounded to the jaded ruler at great length why some would leave their householder life in favor of the wonderful fruits of a homeless life marked by mindfulness, clear awareness, inner delight, and spontaneous virtuous conduct.

In the end, King Ajatasattu rejoiced and formally went for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha as a lifelong lay follower. The Buddha accepted the ruler into the Sangha, even though the king confessed to having killed his good and kind-hearted father in order to usurp the throne, just as his own son would do in due course. After the king had left, the Buddha told his congregation that, because of that heinous crime, the king "is done for, his fate is sealed."<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, the Buddha remarked prophetically, the ruler would have had his spotless Dharma eye opened right there and then.

Those who are caught in the clatter of conventional life can hardly imagine the palpable silence of great masters, whose presence tends to hold the ego in at least

temporary abeyance, or in a wide-open space where it seems to become extinct. Normally, as psychologists assure us, we are enmeshed in the “fight or flight” syndrome. We either fearfully and aggressively lash out against others by whom we feel threatened, or, feeling overpowered by them, we take flight. We run away as fast as possible from imaginary or actual danger. As long as we are apt to react in either way, we can hardly appreciate the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. They embody a different mentality: a nonreactive mode of existence.

The peace of the great realizers, indeed, “passeth all understanding.” It transcends our ordinary way of mindlessly, automatically reacting to things and situations. We have to first cultivate a certain degree of inner silence, a certain measure of spiritual awareness and understanding before we can more fully appreciate the silence around great masters, the pioneers of the Dharma path and make good use of it. The great masters, steeped in profound realization, are spontaneous spiritual transmitters all the time, regardless of our own aptitude or readiness. But, as with a radio, unless we are properly attuned, we cannot capture their transmission, understand and retain it, and also apply it mindfully and effectively.

Hence traditional wisdom advises us to prepare through careful study. In the case of Tibetan Buddhism, upon which the present book is chiefly based, we have wonderful preparatory works, which can serve well even those who have already progressed further on the path. We are referring to the systematic treatments of the Dharma path, as proffered in the so-called “stages of the path,” or *lam-rim*, teachings, as they were first structured by the illustrious eleventh-century Indian master Atisha.

Most of us live in a noisy environment. Because of this, most people are accustomed to noise—both inner and outer. Often their mind is just as noisy as their external environment. Sometimes, they don’t even know that they have become habituated to noise until they are exposed to silence. Many years ago, a friend of Georg’s, who lived in San Francisco, came to visit him in his peaceful rural setting. Georg watched him for several hours being unsettled, even pacing up and down. Then, at one point, his friend exclaimed: “It’s so darn quiet here!” He got ready to drive back to San Francisco, even though he had intended to stay for the weekend. Georg wouldn’t have traded his small, simple home for a mansion in any city of the world. He enjoyed the

quiet and while still living in the United States loathed having on occasion to drive into San Francisco. Both of us find towns rather noisy and chaotic, even our own small town in Saskatchewan, and enjoy the winter months when the roads empty of people and cars.

Artificial noise impacts negatively on the nervous system and, we believe, also befuddles the mind. Occasionally a car drives by our home with the stereo turned up high and the bass turned so low that it becomes an unpleasant physical sensation, even rattling the window panes. This is always an unpleasant experience for us and, we think, hardly beneficial for the car driver.

So-called civilized folks are filling Nature chockfull with noise. The natural “noises” of forests, fields, mountains, rivers, or the ocean, are sounds that the nervous system can handle, incorporate, and even feel to be enlivening. This is not the case with most human-made sounds apart perhaps from certain types of music. We cannot understand, though, how some people say they thrive on listening to music all day long, especially when it is of the pop variety. But even great composers can rattle our nerves and trouble our mind when we listen to their music for too long.

The sounds of civilization are by and large disharmonious and overly loud. City traffic regularly reaches 70–80 decibels and truck and motorcycle traffic 90 decibels.<sup>3</sup> Chainsaws and pneumatic drills clock in at 120 decibels. Rock concerts put out some 120 decibels but can peak at the painful threshold of 150 decibels, which is also the noise level of a roaring jet engine at a hundred feet. Windows shatter at 163 decibels and ear drums burst at 190 decibels. Long before then, deafness can occur from even a single exposure to rock-concert-level noise. No one knows precisely the mental health costs of all this sonic onslaught, though loud sounds are known to cause irritability and fatigue. A little above 200 decibels, sound waves can kill.

The ocean is singularly affected by our civilization’s noise generation. Ships, boats, and military devices tested by the navy of the United States and other countries are causing veritable havoc in the ocean. The propeller sounds of the world’s fleet of 90,000 ships traversing the ocean generate an unpleasant and even harmful sonic environment for aquatic life, apart from all those vessels being a major contributor to marine and also air pollution.

Far worse and far more callous are the sonar waves produced by the U.S. navy's Low Frequency Active Sonar (LFAS) waves, which even at a distance of 100 miles approach 160 decibels. This horribly invasive sound has been directly linked to the "inexplicable" deaths and self-inflicted beachings of whales in recent years. Yet, naval war games, which involve lethal sound waves, have thus far not been called off.

Let us recall here that gray whales, for instance, have populated the ocean for 30 million years and since 1949 have been a protected species. Let us also recall that the humpback whale is capable of singing intricate seasonal songs that consist of up to seven themes and can last ten minutes or so. Only recently, anatomists discovered that the humpback whale shares spindle neurons with great apes and humans. Although the function of spindle neurons in the brain is still only inadequately understood, they seem to be involved in cognitive processes. Do we really want to dismiss the whale's giant brain of c. 7.5 kilograms as just useless gray matter? Or ought we not assume that a species that can communicate through a long-lasting song, which it varies periodically and probably purposively in accordance with accumulated experiences, and that exhibits complex social behavior has an intelligence all its own?

What about bottlenose dolphins? Experiments have shown that they can recognize themselves in a mirror, which is generally taken as a sign of self-awareness. They are quick learners, are highly adaptable, and have surprised many a trainer and spectator with their innovative game playing. Exactly because of their intelligence and collaborative skill, bottlenose dolphins have been exploited by the navy for military purposes. They can outmaneuver torpedoes and can place magnetic mines against the underbelly of ships and submarines. Throughout human history, dolphins have been recognized as displaying purposive intelligence, and there are many accounts about drowning humans owing their life to a dolphin.

How can we use our own human brainpower to destroy such intelligent fellow beings or warp their perception enough to execute our ill intentions? Surely, the nefarious war games of our power-hungry military leaders and the irresponsible experiments of knowledge-hungry scientists are not good enough reasons. As we will show in Chapter 5, the entire ocean, voluminous as it is, is in dire straits from chemical pollution, noise pollution, overfishing, and global warming.

Even when there is no audible noise, our civilization still produces and bombards us with unpleasant electromagnetic interference patterns that travel around the globe and into outer space. There is no dearth of radio waves, and every piece of electric equipment or machinery emanates electromagnetic fields. Our biosphere is riddled with invisible human-made waves, which cause multiple interference patterns that not even millennia of biological evolution have prepared living beings for. Because they are invisible, we tend to remain ignorant about them or prefer not to take them into account.

Western medicine has been slow in acknowledging that such waves are detrimental to our physical and mental well being. In an effort to reduce spiraling health care costs, more recently medicine has started to take an interest in this hidden side of contemporary life.<sup>4</sup> Computers and cell phones, to which many of us are so addicted, are especially damaging because of their strong electromagnetic fields. According the *8th Annual Report on VoIP [Voice over Internet Protocol] Industry*, published by the London-based telecom market research company iLocus, during the first six month of 2006, no fewer than 1 trillion cell phone minutes occupied the electronic ether worldwide. We can guess that a good many of the cell phone calls were placed by children, and very probably many of the calls amounted to little more than irrelevant chatter. Some authorities claim that even ten minutes on a cell phone can trigger cancer cells! We are not aware of any research done into the negative effects of electromagnetic waves upon the natural environment, though it does not take much imagination to extrapolate that they cannot be benign.

As far as sound is concerned, the available evidence is uncontroversial. While some sounds are soothing and even healing, others are clearly destructive. Among the benign sounds are birdsong, listening to someone's heartbeat, coyotes howling, leaves rustling in the wind, ocean waves crashing at the beach, big rain drops falling and bouncing off the ground, the crackling sound of an open fire. Even ice snapping at the end of winter with a bang, or a sudden thunder clap, can prove healing or aligning.

The greatest healing effect, however, derives not from any kind of sound but from refined silence. In order to hear our own thoughts and also to become aware of what Nature is telling us, we must cultivate true silence. We know from the Pali Canon that Gautama the Buddha greatly treasured silence. As one passage states: "Here comes the



recluse Gotama. This venerable one likes quiet and commends quiet.”<sup>5</sup> Having attained freedom from the grasping ego in his holy company, the Buddha’s senior disciples, the Sthaviras or Arhats, too preferred silence. Whenever the Buddha gave one of his instructional discourses, there was complete silence among his listeners, who were eager to hear and imbibe his wisdom. No one, we are told, was coughing, clearing his throat, or shuffling around. Their mind was one pointed or, as the Pali Canon also says, disentangled.

One time, a large group of monks visited the Buddha and noisily greeted the resident members of the Sangha. The Buddha promptly dismissed them. He allowed them to stay only after Sakyan family members and the deity Brahma Sahampati had pleaded with the Buddha to reconsider his decision because the visiting monks were newly ordained and did not know any better.<sup>6</sup>

According to one discourse, the Brahmin Jata Bharadvaja asked the Buddha in verse:

A tangle inside, a tangle outside,  
This generation is entangled in a tangle.  
I ask you, O Gautama,  
Who can disentangle this tangle?<sup>7</sup>

The Buddha responded by saying that someone who has virtue and wisdom and who has conquered ignorance, lust, and anger could easily disentangle the tangle. This happened 2,500 year ago. We might as well ask the same question today, though perhaps with yet greater cause and urgency. The answer would still be the same, of course.

We ourselves have been fortunate enough to experience firsthand the palpable silence surrounding adepts. Theirs is a wholesome, healing field. When Pabongka Rinpoche taught, you apparently could hear a pin drop; the monastic and the lay followers in attendance were quiet, solely intent on listening to the Dharma.

It would never occur to a Buddha or a Dharma elder to race up and down the ocean or a river in a motor boat just for the fun of it, while all the while injuring countless water creatures. It would also never occur to them to mow down entire forests or even

ruin a single branch of a tree just to satisfy their hunger or curiosity, or for monetary profit. According to one story, a monk once cut off the main branch of a tree. The spirit associated with that tree complained to the Buddha that one of his disciples had lopped off the arm of his child.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the Buddha forbade cutting tree branches and trees in future.

For the same reason, to protect life forms, he forbade his monastic followers to till the soil. He himself emphasized that he took great care to avoid damaging seeds and crops and expected his monastics to do likewise. Now, you might argue that the monastic rule against agricultural work was and perhaps is appropriate for a monk but would be impractical for lay people, who must grow food in order to survive. Yet, ought we to not at least consider the Buddha's uncompromising code of nonharming? Agriculture, especially modern industrial agriculture with its huge amounts of herbicides, pesticides, and insecticides is lethal to many creatures above and below the ground, including the farmers applying these toxins. Industrial agriculture, or agribusiness, uses about 2.5 million tons of toxic pesticides every year.<sup>9</sup> That's enough poison to kill all of us! Pesticides and all the other "cides" are indeed proving detrimental to our health through the food we eat. But in the present context our concern is primarily with the animal victims of our wayward human ways. Dharmically, the answer is clear: We must not harm other creatures, and therefore industrial agriculture stands indicted as ethically unviable at least from the perspective of the Dharma.

The same applies to other industries, not least logging, which harms untold numbers of beings and the trees themselves. Here we ought to consider the possibility that trees and plants are sentient. In the first half of the twentieth century, the ingenious Indian biologist Jagadish Chandra Bose demonstrated by means of a specially designed instrument—which he called the crescograph—that plants are sentient.<sup>10</sup> The Buddha praised them for offering welcome shade to travelers and ascetics, which ought to give rise to the feeling of gratitude. He even accepted that they were associated with tree-dwelling spirits and that most certainly they should never be damaged. More recently, trees entered into jurisprudence when Christopher D. Stone proposed that since corporations were given legal rights, trees and mountains, as well as rivers and lakes

should be granted legal standing too.<sup>11</sup> There is much food for thought in this kind of legal consideration.

We are not making an argument here to stop growing food and sitting down to die, which would be absurd and definitely not even in keeping with the Buddha's teaching. However, we are arguing that we ought to extend reverence for life to all of Nature, not merely the mammals we find cute and adorable, and also that we should carefully examine the ethical implications of industrial agriculture, logging, and other "civilized" activities. We must have the courage to examine both our urban and rural lifestyle to see whether it is morally sound or, as we believe, in urgent need of radical reform.

Such examination thrives best in an atmosphere of cultivated silence. Even before the time of the Buddha, the sages of India delighted in silence and sought to cultivate it. Various Pali *Suttas* record the Buddha as having said that one should abandon false and harsh speech and instead cultivate speaking words that are timely, true gentle, good, invested with loving-kindness.<sup>12</sup> In other words, a true disciple of the Buddha guards his or her speech well. Since even at the best of times, there are few occasions for speaking, the Buddha and his disciples remained mostly silent. Hence he came to be known as Sakyamuni, or Shakyamuni, the sage of the Sakya tribe. The Sanskrit word *muni* entails the related word *mauna*, or "silence." Thus a *muni* is traditionally someone who is a "silent sage," a sage who is mindful of every word he speaks.

The mindful silence of a sage is indeed golden. Only a fool's silence is like tin or, in more contemporary terms, like plastic. Reiterating the wisdom of earlier masters, the Seventh Dalai Lama wrote in his *Gems of Wisdom* (verse 19):

What invisible wind brings weakness  
and wanders without end?  
Indulgence in babble and chatter  
devoid of any meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Commenting on this stanza, Glenn Mullin quotes Je Tsongkhapa, who wrote:

The person following higher being and enlightenment resolves to speak truthfully, gently, helpfully, and meaningfully.

And we might add: “Otherwise not at all.” Again, Mullin cites the great Sakya Pandita, founder of the Sakya branch of Vajrayana Buddhism:

When you have nothing meaningful to say, simply enjoy the silence. If you cannot keep your tongue from flapping, tie a piece of string around it. For some that is the only remedy.<sup>14</sup>

It does not take a huge amount of imagination or cleverness to appreciate the advantage of silence. Even in our own Western tradition, we have the adage that “silence is golden.” Logically, we ought to begin any dharmic study with silence, so that we can truly hear the Dharma and begin to disentangle our inner and outer entanglements. In the same way, pondering the pangs of Nature, silence is our best gambit.

If we can periodically go on a silent retreat, we will be greatly assisted in our effort to elicit the power of silence from within us. In turn, our cultivation of silence can lead to greater harmony and sanity in order to countermand the insanity associated with modern civilizational living. As we become inwardly and outwardly more silent, we will not only hear the Dharma but also the voice of Nature and her trillions of fellow sentient beings. The outer wilderness, which the Buddha preferred over noisy towns and cities, corresponds with the inner wilderness, the transconceptual mind at large, which, like the external wilderness, is natural, unmodified and unspoiled by humanity, without reference points, and free.

ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 1

1. This account is related in the *Samannaphala-Sutta* of the *Digha-Nikaya* (2.1ff.). Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, new ed. 1995), pp. 91–109.
2. Verse 2.102. Maurice Walshe, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
3. Each decibel is twice as loud as the preceding decibel.
4. See, e.g., Health Publica Icon Health Publications, *Sound Waves: Three-in-One Medical Reference* (San Diego, Calif.: Icon Health Publications, 2003).
59. The *Mahasakuludayi-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (77.4). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2d ed. 2001), p. 629.
6. This story is told in the *Catuma-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (67.4ff.). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, p. 560f.
7. This intriguing dialogue between the Buddha and the Brahmin is found in the *Brahmana-Samyutta-Sutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (7.625). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 259.
8. This story is related in the *Pacittiya* of the *Bhutaḡama-Vagga*, a tract found in the Thai Pali Canon.
9. See G. Tyler Miller, *Living in the Environment* (Bellmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 12th ed. 2002).

10. See J. C. Bose's *Life Movements in Plants* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, reissued 1993), 2 vols.

11. See Christopher D. Stone, *Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Tioga Publishing, repr. 1988). We think that trees should be granted legal status all the more since they are endowed with a certain kind of sentience.

12. See, e.g., the *Kakacupama-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (21.11). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *op. cit.*, p. 217ff.

13. Seventh Dalai Lama, *Gems of Wisdom*. Trans. by Glenn H. Mullin (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999), p. 50.

14. *Ibid.*

## *CHAPTER 2*

# **WILDERNESS WITHIN AND WITHOUT**

Gautama the Buddha favored the wilderness, especially groves and forests, rather than towns and cities, for his dwelling and meditation place. Some people, presumably malcontented fellow ascetics or Brahmins, seem to have criticized him for this. In one of his discourses, he made a point of explicitly explaining his understandable preference, which clearly had nothing to do with an egoic inclination, or unconscious habit. As he put it straightforwardly:

Now, Brahmin, it might be that you think: “Perhaps the recluse Gotama is not free from lust, hate, and delusion even today, which is why he still resorts to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest.” But you should not think thus. It is because I see two benefits that I still resort to remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest: I see a pleasant abiding for myself here and now, and I have compassion for future generations.<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha was not fleeing from the world, as if the world could inhibit his sublime realization of full enlightenment. He simply chose to keep a certain distance from the vulgar ways of life typical of the ordinary worldling<sup>2</sup> who, caught in compulsive karmic behavior, has little room for a mindful, contemplative lifestyle dedicated to freedom from negative attitudes and emotions and the positive cultivation of wholeness. By definition, a worldling is someone who is attracted to the karmic grooves of the world and therefore is subject to repeated “recycling,” both in any given lifetime and also life after life. Unless he or she has learned the lesson of life, namely that worldly ways only reinforce suffering, a worldling cannot see the advantage of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Even if able to intuit the great advantage of taking refuge to the Triple Gem<sup>3</sup>, the worldling would still succumb time and time again to ignorance, lust, hatred, and all

the other egoic reactions to life, thereby keeping the fateful cycle of karmic production and karmic fruition going indefinitely.

Also, we must point out that “a pleasant abiding” is not the same as a “pleasurable place or circumstance,” or, in contemporary terms, “having a good time.” The latter is something that thrills, or massages the ego personality, whereas pleasant or, more correctly, joyous abiding is what we might call an appropriate locus for an awakened being—or someone aspiring to spiritual awakening—who naturally and spontaneously seeks out quietude rather than the hustle and bustle of towns and cities, so that he or she may tread lightly upon the Earth and benefit other beings.

The Buddha preached and also personally demonstrated the supreme value of a self-disciplined, morally sound way of life and what today we would refer to as a sustainable lifestyle. Precisely because of this, the Buddha’s exemplary preference for dwelling in the forests with utmost simplicity is also a compassionate act that favors future generations, and he understood it as such. A self-indulgent lifestyle, by contrast, neither bears future generations in mind nor is compassionate at the present time.

The Buddha did not have available to him a concept like “sustainability,” which, in the 1980s, became current when we moderns began to realize that Nature had come under extreme duress as a result of our overconsuming and indiscriminate lifestyle, which ignores the welfare of others and especially future generations. The Buddha recognized and acknowledged that compassion calls for a sustainable way of life, which embodies a concern for all other beings—not merely oneself, not merely one’s family or favored species or group, and not merely those alive now but *all* sentient beings now and in the future.

Because contemporary people practically deny their own mortality and behave as if they would live forever, and because they are primarily concerned with their own welfare and their own pleasure, they ignore other beings—those alive now and those yet to come. But any compassion that is not all-embracing and extending beyond the present is necessarily partial and inadequate. Therefore, unless we understand sustainability in truly comprehensive terms, we really do not understand it at all. The Dharma conveys a very clear sense of this.



We have used the term “wilderness” but wilderness is wilderness only in opposition to the highly structured, if not strangulating, life offered by civilization. We realize that from the viewpoint of groves or forests and the beings living in them—human or animal—the wilderness is an interactive and interdependent community. The Buddha and his monastic disciples obviously would not have thought of a grove or forest as “wilderness.” For them, they were an organic environment of natural interrelatedness, whereas the karmically “entangled” life in towns and cities was a step removed from Nature and wholeness. The urban lifestyle was and is handicapped by the artificiality of civilized arrangements—the sort of environment where “dancing, singing, music and shows” abound, as a well-known discourse puts it<sup>4</sup>—that is, where noisy distractions proliferate and where ego-driven individuals maneuver each to their own short-term advantage and without ever experiencing true community.

The peculiar concerns and fixations of the ordinary worldling are, of course, not limited to an urban environment. Villages and hamlets display the same mental attitudes and practices that, perhaps in a more exaggerated manner, define towns and cities. Wherever we find human settlements, we encounter the ways of the world. Wilderness, by contrast, is the absence of human intervention.

As the Buddha explained, someone leaving his noisy town environment and taking up the wholesome life of an ascetic, in effect adopts a whole new, highly ethical code and lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> He stops killing and even harming other creatures; he does not steal or lie, and he abandons the loose sexual mores of a worldling by adopting rigorous rules of chastity. Instead of deceiving and bearing false witness, the ascetic controls his tongue and not only speaks truthfully but also endeavors to make his speech gentle, relevant, and conducive to peace. Above all, he opts for mindfulness in all situations.

How should we understand mindfulness? This question is best answered in the words of the Buddha himself:

There is, monks, this one way to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and distress, for the disappearance of pain and sadness, for the gaining of the right path, for the realization of Nibbâna: — that is to say, the four foundations of mindfulness.<sup>6</sup>

The Buddha continued by explaining what the four foundations are:

What are the four? Here, monks, a monk abides contemplating the body as body, ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world; he abides contemplating feelings as feelings [*vedana*] . . .; he abides contemplating mind as mind [*citta*] . . .; he abides contemplating mind-objects as mind-objects [*dhamma*], ardent, clearly aware and mindful, having put aside hankering and fretting for the world.<sup>7</sup>

The contemplation of the body as body, the Buddha moreover elucidated, proceeds by mindfully breathing in and out, while remaining aware of all the parts of the body and the body as a whole, without clinging to anything in the world. This practice can be done when seated in a cross-legged posture or when walking or lying down. The key is awareness of the present moment, without one's awareness being distracted, which is likely to occur as long as we are attracted to the world. Those who are attached to the world, the Buddha noted, might benefit from contemplating a corpse. In India and Tibet, this practice is made easier because of the existence of charnel grounds where corpses can readily be seen decaying and decomposing. In our Western civilization, which denies and hides the stark reality of death whenever it can, we need to resort to imaginative visualization.<sup>8</sup>

In a similarly detached manner in which a Dharma practitioner would witness a clump of dirt, a withered leaf, or a corpse, we are asked to witness our own body and the feelings, or sensations, arising in it, whether they be felt to be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. We simply notice what is arising bodily, in our feelings, and mentally. As far as noticing the mind and its mental activities is concerned, we particularly observe whether sensual desire, ill-will, laziness, worry, and doubt are present. Similarly we notice whenever the five “aggregates of grasping”<sup>9</sup> are present. Mindfulness means the disciplined application of awareness to everything that is arising to one's consciousness. Nyanaponika Thera has shed additional light on this:

Mindfulness, though so highly praised and capable of such great achievements, is not at all a ‘mystical’ state, beyond the ken and reach of the average person. It is, on the contrary, something quite simple and common, and very familiar to us. In its elementary manifestation, known under the term ‘attention’, it is one of the cardinal functions of consciousness without which there cannot be perception of any object at all. If a sense object exercises a stimulus that is sufficiently strong, attention is roused in its basic form as initial ‘taking notice’ of the object, as the first ‘turning towards’ it. Because of this, consciousness breaks through the dark stream of subconsciousness (—a function that, according to the Abhidamma (Buddhist psychology), is performed innumerable times during each second of waking life). This function of germinal mindfulness, or initial attention, is still a rather primitive process, but it is of decisive importance, being the first emergence of consciousness from its unconscious subsoil.<sup>10</sup>

As Andrew JiYu Weiss points out in his helpful book *Beginning Mindfulness*, mindfulness is an “embodied practice,” which permits us to “experience mindfulness directly and tangibly,” and which puts us directly in contact with whatever we focus our disciplined attention on.<sup>11</sup>

The Buddha favored groves and forests, because they were supportive of the kind of undistracted lifestyle that he deemed fit for a Dharma practitioner. In contradistinction, he looked upon towns as places for worldly folk who, lacking in mindfulness, were enmeshed in an abundance of unconscious conduct and immorality. Unconsciousness does not make for rightful behavior. Rather, it inclines toward egoic reactivity, which often is expressed in immorality. Mindfulness, by contrast, leans toward rectitude and the sort of behavior that naturally leads to greater inner freedom and wholeness.

At the same time, the Buddha was very clear that the delight felt by a Buddha or an Arhat is not dependent on any external circumstances and represents something like a portable shrine. As is recorded in one Pali text:

Shrines in parks and woodland shrines,  
Well-constructed lotus ponds:

These are not worth a sixteenths part  
Of a delightful human being.

Whether in a village or forest,  
In a valley or on the plain—  
Wherever the arahants dwell  
Is truly a delightful place.<sup>12</sup>

A Buddha or an Arhat find the inner wilderness, which, as the Pali Canon is adamant, not only does not instill fear but actually creates delight.<sup>13</sup> This teaching in itself makes the Dharma life positive and belies the popular belief that Buddhism is dour and pessimistic. While the ordinary worldling, whose senses are pulled out into the external world, predictably equates wilderness with certain external environmental features, the above verses give us a potent clue for understanding wilderness in a different way. As stated in the second stanza, a delightful place is one which an arhant infuses with his inner delight. The awakened one radiates joy.

To be sure, Buddhism has an entirely positive regard for Nature, which is a very important point. In particular, it tallies with today's concern for sustainability and the proper conservation and restoration of Nature, not least of wild forests.

As the editors and contributors of the anthology *Wild Forestry* argue, wild forests are far more than an economic or political issue. They are a psychological and spiritual force and a vitalizing reality, which contemporary humanity needs in order to find itself, to find its Dharma track. Ecosophists Alan Drengson and Duncan Taylor, the editors of that volume, write:

Wild foresting is a responsible use of forests that appreciates, is attuned to, and learns from their wild energies and wisdom. Wild foresting connects indigenous knowledge systems with contemporary ecological knowledge, and reconciles the needs of the Earth with those of humans. It unites a great variety of local practices tailored to the characteristics and values of unique forest places around the world. Wild foresting sustains and

promotes forest health, biological and cultural diversity. Wherever wild forests grow, or are being restored, practitioners discover that health and life quality are intertwined with the integrity and resilience of diverse ecosystem processes. Wild foresting honours these processes as it adapts human activities to the values these systems can sustain in perpetuity.<sup>14</sup>

It is very important for us moderns to hear the Buddha's teaching about forests, because every single day, the Earth is deprived of some 80,000 acres (or 125 square miles) of forest, and every single day, the Earth is also deprived of some 135 plant and animal species who are becoming extinct; that amounts to nearly 50,000 species every year. "Oh, so that includes plants?" reacted one less-than-caring individual, as if plants had no right to exist and as if their demise would not disadvantage us as well. Of the numerous species pushed toward the brink of oblivion, the 240 known species of primates are critically endangered (8 percent), endangered (19 percent), or vulnerable (21 percent).

Most people are still unaware of the Sixth Mass Extinction that is underway. What is it? Quite simply, this somewhat prosaic phrase refers to a shocking reality: Today's rate of species extinction surpasses the catastrophe of the last great extinction in which the dinosaurs vanished from the surface of the Earth, apparently as the result of a meteor impact about 65 million years ago.

The Sixth Mass Extinction is not a quaint notion concocted by a handful of eccentric scientists. It is an *actuality* agreed on, according to a survey of over 3,000 biologists undertaken in 1998, by seven out of ten practitioners of the biological sciences. This was reconfirmed in 2005 by more than 1,300 scientists recruited from 95 countries who contributed to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report. This report, which can be read online, concluded that over the past few hundred years, "humans have increased the species extinction rate by as much as 1,000 over background rates typical over the planet's history."<sup>15</sup> Another report, entitled *Living Beyond Our Means: Natural Assets and Human Well-Being* includes the following disquieting statement:

At the heart of this assessment is a stark warning. Human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted.<sup>16</sup>

In February 2006, the *Global Outlook* report published by the United Nations warned that “biodiversity is in decline at all levels and geographical scales.”<sup>17</sup> The rapid decline of biodiversity—which is another way of talking about the Sixth Mass Extinction—is most painfully obvious in the destruction of the rain forests of the Amazon basin. Rain forests are the home of an estimated 50 percent of all species, which makes them very special places, which we ought to protect and nurture rather than mow down.

With the disappearance of rain forests, we also forfeit, among other things, a most valuable apothecary. Twenty-five percent of Western pharmaceuticals contain ingredients that are derived from rain forest plants. Amazingly, we know perhaps only one percent of the plant species growing in rain forests, and clear-cutting, if nothing else, amounts to mindlessly discarding precious medicine. We will say more about this in Chapter 4.

There is another important facet to deforestation: Growing trees are significant carbon sinks. As we divest our planet of forests, we simultaneously burden the atmosphere with the carbon dioxide load that we produce and that would normally be absorbed by trees and plants for their own growth.

Thus far, the dire warnings of scientists have been largely ignored by the public and underplayed by the mass media. People seem to push the growing malaise of Nature as readily into their subconscious as the inevitability of death in general. Despite all the alarm signals ringing loud and clear, few seem to want to contemplate the impending collapse of the Earth's biosphere and the extinction of our own species.

When we normally view Nature as a source of pleasure, as something we travel to as tourists in order to wrest from it every ounce of comfort and pleasure we can. We don't think of going to an island, a forest, or a beach but to a hotel or motel located on an attractive island, in a pleasant forest, or on a beach environment. Thus, for many people Nature is little more than a tourist destination.

This seems the place to say something about tourism and business travel in general and eco-tourism in particular. Every year, over 300 million people around the

world indulge in business or leisure travel. Given audio and video conferencing, a great deal of business travel is unnecessary and even uneconomic. Only a few companies have started to minimize their business travel, which is commendable even if they were motivated by economic rather than environmental concerns.

Here we must point out a major incongruity perpetrated by Al Gore, who was a joint recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for his efforts on behalf of the environment. What was he thinking of when organizing his worldwide 29-hour marathon *Life Earth* rock concert in the summer of 2007 supposedly in aid of our ailing Earth? From the perspective of air and noise pollution alone, this was entirely misconceived. How could one expect wisdom to arise from cacophony? It struck us as especially ironic that one of the concerts was held in the Antarctic, where the ice sheet is shrinking fast because of global warming. The participating artists and spectators around the world are estimated to have produced over 74,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> from their travels and energy consumption, as well as more than 1000 tons of garbage.

A related incongruity is Al Gore's message that all this pollution can readily be offset. However, the notion of offsetting entails a really fatal error, because once the genie has been released from the bottle, he or she cannot be compelled to return. We cannot magically make emitted CO<sub>2</sub> disappear. For instance, a jet leaves a trail not just of water vapor but greenhouse gases, and whatever else we might do to "offset," they obviously remain there in the polluted atmosphere. The only way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions is to slow down consumption. This includes drastically reducing air travel, which, amazingly enough, is still on the rise.

Jet-setting Dharma teachers have yet to do some serious heart searching about the appropriateness of their extensive air travels: Are they justified in assuming that their work on behalf of the Dharma is more important than the health of the environment, given the current level of threat? Or are they merely a poor role model for their students? Would the Buddha have availed himself of this mode of transport at all and in particular in view of the devastating environmental effects of air travel? The same questions could readily be put to those who jet-set around the world in order to lecture on the state of the environment.

There are of course also the same ecological problems with leisure tourism, not least because of the generation of huge amounts of greenhouse gases. Much of this highly undesirable effect, which contributes significantly to global warming, is due to air travel. Few travelers are aware that an airplane trip of 3,000 miles (approximately a round trip from New York to Houston) produces roughly 1 ton of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per passenger.

Needless to say, from the viewpoint of the Dharma, eco-tourism is a misguided, if not deliberately deceptive, business. In practice, it neither restores nor preserves the natural environment. Tourism, a habit of the ego, is intrinsically damaging to Nature and even spiritually questionable. It is engaged for fun, or pleasure, that is to say, it is in the employ of the ego, and therefore cannot, nor is it designed to, foster wisdom or mindfulness.

Tourism, whatever its label, is a mass movement, and masses by definition have a large ecological footprint. Whatever the advertisers of eco-tourism tell us, they cannot avoid the damaging impact on the environment. This is what we felt was wrong, for instance, with a certain well-meaning but injudicious book about the ocean, which seeks to convince readers that beach weddings are all right as long as you clean up afterward and that there is nothing wrong with recreational boating; just bring some oil-absorbent rags or diapers (!) for taking care of spills.<sup>18</sup> The book virtually ignores the fact that the ocean is dying and in need of *radical* ecological intercession. Conventionally speaking, it is too late for the kind of cavalier attitude advocated in that book and other consumer-oriented publications like it. Nature is seriously ailing, and we can ill afford to impact on it in the usual tourist way, even eco-tourist way. Dharmically speaking, such entertainments are simply distractions, which cater to the common ego and do not represent an instance of mindfulness.

We also declined to sponsor a recent fundraising event in the United States that involved going to the beach *en masse*. However worthy a particular human cause might be, as long as it involves damaging Nature and causing possible harm to other creatures, it does not seem worthy of support. At a certain level, this well-intentioned cause is morally questionable. Apart from these consideration, we ourselves have resolved to altogether stop traveling by air and to use our care only on what we regard as essential occasions.



To spell it out: To support a morally questionable cause means to behave in a morally questionable way—that is, in a way that could not be justified from the perspective of the Dharma. In *Yoga Morality*, Georg made the point that morality is an integral part of Yoga and that no spirituality worth its name can afford to ignore the moral dimension.<sup>19</sup> This is even more obvious when it comes to the Yogic path of the Buddha and his epigones. One just has to peer into any of the many Pali, Sanskrit, or Tibetan texts to be struck by their high moral tone.

As Dharma practitioners, we must apply a strong moral perspective to everything we do. This includes the environment and particularly tourism. Ordinary tourism is decidedly ego-tourism. As we would argue, even so-called eco-tourism is a project of the ego. The best form of eco-tourism is staying at home and going within for peace and joy.

As long as we choose to be householders rather than monastics, we should turn our homes into caves and forest retreats. Few people have the means to live on a farm or cottage in the countryside, far removed from the noise and distractions of towns and cities. Therefore, we must learn to make do with whatever our situation may be by transforming our home into a place of peace and quiet. How can we do this?

We begin by uncluttering our life, that is, by giving away what we haven't used in a year or two and thus really don't need. This can prove an unexpectedly challenging task, because it is often difficult to give away stuff we no longer need or want, not because we are still attached to those things but because others aren't interested in receiving hand-me-downs, perhaps because in the circles in which we are moving everyone feels at least some of the burden of owning too much or perhaps because people prefer new thing over old ones. That's where thrift stores come in handy.

Uncluttering involves a measure of renunciation. This is in fact one of three key practices according to the Gelugpa tradition. The other two are developing compassion and correct view (consisting in understanding emptiness). We will talk about these two shortly.

To stay with renunciation for a moment, simplifying one's life can be quite a task. Uncluttering is one aspect of it. But then there is also identifying those areas in one's life where we need to disentangle ourselves from conventional involvements. How can we

simplify our life? Once we have gotten rid of unnecessary and unwanted surplus in our life, we inspect how our behavior, rather than our belongings, is similarly cluttered.

Getting rid of surplus material goods is difficult enough, but examining our involvements is even more difficult. We call this phase of personal simplification “social uncluttering.” Here we must note that some of our involvements seem like necessary obligations but are not really. We are just telling ourselves, we need to do such and such, perhaps because we have done so for a long time or because some of our values and social practices still lag behind our dharmic insights. In the end, it is all a matter of our priorities, our value system. What do we truly treasure in order to invest our time and energy in it?

To speak in Christian theologian Paul Tillich’s terms: What is our ultimate concern?<sup>20</sup> Do we really want to be apprised every day of the mass media news, which is frequently too warped or slanted to be reliable and that is also mostly quite irrelevant? Do we really need to teach the local football team? Is foot ball our ultimate concern? Do we really need to spend so much time, energy, and money on entertaining others? What for? Who is truly served by social distractions? If we are Dharma practitioners, our values should be clear to us. If they are not clear and simple, then we need to study the Dharma more and imbibe the wisdom teachings of the Buddha and other masters.

On the path of the Dharma, analysis and proper understanding are considered highly important. The reason for this is that we are encouraged to not take anything just on faith. It is easy to fall out of faith, but once something has been properly understood and appreciated for the right reasons, we are not readily distracted by apparent alternatives that might seem attractive on the surface but have no real substance.

We would do well to do our battles with doubt up front and not halfway down the path. And how do we know that the certainty we have reached is firm and unassailable from doubt? We can tell by our own clarity, the many positive fruits of our conduct, and through the continued application of self-examination. If we are on the right path, more and more we will be at ease and realize what the great masters before us realized. We will, in other words, increasingly seek to and also be able to benefit others rather than ourselves. As Geshe Sonam Rinchen put it in his comments to Atisha’s *Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* (verse 41):

Firm conviction comes from knowledge and personal experience. If you've burnt your hand, you know that fire burns and no one can persuade you otherwise.<sup>21</sup>

To return to our consideration about simplification: Having creatively abandoned our surplus material possessions and having done likewise with our unnecessary social involvements, we are free to align our life more and more to the holy life of the Dharma. Since the lifestyle recommended by the Dharma is extraordinarily simple, we can very easily gauge the simplicity of our own lifestyle. If it detracts us significantly from our ultimate value—which for a Dharma practitioner is the virtue of wisdom and compassion leading to and expressing enlightenment—we have not yet reached the necessary simplicity.

Many great realizers were born into a privileged life with all sorts of material luxury and security. They include kings and princes. Gautama the Buddha, Bhavaviveka, Aryadeva, Padmasambhava, Shantarakshita, Shantideva, Simhabhadra, and Atisha count among them. They all renounced their life of privilege to take up the much simpler but also far less complicated and distracting life of the Dharma.

Unlike our material uncluttering, which primarily affects us personally, our social uncluttering can lead to a certain amount of displeasure in others. We should therefore be as skillful as possible in disentangling ourselves from unnecessary social involvements, especially if they are long standing. We also should not mind when our actions cause former friends and associates to think of us as cooks. We must be willing to pay the prize for integrity, for living by our deepest convictions.

A third level of simplification consists in uncluttering our conceptual furniture. Our thoughts, as we all know from personal experience, can have a negative impact on our inner environment and thus also negatively affect our external environment. As Westerners practicing the Dharma, which originated in India, we have a special liability. Often we bring to our Dharma practice a typically Western mindset, which is tainted by consumerism. On the one hand, we make the Dharma and our practice needlessly complicated. On the other hand, we are prone to distort the simple truths of the Dharma. An example of the former would be the habit of many Westerners to seek out all sorts of

initiations as if they were victory badges they could wear on their lapels, while an example of the latter flaw would be our mostly unconscious tendency to bend the Dharma our way, to favor our personal inclinations. Here the widespread consumption of alcohol and meat among many Western Buddhists is a case in point.

We like to pick and choose what suits us rather than what is helpful to our inner growth. For instance, we like to adopt glamorous looking practices that make us and others believe that we are very advanced. Sometimes we even find fault with teachers who, seeing our mind games very clearly and wanting to help our development, focus on teaching us, over and over again, the same simple moral principles and practices and reminding us of the superlative value of compassion and kindness.

Or we go from teaching to teaching to “get a personal hit” from the teacher instead of imbibing the teaching once and for all by translating it into daily practice. As long as we behave like butterflies, we cannot settle down to real practice, and therefore we also do not actually grow.

The Dharma is intrinsically simple. The process of renunciation is simple. So is developing compassion and correct view, which are the second and third principle of the path, as mapped out by Je Tsongkhapa.<sup>22</sup> Whenever the Dharma appears complicated, we can be sure it is only our mind making it so.

While we may not immediately understand everything about the philosophical artifice created around the Dharma over many centuries, the Buddha’s own discourses, as we know them from the Pali Canon or from the early Mahayana scriptures, and even the fundamental teachings of the Vajrayana require no particular aptitude. As long as we are willing to study the wisdom of the great Buddhist masters, we will in due course comprehend the principles underlying all genuine Buddha Dharma.

Material, social, and mental uncluttering, as explained above, has a positive impact on our mind and life. We will be able to better understand and appreciate the fundamental aspects of the Dharma and remove many obstacles blocking our smooth progression on the path to Buddhahood. Above all, we will become more capable of extending ourselves in empathy to all other beings and to the natural environment at large. We will come to see very clearly that there are no situations in our contemporary

life, complicated as it is, on which the Buddha Dharma cannot shed valuable light in principle, if not in detail.

Our present-day environmental crisis, which will soon of necessity keep our minds preoccupied, is a good example. The moral principles of the Dharma are completely relevant to our unfortunate situation. As we have seen from already cited materials, from the Buddha on, there have been sagely teachers and sagacious teachings showing us how to relate properly to our inner (mental) environment and the shared outer (natural) environment.

In a communication to the International Conference on Ecological Responsibility, held in New Delhi on October 2, 1993, Sakya Trizin Rinpoche, the spiritual head of the Sakya branch of Tibetan Buddhism, emphasized the connection between the inner and outer environments as follows:

Motivated by delusions, sentient beings perform positive and negative actions. These actions, otherwise known as karma, cause the formation of the animate and inanimate world. . . . Although the nature and condition of the births and lives of sentient beings are the consequence of individual karma, the external world is the outcome of the joint karma of all those beings equally connected to it.<sup>23</sup>

The above passage expresses an ancient dictum: As within, so without.

Compare this with the attitude of the ordinary worldling, which represents the modal attitude of our contemporary civilization at large: We objectify everything and then stand aloof from the objectified world that we have constructed out of lack of understanding, thinking that we are not responsible for that which we have created, that we are immune from the karmic effects of our thoughts and actions. Ignorance, egocentrism, and a skew value system allow hundreds of millions of people to ignore the plight of their fellow beings around the world, the extreme duress of Nature, the horrible truth of the Sixth Mass Extinction, and the extreme changes spawned by global warming.

These psychological factors are blocking the pathway to wholesome wilderness—both within and without. Dharma practitioners, we feel, have the obligation

to interrupt this fateful habituation to ignorance and self-centered indifference. By applying wisdom and compassion, those who have been fortunate enough to find the Dharma in this life must extricate themselves from the suicidal tendencies of our so-called post-modern civilization, which is really a civilization in the grip of the age-old poisons of greed, anger, and delusion. By finding and treasuring the wilderness within, which brings peace and joy, Dharma practitioners can bring solace and relief from suffering to our ailing world.

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPER 2

1. The *Bhaya-Bherava-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (4.34). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 107.
2. “Worldling” refers to what in Sanskrit is called a *samsarin*, someone wandering about in the world of change at whatever level, even the level of the creator-deity Brahma.
3. That is, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—the enlightened one, his teaching, and the community of sincere practitioners of the Buddha’s teaching.
4. The *Brahma-Jala-Sutta* of the *Digha-Nikaya* (1.10). Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, new ed. 1995), p. 69.
5. The *Samanaphala-Sutta* of the *Digha-Nikaya* (2.68ff.). Maurice Walshe, *op. cit.*, pp. 103ff.
6. The *Mahasatipatthana-Sutta* of the *Digha-Nikaya* (22.1). Maurice Walshe, *op. cit.*, p. 335.

7. Ibid.

8. For a good discussion of the “invisibility” of death in our contemporary society, see Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973).

9. The five “aggregates of grasping” (*skandha*) comprise the aggregate of form (including the body); the aggregate of feeling or sensation (which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral); the aggregate of perception (which reveals the distinctive feature of a given object); the aggregate of mental formations, and the aggregate of consciousness or simple awareness (which occurs always in connection with arising phenomena). When these aggregates are active, the sense of I also is not far removed.

10. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Meditation* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1973), p. 24.

11. See Andrew JiYu Weiss, *Beginning Mindfulness: Learning the Way of Awareness* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2004), p. 83.

12. The *Sakka-Samyutta-Sutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (11.2.15). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 332.

13. See the *Brahmana-Samyutta-Sutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (7.698). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *op. cit.*, p. 276.

14. Alan Drengson and Duncan Taylor, eds. *Wild Foresting: Place Based Practices for Diversity and Health* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2008). Cited after the final manuscript version, by permission of the editors.

15. See [www.maweb.org](http://www.maweb.org).

16. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Living Beyond Our Means: Natural Assets and Human Well-Being* (<http://www.millenniumassessment.org/documents/document.429.aspx.pdf>), p. 5.
17. *Global Outlook*, 2. Summary of the Second Edition of the Biodiversity Outlook, para. 15 (<http://www.cbd.int/doc/meetings/cop/cop-08/official/cop-08-12-en.doc>).
18. Diapers, though convenient for hurried parents, are environmentally especially damaging, because of the great numbers that are discarded but also because they decompose very slowly. Cotton diapers have raised concerns, because of the pesticide use in growing cotton. The fact is: there are far too many members of our human species!
19. See Georg Feuerstein, *Yoga Morality* (Prescott, Ariz.: Hohm Press, 2007).
20. Paul Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern," framed within a Christian context, has been explained as that which concerns us ultimately. So-called "ultimate concerns" that relate to finite things, such as the wellbeing of one's child, moving up the business ladder, becoming a billionaire, being popular, the idea of economic progress are all pseudo-ultimate concerns. Most people operate within such pseudo-ultimate concerns rather than the ultimate concern of attaining nirvana or manifesting unconditional loving-kindness toward every being. See, e.g., Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1978), vol. 1, pp. 10–12.
21. Geshe Sonam Rinchen, *Lamp For the Path to Enlightenment*. Trans. and ed. by Ruth Sonam (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1997), p. 103.
22. See the fine commentary on Je Tsongkhapa's *The Three Principal Paths* by Geshe Sonam Rinchen, *The Three Principal Aspects of the Path*. Edited by Ruth Sonam (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 1999).
23. T. Y. S. Lama Gangchen, *Making Peace with the Environment*, vol. 1 (Milan, Italy and New Delhi, Lama Gangchen Peace Publications in association with The Global Open University Press & Indian Institute of Ecology & Environment, 1996), p. 10.



### *CHAPTER 3*

## **ABIDING FORESTS, SILENT DHARMA**

As we have shown in the preceding two chapters, the Buddha not only had a positive regard for Nature but actively sought out groves and forests as a habitat conducive to a life of quietude and simplicity. The qualities he and the Sangha were looking for are spelled out in the influential *Ugra-Paripriccha* (Inquiry of Ugra), composed probably in the first century B.C.<sup>1</sup> Here the lay practitioner Ugra is reminded of the ten advantages for a Bodhisattva of leaving his home and household in favor of dwelling in the wilderness. These advantages are (1) attainment of mental happiness and self-control; (2) freedom from the idea of “mine,” (3) freedom from grasping; (4) abundant lodging; (5) few objectives and little to do; (6) renunciation of family obligations; (7) no (neurotic or self-centered) regard for body and life; (8) freedom from seeking qualities produced by actions; (9) attainment of one-pointedness due to the practice of concentration (*samadhi*); (10) free attention. A renouncing Bodhisattva is, furthermore, encouraged to think that whatever fear he might have had before amidst “noisy gatherings,” it will leave him upon entering the wilderness, which is conducive to a virtuous life.

The life of the ordinary worldling is markedly different. The famous British philosopher-mathematician Bertrand Russell portrayed that quotidian life in his popular book *The Conquest of Happiness* in quite unenviable terms. An ordinary man, Russell assumed, is a man trying to succeed in a highly competitive world.

He has, we may suppose, a charming house, a charming wife, and charming children. He wakes up early in the morning while they are still asleep and hurries off to his office. There it is his duty to display the qualities of a great executive; he cultivates a firm jaw, a decisive manner of speech, and an air of sagacious reserve calculated to impress everybody except the office boy. . . . He arrives home, tired, just in time to dress for

dinner. . . . How many hours it may take the poor man to escape, it is impossible to foresee.<sup>2</sup>

Russell summed up this sorry, weary life by saying:

The working life of this man has the psychology of a hundred-yard race, but as the race upon which he is engaged is one whose only goal is the grave, the concentration . . . becomes in the end somewhat excessive.<sup>3</sup>

Russell's snapshot, originally written in 1930, captures well the person caught in the rat race of our modern consumer society, powered by personal and corporate greed and a great deal of ignorance about life and what really matters.

Had villages, towns, and cities offered the Buddha and his early congregation the same benign qualities as the so-called wilderness, he and his disciples would undoubtedly have frequented them as eagerly and praised them equally to treed areas. But the intrinsic properties of more heavily populated areas are typically counterproductive to a life of intensive contemplation, because of the mindset which they favor and support. And yet, today, over 3 billion people live in cities, with 1 billion of them living in slums that lack clean water, adequate toilet facilities, and durable housing.

We will expound on this shortly. At the moment, we want to focus on forests. The bad news about worldwide deforestation has been widely disseminated, and we mentioned it in the preceding chapter. Yet, it is good to keep in mind that every year, the Earth is robbed of an estimated 30 million acres of forest, or c. 45,000 square miles (or 120,000 square kilometers). Visualize what this means: It represents an area roughly the size of Denmark or the size of the U.S. state Pennsylvania.

Once upon a time, half of our planet's land was forested. Today only one fifth of old-growth forest remains. Almost half of this, again, is endangered by legal and illegal logging (mostly ruthless clear-cutting) and urban sprawl.

In 2005, The Global Forest Resources Assessment studied 229 countries and concludes that the Earth's forests (at that time) assimilated 283 gigatons (283,000,000,000 metric tons) of carbon, which otherwise would float around in the

atmosphere. This sounds like a lot. But we must bear in mind that annually, deforestation reduces this astounding figure by over 1 gigaton. In his valuable book *Plan 2.0*, Lester R. Brown, who has championed the environment and the cause of sustainable living for decades, notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Earth's forested land was estimated to be c. 12 billion acres (or roughly 19 million square miles). In just a little over a century, this area has alarmingly shrunk to 9.6 billion acres (or c. 15 million square miles).

Rampant clear-cutting and widespread illegal logging especially in developing nations make up a huge percentage of this devastation. Forests are “recovering” and growing in developed countries, largely because of abandoned crop land reverting to forests. This supposed recovery, however, is illusory, because new growth forests lack the vitality and resilience of old growth forests. In any case, forests are rapidly declining in developing countries, where logging is responsible for soil erosion and landslides that damage the land further and have claimed many human fatalities. China, the Philippines, Thailand, and Honduras are notable disaster areas from deforestation.

In 1998 hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras, killing over 6,500 people in floods and landslides, which were facilitated by a landscape that had been stripped of all vegetation. The loss of life and the multi-billion dollar damage caused by soil erosion followed by landslides mobilized the Honduras government and other countries to ban logging.

Unfortunately, illegal logging in many parts of the world has thus far won the day and is thought to be responsible every year for up to 23 million acres of forest in the world. Even badly deforested and eroded land in developing countries, particularly in Africa and India, continues to be plundered, mostly for firewood. Intensive logging in the Amazon, the Congo, and Borneo, which is financed by developed nations, is done primarily in order to clear land for farming and ranching, that is, essentially for profit and mostly for profit lining the pockets of North American capitalists.

Most of us are aware of this tragedy, but few people have taken the time to ponder all the terrible facts in conjunction and to ask essential moral questions about this large-scale devastation. Dharma practitioners are particularly obligated to ask such questions. We do not live in isolation from the rest of the world. Our lifestyle must be sustainable, if

nothing else, and we must help those unfortunates who, for reasons of personal survival, are trapped in unsustainable ways of living. We ourselves have chosen to do this primarily by financially supporting efforts like Trees for the Future. This nonprofit organization, which was founded in 1989, has been helping local populations around the world to restore essential tree cover to their locales and to recover and preserve their traditional forms of livelihood in a sustainable way.<sup>4</sup>

At the time of the Buddha, deforestation on the distressing scale on which it is happening today was unknown. Or he would undoubtedly have formulated specific moral rules for his monastic and lay followers to address the problem. Nevertheless, his simple moral disciplines vis-à-vis Nature can guide us in making a viable moral response to our present-day crisis.

In considering the environmental significance of the Dharma, it is important to realize that the Buddha did not, as some moderns are prone to do, romanticize the Earth and its elements. However valuable the Earth is as a dwelling place for humans and nonhumans, it is still part of the world of change, or samsara. From the vantage point of the Buddha, only an individual inexperienced in the way of the Dharma becomes “hooked” on Nature or any part of it. Someone who is advanced on the Dharmic path, on the other hand, neither identifies nor does not identify with the Earth or anything else within the orbit of samsara.<sup>5</sup>

To gain proper, or liberating, insight into the nature of existence calls for sharp discernment. Thus, on the path of the Dharma, analysis and proper understanding have a high priority. An Arhat is said to know Nature and the elements *directly*, and because he remains unattached, with all cravings stilled, he does not identify with anything that would karmically bind him again to the world of change.

This implies that a Dharma practitioner, while noting the plight of Nature and acting with moral circumspection and appropriateness, would also not indulge in nail-biting and fretting over the possible collapse of the biosphere. He would not waste his energies on contemplating doom and gloom, even if this were the foreseeable outcome of the current worldwide crisis. Instead, he would persevere in acting morally and responsibly in the world, while at the same time creating a dharmically sound mind.

In one of his discourses, the Buddha introduced the helpful simile of a dyed piece of cloth.<sup>6</sup> If it were stained, he noted, it would look poorly dyed even when dyed in bright colors. If it were unstained, however, any dye would make it look good. Similarly, when we render the mind itself pure by ridding it of negative thoughts and emotions, it looks bright whatever the external circumstance. Then the body will also become peaceful and not be agitated by unpleasant experiences. Such a one, the Buddha said, is regarded as one who is “bathed with the inner bathing.”<sup>7</sup>

When we started out writing our first coauthored book, *Green Yoga*, we felt greatly shocked and agitated by the mountains of daily bad news and negative evidence we had to sift through. We almost forgot to utilize the wisdom of the Dharma, but thanks to the graceful intervention of our teacher, Neten Rinpoche, we were able to restore our practice in order to complete that work and also write *Green Dharma*. Today we are no less concerned about the environmental crisis, but we are able to approach it with more equanimity. We can, however, readily envision a time when millions, even billions of people, who do not have access to the Dharma, or a benign teacher, and a deep Dharmic practice will panic in the face of environmental disasters wrought by climate change and the overall bleak outlook. It is crucial, we think, for all Dharma practitioners to prepare emotionally and spiritually for the likely eventuality of even more severe manifestations of global warming than we have seen so far.

We live in disturbing times; that seems to be our karma. Since governments are slow to correct existing environmental problems and the public is likewise acting irresponsibly, we must expect for things to get very much worse than they already are. By vigorously cultivating a Dharmic lifestyle, which includes conscientious moral action, we keep our own house (our body and mind) in order, and thus will be able to brave the harsh environmental and also economic-political crisis that looms large on the horizon. At the same time, we will be able to better serve those who will not be mentally equipped for the more acute manifestations of the present crisis.

Some Dharma practitioners maintain—quite wrongly, we would argue—that the Buddha’s teaching excludes an active concern for the world and that, therefore, one should not actively intervene in the state of affairs but remain passive. The words of the

Buddha himself suggest a different orientation; he used the following simile to make a significant teaching point:

Suppose there were a big sala-tree grove near a village or town, and it was choked with castor-oil weeds, and some man would appear desiring its good, welfare, and protection. He would cut down and throw out the crooked saplings that robbed the sap, and he would clean up the interior of the grove and tend the straight well-formed saplings, so that the sala-tree grove later on would come to growth, increase, and fulfillment. So too, bhikkhus, abandon what is unwholesome and devote yourselves to wholesome states, for that is how you will come to growth, increase, and fulfillment in this Dhamma and Discipline.”<sup>8</sup>

It is true that the Buddha did not devise this simile to encourage his monastic disciples to take up forestry, or, by extension, to become green activists; he did, however, clearly approve of the man’s action to weed out the grove so that it could flourish. Likewise, in the same discourse, the Buddha disapproved of someone who would dig here and there, randomly scatter the soil, as well as spit and urinate on it.

Lest we should attribute to the Buddha a monotonous passivity, we would do well to carefully consider his advice to Rahula, his own son. He did *not* advise him to absolutely abstain from any kind of action, which is impossible. Rather, he counseled him that before taking an action with the body, he should first repeatedly, or deeply, reflect upon that action to determine whether it would increase one’s own suffering or the suffering of others or, for sure, have a wholesome outcome for oneself and others. The Buddha recommended to his son that he should apply the same diligent inspection to speech and mental activity. At our time of planet-wide crisis, we believe, we have here the proper dharmic foundation also for *green* action, which favors all beings and the environment as a whole.

It is this kind of orientation that underlies the environment-positive action, speech, and thought of the renowned monastic leader and Nobel Prize nominee Thich Nhat Hanh, who wrote:

We humans are made entirely of non-human elements, such as plants, minerals, earth, clouds, and sunshine. For our practice to be deep and true, we must include the ecosystem. If the environment is destroyed, humans will be destroyed, too. Protecting human life is not possible without also protection the lives of animals, plants, and minerals. The Diamond Sutra teaches us that it is impossible to distinguish between sentient and non-sentient beings. This is one of many ancient Buddhist texts that teach deep ecology. Every Buddhist practitioner should be a protector of the environment.<sup>9</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh's great compassion led him to join the world peace movement in the 1960s and the environmental movement in the 1980s. He left his quiet monastery, which he had joined at the age of sixteen, in order to protest the Vietnam War and subsequently to promote peace between North and South Vietnam; as a result he was exiled from his country and was not allowed to return until 2005 for a visit.

Like Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dharma elders of more than two thousand years ago, who emulated the Buddha, we too must be willing to emulate the noble way of life demonstrated by the Buddha and the Arhats. Right now, the Dharma is still alive among us even in the present "degenerate age," and we can benefit from it if only we were to open our ears and hearts. We can, unfortunately, no longer sit at the Buddha's feet; yet, there still are great masters in the world to whom we can look for blessings, guidance, and good example. Also, we now have access to the Dharma in printed form more readily than ever.

The "degenerate time" of which many traditional Dharma teachers speak most certainly is a fit description for our time. It is not, though, an excuse for apathy. In the *Verses of the Elders (Thera-Gatha)*, a collection of 1,279 verses composed after the Buddha's passing, we can read:

The behaviour of the *bhikkhus* now seems different from when the protector of the world, the best of men, was alive. . .

. . . their gait, eating and practices were pious; their deportment was smooth, like a stream of oil.

. . . Now there are few such men.<sup>11</sup>

The monk Parapariya, the author of the above statements, continued to lament the state of affairs when he was alive, which would have been a few hundred years after the Buddha's physical death. Despite all the decay of the Dharma he could witness around him, this elder succeeded in quenching his own negative tendencies and transcending his cultural environment. If we care deeply enough about the Three Jewels, we can do so as well.

Such high aspiration does not—and must not—exclude caring for the environment and taking appropriate green action. Caring for the environment is a natural aspect of the Dharma and, today, a moral imperative. This is evident from discourses like the following:

The ascetic Gotama [the Buddha] is a refrainer from damaging seeds and crops. He eats once a day and not at night, refraining from eating at improper times. . .

Whereas, gentlemen, some ascetics and Brahmins, feeding on the food of the faithful, are addicted to the destruction of such seeds as are propagated from roots, from stems, from joints, from cuttings, from seeds, the ascetic Gotama refrains from such destruction.<sup>12</sup>

The Buddha engaged even the smallest and apparently most insignificant action with great attentiveness and natural gracefulness. He advised all his disciples to follow suit, and certainly his advanced disciples displayed the same praiseworthy orientation.

Compare this with the frenetic lifestyle of the ordinary worldling of our time, especially the city dweller, who rushes from one thing to another without giving anything much thought or empathy. It is almost true to say that the bigger the city, the more rushed and pressured its urbanites are apt to feel. We can detect this difference, for instance, in our local post office and stores. Those who come from, or, as far as we can tell, have



been exposed to urban living, incline toward pronounced impatience, whereas local farmers trained in patience by Nature predictably manifest the opposite characteristic.

There are innumerable distractions attending urban living. Psychologists have pointed out that cities are psychologically toxic environments, never mind their high index of chemical pollution, which adversely affects people's physical and mental health.<sup>13</sup> As of today, there are twenty cities with over ten million residents, and this trend toward ever greater aggregation seems to continue unabated and does not bode well. Thus, we can expect ever more environments breeding discontent and craziness *en masse*.

As we indicated in Chapter 1, the noise level in cities is so high that it appears to drown people's critical faculties. Most people simply put up with this cacophony as they put up with everything else that is unenviable about metropolises: pollution, crime, inadequate infrastructure, water supply, and public transport, as well as high living expenses. The unspoken strategy for the average individual seems to be to not rock the boat. The ego always fears instability, or change; especially the political ego. Alas, now global environmental deterioration more and more is forcing change on nations, governments, and individuals, though thus far salutary change occurs unrealistically at a snail's pace.

As we see it, we must opt for voluntary self-transformation and prudent outer change if we want to avoid being mere pawns in the inevitable modifications forced by Nature. That is, we must voluntarily collaborate with Nature to forestall the kind of upheaval that unchecked climate change and loss of biodiversity, as well as all the other crises will wreak upon us. In the upcoming chapters, we will attempt to answer, among other things, the decisive question: Why and how must we transform ourselves?

The ego-personality is hooked on the idea of "free-for-all" or, more likely, "free-for-me"—the liberty to indulge in as many pleasures as possible and the liberty to succeed over others. This notion of liberty, however, is illusory. It is little more than an idea and an unrealizable program. Every single human being encounters limitations in his or her lifetime. Even the most powerful politician or business tycoon, who is cocooned from the realities of the world and surrounded by yes men, will sooner or later meet with resistance or opposition from others and by the world at large. No worldly liberty is infinite or absolute.

City dwellers like to believe that the city gives them unparalleled opportunities and freedoms, but as Sigmund Freud pointed out already back in 1930, individuals enjoyed far more liberty prior to the rise of cities. Freud suggested, though, that at that early time in human history, liberty “had for the most part no value, since the individual was scarcely in a position to defend it.”<sup>14</sup> In many ways, the city imprisons its residents, cutting them off from Nature, and entangling them in mere sensual or intellectual pursuits. We may celebrate a city’s plenitude of cosmopolitan knowledge or its abundance of aesthetic creations, but this generally involves a simultaneous loss of contact with down-to-earth reality. As Theodore Roszak, a perceptive critic of our civilization, recognized:

But with every passing generation, there is less that anybody can *be*—except a subject or satellite of urban culture. The Eskimos cannot be Eskimos any longer, the forests cannot be forests, the whales cannot be whales. Everything succumbs to the empire of the cities, and all the alternatives we study become merely academic.<sup>15</sup>

The city fills our head with a maze of conceptual boxes, fed by deceitful advertising and the shallow mass media, which make it all the more difficult to discover true freedom, genuine simplicity, and an authentically sustainable lifestyle. Cities, themselves manifestations of collectivism, breed a collectivist orientation geared toward consumption.

We have noticed that many of our urbanite friends, who happily supported and endorsed the *green* message of our recent publications, have thus far not *really* found their way to a green lifestyle. We know they are trying to reform their lifestyle, but their urban environment—both physical and conceptual—seems to prevent them from embracing a green way of life as wholeheartedly and as radically as would be beneficial for all beings on Earth.

In his monumental study *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford drew attention to the way in which the city manipulates us. Mumford gave us the larger picture when he wrote:

From the beginning, then, the city exhibited an ambivalent character it has never wholly lost: it combined the maximum amount of protection with the greatest incentives to aggression: it offered the widest possible freedom and diversity, yet imposes a drastic system of compulsion and regimentation which, along with its military aggression and destruction, has become ‘second nature’ to civilized man and is often erroneously identified with his original biological proclivities.<sup>16</sup>

Still, some urbanites would not agree with Mumford. For instance, Clive Doucet, a poet and well-meaning city councilor of Ottawa, waxed eloquent about cities when he romantically declared:

Cities are the heartbeat of the human condition. They are our burrows. They are the places [where] human beings create society with all its myriad powers and possibilities. . . . It is our cities where the most complex expressions of society and individual accomplishment can be found.<sup>17</sup>

Our own point of view, shaped by our rural experience, our admitted aversion to cities, and our need for at least relative solitude and silence, is quite different. We do agree with Doucet that “[w]ithout cities, there is no western civilization,” but we question whether “western civilization” is a development of which we ought to be proud.<sup>18</sup> We tend to side with “Mahatma” M. K. Gandhi who, when asked regarding his thoughts about Western civilization, responded humorously but pointedly by saying: “It would be a good idea.” He profoundly disapproved of so-called Western civilization, which he witnessed in action in India. Gandhi saw no merit in it but plenty of evil—baseness, immorality, callousness, and greed.

We think, too, it would be a good idea to have fewer cities and for the unending migration from the rural environment to cities to stop and to make existing cities and towns more habitable, friendly places. From Nature’s perspective, it would be good to

have a “moratorium” on Western civilization, but maybe this is exactly what is in the offing due to global warming.<sup>19</sup>

Doucet’s book mentions many of the problems with which municipal councilors are inundated. They belie his romantic view of cities. At the end of his book, he asks in a sobering tone:

How is it all going to play out? Will we fall off the bubble? I don’t know. What I do know is that events at every level are moving so fast it’s impossible for anyone to anticipate where it is all going to end.<sup>20</sup>

Doucet is chiefly referring to climate change and how it increasingly impacts on humanity, not least life in the city. We wish there were more alert and responsible elected officials of Clive Doucet’s caliber in Canada and elsewhere. Unfortunately for all of us, this is not the case. Most officials don’t seem to care about the common weal. Most cities and towns are not green, not designed for real community building, not sustainable, and not healthy. As for dharmic values and attitudes, cities are probably just as drab as towns and villages in rural areas. The reason is quite simply that few people, now as at the time of the Buddha, feel an impulse for moral rectitude, compassionate action, self-transformation, and authentic liberation.

Instead, the majority of people are driven by that strange mental artifact called “the ego.” As egoic individuals, they look after “Number One” first and foremost. Whether cities or villages or a shack in the middle of nowhere, wherever ordinary folks live, the ego is alive and kicking. This makes people’s habits rather predictable. They will be the typical egoic habits, which feed right into a worldly lifestyle. If they happen to live in a middle-class environment, which would give them appropriate financial means, those people are apt to be avid and at least statistically predictable consumers, which means they are unlikely to be mindful or responsible.

According to a 2005 statistic, the average Briton spends about £1.5 million (or c. \$3 million) during his or her entire lifetime. We expect that the figures for North Americans will be quite similar. That’s a lot of money considering that in 2001, 1.1 billion people had less than \$1 per day to live on, and 2.7 billion had to make do with

around \$2 per day.<sup>21</sup> It's even an awful lot of money considering that in affluent America, approximately 12 percent of people have an income below the government's poverty line. This is all the more astonishing and shameful in light of the fact that the United States government has for some time been spending well over \$500 billion every year to keep its military juggernaut rolling. What could already have been accomplished by investing this stupendous amount in obliterating poverty and in introducing sensible environmental measures?

Viewed from one's comfortable sitting room, the environmental crisis seems a remote concern. Presumably, as long as farmers and merchants continue to put food and drink on everyone's table, there is no need to be concerned about Nature. But if we allow our senses rather than our boxed-in mind to guide us for even a moment, we can taste the ever-expanding troubles of Nature. To quote Theodore Roszak's powerful words:

There is no wilderness so remote, no corner of the world so private that the Earth will not be able to remind us of her sufferings by the stink of the air we breathe, the poisons in the water we drink, the haze that veils the sun and stars from our eyes—and remind, too, of all the human miseries such ugliness implies.<sup>22</sup>

Ever since the beginning of the so-called Neolithic Revolution, agricultural fields have been crucial to sustaining the life style of large settlements and their residents. Without the labor or de facto slave labor of farmers, bread and cakes would have stopped popping from the hearth; without farmers, the domestication of animals would not have been able to proceed, for they are dependent on crops for food.

When we look back in history, we can see a progressive shift from the simple *ecocentric* life style of the so-called primitive culture of our remote ancestors to the *anthropocentric* and, yes, egocentric orientation of modern humanity. By gradually forgetting our interdependence with the natural environment, we have bit by bit erected a civilization that in practice, if not in theory, is distancing itself from, if not hostile toward, Nature. This amnesia is now catching up with us. Nature is reacting to our forgetfulness, neglect, and abuse.

*Anthropocentrism* is the kind of attitude that puts humanity first before any other species and allows it to exercise dominion over the nonhuman world. As anthropologist Lynn Whyte, Jr., argued in his controversial but widely read essay “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” this attitude was historically fostered by the Judeo-Christian tradition with its ideal of stewardship over Nature.<sup>23</sup>

*Egocentrism* suggests that it is the individual ego that is used as the ultimate measuring standard. If anthropocentrism is a cultural bias, the much harder-to-overcome egocentrism is a species-wide liability. The former is subject to correction by means of objective philosophical analysis, whereas the latter—being a largely unconscious propensity—can only be transcended by sustained conscious self-transformative discipline. Thus, it requires a great deal more insight and effort and therefore also is whole lot more difficult to accomplish.

Deep Ecology, which has brought to our awareness the anthropocentric bias in our life style and thought, has also questioned egocentrism. Arne Naess, one of the doyens of Deep Ecology, explored this issue in his essay “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World.”<sup>24</sup> Leaning especially on the work of psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, Naess distinguished between the sort of self that represents what one might call “a wide and deep identification,” a sense of connectedness with others and Nature, and the self that is narrowly focused as the ego and represents a less mature stage of human development. As Naess put it in his own inimitable terms:

The “ego-trip” interpretation of the potentialities of humans presupposes a major underestimation of the richness and broadness of our potentialities.<sup>25</sup>

Naess, by temperament and life experience as well as by his philosophical insights, derived his sense of self and purpose mainly from what he called the “ecological self.” For a Buddhist practitioner, who understands the sense of self to be a mental construct, the various selves that one can animate do not have the same hold upon him as they have upon the ordinary worldling. Like the ecosophist who sees himself in relationship with Nature, the Dharma practitioner understands and cultivates the ability of empathy, or compassionate identification, with others and the environment. This

identification, however, is not a warped or delusional mental state. It is rooted in the verifiable evidence of the interdependence, or “emptiness,” of all beings and things. It is the obverse side of the dependent origination of which the Buddha talked about and which represents his most unique contribution to the wisdom heritage of humanity.

What is meant by “dependent origination”? John Daido Looi, the American-born abbot of the Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York, proffered a good answer to this question:

This description of reality is not a holistic hypothesis or an idealistic dream. It is your life and my life, the life of the mountain and the life of the river, the life of a blade of grass, a spiderweb, the Brooklyn Bridge. These things are not related to each other. They’re not part of the same thing. They’re not similar. Rather, they are identical to each other in every respect.<sup>26</sup>

How can this be so? At the level of phenomena, they are obviously distinct and not identical. Our experience tells us so. Unless we are psychotic, we don’t confuse a spider web with the Golden Gate Bridge. They must be identical in some other sense. Indeed, upon enlightenment the sharp edges between things—I and you or I and that—fall away. Upon enlightenment, there are no conceptual elaborations to distort reality. According to all the realized masters, everything is one. Duality is the big deception.

In the simple words of Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh:

Too many people distinguish between the inner world of our mind and the world outside, but these worlds are not separate. They belong to the same reality.<sup>27</sup>

Nothing that exists, exists in utter independence or isolation from everything else. Even a hermit living in seclusion lives surrounded by other beings, however inconspicuous they may be. He lives on this Earth, and the Earth travels through space around the Sun, which, in turn, is traveling with billions of other stars in our galaxy, which in turn is rotating along with countless other galaxies. The hermit’s isolated

existence is not hermetically sealed off from the rest of life. Such perfect isolation is impossible. Immerse yourself in a so-called Samadhi tank, and you are undisturbed by outside sounds but still in touch with the sounds within the body and the thoughts and visions bubbling up in your head. There would be no relative stillness without the surrounding water in which you are floating, and the water would not be contained were it not for the encasing wood and other materials. The tank would not exist without the surrounding air, which is part of Earth's enormous atmosphere, shielding it from incoming solar and cosmic rays. Nor would it exist without the labors of a human being or the tools used. As H. H. the Dalai Lama put it very simply:

The view of interdependence makes for a great openness of mind. . . . By training our minds and getting used to this view, we change our way of seeing things, and as a result we gradually change our behavior and do less harm to others.<sup>28</sup>

Dependent origination connects with another most important notion that was first introduced by the Buddha himself, namely that nothing has an identifiable ultimate core or essence. Everything is “empty” of an immortal, unchanging essence. Correctly understood, the ideas of dependent origination and emptiness indicate the same truth. To be precise, for the idea of dependent origination to hold true, it too must be empty of an ultimate essence. The philosophical and practical notion of emptiness was greatly developed by later Dharma masters, notably those articulating the tenets of Mahayana, such as Nagarjuna (c. 100 A.D.), Dharmakirti (c. 650 A.D.), and Shantideva (c. 750 A.D.). Perhaps the most sophisticated formulation exists within the Gelugpa Order of Tibetan Buddhism, where Je Tsongkhapa brought the teaching of emptiness into sharp focus.

The difficulty we tend to experience with the concept of emptiness lies with the ego-driven mind, which cannot conceive of itself as empty. The self is a reflex that announces the opposite of emptiness and dependent origination. It always wants to celebrate itself as if it were the absolute, immortal ruler, or essence, of everything. But according to the Dharma and many other spiritual teachings, the ego is a false center.



The ego is like a tree that wants to be the whole forest rather than one among numerous interconnected trees in an interconnected environment. This brings us back to our starting point: forests.

We know all the confusion that the ego tends to suffer but seldom wants to admit. But what does a forest feel? Dharma practitioner and environmentalist Stephanie Kaza asked herself precisely this question and found the following answer:

The voice of a forest is an elusive thing. It sings in the sweet warbles of purple finches and Swainson's thrushes. It rustles in the leaves dancing in the afternoon sunlight. It buzzes in the slim sounds of crickets and mosquitoes. It creaks in the sway of tree trunks rubbing against each other.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to these movements that give forests a voice, forests are also simply abiding. This is their "meditative" mode. We think that it is this that appeals to those seeking quietude, inward aliveness, and ego-transcendence. It is this that would be our greatest loss if forests were to disappear forever. Let's remember that Gautama the Buddha, sat under a fig tree when attaining unsurpassable enlightenment. He sat under trees after his enlightenment. We should not deprive ourselves or future generations of the same opportunity.

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 3

1. See the *Ugra-Paripriccha*, trans. by Jan Nattier, based on a critical edition of the Tibetan text and partially translated in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 269–277.

2. Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Bantam Books, repr. 1968), p. 27.

3. Russell, *op. cit.*, pp.27-28.

4. See Trees for the Future at [www.treesfff.org](http://www.treesfff.org).

5. See the Buddha's discourse entitled *Mulapariyaya-Sutta*, which opens the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (1.27ff.). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2d ed. 2001), p. 87. To comment on the Sanskrit term *samsara*, it literally means "confluence," suggesting the round of births and deaths that all unenlightened beings must endure.

6. The *Vatthupama-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (7.2ff.). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, pp. 118ff.

7. See the *Vatthupama-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (7.18). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

8. The *Kakacupamana-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (21). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

9. Thich Nhat Hanh, *For a Future to Be Possible: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 2007), pp. 9–10.

10. The *Diamond Sutra*, *Diamond Cutter Sutra*, or *Vajrachhedika-Sutra* (27). *Buddhist Mahayana Texts. Part II. Sacred Books of the East* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, repr. 1990), p. 141. [Originally published in 1894.] The rendering of the *Vajra-Chedika-Sutra* is by the nineteenth-century indologist F. Max Müller.

11. *The Elders' Verses I: Theragāthā*, trans. K. R. Norman, Pali Text Society Translation Series No. 38 (London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1969), p. 86.
12. The *Brahmajala-Sutta* of the *Digha-Nikaya* (1.10–11). Maurice Walshe, trans. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 1987), p. 69.
13. See, e.g., Kev Fitzpatrick, *Unhealthy Places: The Ecology of Risk in the Urban Landscape* (London: Routledge, 2000).
14. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents: The Standard Edition translated by James Strachey* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), p. 42.
15. Theodore Roszak, *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), p. 278.
16. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (San Diego, Calif.: Harvest Books, repr. 1989), p. 46.
17. Clive Doucet, *Urban Meltdown: Cities, Climate Change and Politics as Usual* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2007), p. 2.
18. Clive Doucet, *op. cit.*, p. 2.
19. See, e.g., Richard Heinberg, *Peaking Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Declines* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2007) and *The Party's Over: War and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2005).
20. Clive Doucet, *op. cit.*, p. 238.
21. We are following a World Bank estimate.

22. Theodore Roszak, *Person/Planet: The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978), p. 320.
23. Lynn Whyte, Jr.'s essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" was first published in *Science*, no. 155, in 1967, pp. 1203–7.
24. Arne Naess, reprinted in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. by George Sessions (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 1995), pp. 225–239; originally given as a lecture in 1986.
25. George Sessions, *op. cit.*, p. 230.
26. J. D. Looi, *Teachings of the Earth: Zen and the Environment* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, repr. 2007), pp. xi–xii.
27. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 3d edition 1987), p. 4.
28. The Dalai Lama, *A Flash of Lightning in the Dark of Night: A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 1994), p. 3.
29. Stephanie Kaza, *The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees* (New York: Fawcett Columbine Books/Ballantine Books, 1993), p. 244.

## *CHAPTER 4*

# **ANOTHER KIND OF EXTINCTION**

Two thousand five hundred years ago, when the Buddha was alive, there were an estimated 100 million people on Earth. Today, the human population is fast approaching the 7 billion mark, with c. 1 billion people living on the Indian peninsula alone. Although it is still highly unpopular to talk about the role of the human population explosion in regard to our environmental crisis and the survival of humanity, we must make the connection clear: Seven billion people are simply too many mouths to feed on this planet. Our population is not sustainable.

The *AAAS Atlas of Population & Environment* published by the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 2000, begins with the dubious statement that “[h]umans are perhaps the most successful species in the history of life on earth.”<sup>1</sup> In what sense is humanity successful? In terms of evolutionary survival? This remains to be seen. Compared to other species, ours is relatively young. Successful in adaptation? Considering our huge environmental crisis, our species has thus far failed miserably. Successful in terms of equality and fairness? In view of the billions of people who are starving, we could not possibly make such a claim. Successful in terms of numbers? Surely not. The operative word in the above quote is “perhaps,” which we should understand as “not really.”

There is no merit in mere population growth, especially not of a population that has catapulted, as the authors of the *Atlas* mention, from “a few thousand individuals some 200,000 years ago” to one that today has overrun the planet with nearly 7 billion individuals. We also see absolutely no merit in having “transformed approximately half the land on earth for our own uses.” What about all other species? To the authors’ credit, they also made the point that our species has had “an incalculable effect on the Earth’s biodiversity.” This is really the crux, which we must consider intensively and act upon appropriately.

Here we would like to propose the unpopular view that humanity ought to voluntarily limit its population growth. Already back in the late 1960s, Paul Ehrlich recognized human overpopulation as a serious problem and suggested instituting voluntary restraints on reproduction. His view was widely ridiculed as Malthusian by right-wingers and libertarians. The former, dominated by the Christian value system, balked at the implication of birth control, while the latter were worried about the implications for individual liberty.

Half a century later, the problem is still with us, and more so than ever. Malthus and Ehrlich may have erred in part. Their basic message holds. Populations have a tendency to grow and apparently to outgrow their food resources.

Some so-called experts believe—and this is only a speculation or belief—that the Earth could sustain up to 20 billion human beings. The fact is, however, that the Earth is already straining with having to sustain 7 billion individuals. Even if the overconsuming developed nations were to immediately reduce their consumption, which is highly unlikely to happen, the Earth resources are at this point severely compromised and could not sustain the present world population on an ongoing basis.

We should indeed establish justice and equality throughout the world and endeavor to feed, clothe, and shelter every single individual alive today, and assist him or her in living a physically and mentally sound and healthy life. But we must realize that the production and distribution of food and goods involves hidden and steep costs, which are costs to the environment as a whole. The fact is that—to reiterate—the present world population is already overtaxing the Earth.

In particular, our species has spread all over the globe to a degree that is not merely threatening other species but actually obliterating them. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Sixth Mass Extinction is not merely a curious possibility or an abstract projection but an undeniable present-day reality.

Let's look at some figures: Every year, some 50,000 animal and plant species are becoming extinct. That's c. 135 species every day! Many experts think that the rate of extinction is still higher. Twenty-three percent of the known 4,776 mammal species are endangered. So are c 12 percent of an estimated 10,000 species of birds and a whopping 47 percent of identified fish species. In fact, 90–95 percent of all large fish in the ocean—

swordfish, marlin, sharks, tuna, and so on—are gone. Species are always becoming extinct, but in the absence of a catastrophe this background rate is a minute fraction of what we are witnessing today.

And who or what is responsible for today's extraordinarily high rate of species-wide extinction? The mass extinction that caused the demise of the dinosaurs some 65 million years ago was due to the impact of a large meteorite. The preceding four mass extinction of which science knows were apparently the result of natural catastrophes. The sad truth is that the cause of today's mass extinction is humanity, which is more and more encroaching on the habitat of other species through urban sprawl, deforestation, converting forested land into agricultural land, loss of water, and general environmental pollution and climbing temperatures. Wherever we look—on land, in the waters, in the air—we have soiled and spoiled our planet's biosphere, and continue to do so. All creatures are suffering needlessly. More and more creatures are disappearing from the face of the Earth. The rescue attempts made by individuals and organizations to save wildlife, forests, or herbs are noble but a drop in the ocean.

Although the Dharma reminds us that suffering is an integral part of life in the ever-changing universe. There is some suffering, notably that caused by human beings to other human and nonhuman beings, that is gratuitous and avoidable. The harm caused by a sentient individual to another is avoidable. The wanton destruction of the environment is avoidable. Humanity's destructive activities, which are rooted in carelessness and greed, no doubt have a huge karmic consequence for our species. We cannot ride roughshod over other species with impunity. From the perspective of the Dharma, every time we axe down a tree, maim or kill a mammal, hook a fish for fun or food, or angrily swat a mosquito, we trigger more or less severe karmic repercussions.

Let's not forget here native human populations that are forced into extinction as well. According to *The State of the World Report* for 1992, since 1900, on average one Amazon tribe has disappeared each year either because of the ruthless destruction of their habitat or, if all else fails, by murder.<sup>2</sup> Native tribes tend to be as unsuspecting and defenseless against corporate ambush as any animal species. We who understand and care must act on their behalf to prevent further bedlam.

Most importantly, all those numerous species are becoming extinct not in the Buddhist sense of attaining *nirvana*. Rather, their extinction consists in total biological obliteration and the deprivation of the very possibility of their further growth and, indirectly, of their maturing to a point where they could, over however many lifetimes, conceivably achieve higher sentience and consciously practice the Dharma in order to ultimately attain liberation.

If the human population continues to grow—9 billion people are predicted by the middle of the twenty-first century—the extinction affecting other species will correspondingly increase. This will, in turn, undoubtedly backfire on the human race if we survive that long. Do we need to come to this point of sweeping catastrophe before we see the fatal outcome of our present course? By then it will be too late for a benign change of direction. Humanity will stand revealed as a plague.

We ought to learn from environmental crises wrought by previous civilizations, notably the Mesopotamian, the Mayan, and the Easter Island civilizations. They failed to adapt to their respective environments and hence were doomed to collapse. Our own supertechnological civilization is heading in the same direction except on a worldwide rather than merely local scale.

From where we stand, it seems that humanity is bent on global destruction, which means also self-destruction. We are by no means alone in thinking so. Many scientists share our view. Humanity's present ethos, which is largely unconscious, is not only not sustainable but detrimental to life as a whole. Those who have chosen a green lifestyle, who care deeply for the environment and nonhuman beings, are in the minority. Perhaps they have always been, but in bygone ages the smaller human population and the lower rate of consumption made even humanity's worst offenses against the environment pardonable. Now there is no more leeway for erring on the side of unsustainability.

Our planet's biodiversity, which is fundamental to the survival of all species, not merely humans, and the biosphere as such, is rapidly declining. Biodiversity is co-creative plurality. It is wholeness. When you think about it, wholeness is always more than a single thing. It is a symphony of differences, where all parts act in a recognizably interdependent manner. Each whole is thus a universe made of many components.



Although individual parts may be highly specialized—think of a bee—it is yet what Thich Nhat Hanh would call an “inter-being” that “inter-is” with everything else.<sup>3</sup>

To stick with bees for a moment. They are important pollinators; but the bee population is rapidly declining, which has an incisive effect on the fructification of plants. Throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe, bee hives are turning up empty. The profession of beekeeping is at risk, but even more importantly, all of us are at risk. No bee corpses are left behind, which rules out a virus infestation. Some have speculated that cell phones are to blame, but the ruling on this is still out. Where we live in southern Saskatchewan, we rarely see bees or bumblebees anymore. In Great Britain three out of nineteen species of bumblebees are already extinct, and the others may be gone within years. Scientists and growers are rightly worried about what will happen to apples, blueberries, cucumbers, tomatoes and numerous other food crops when the bees and bumblebees are gone. Who will pollinate the plants then?

Now, let’s consider another link in Nature’s web of life—butterflies. They are not only pretty to look at; they also fulfill a crucial function as pollinators and eaters of so-called pests. They, too, are becoming scarce. A 2006 survey of 45 European countries revealed that out of 576 butterfly species, 71 were so decimated that they were placed on the endangered list. The sad saga goes on.

Wherever we look, Nature’s creatures are being harassed, maimed, killed, and eradicated as a species. According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, of the 240 known primate species are classified as “endangered” or “vulnerable.” Some researchers have estimated that one third of plant and animal species in the United States are threatened with extinction.<sup>4</sup>

Biodiversity spells life. It’s a word coined in the 1970s, which refers to the variation of life forms within a given ecosystem, which collectively strengthen that ecosystem and thereby also improve their own chances of survival. There are all sorts of detailed indicators for economic growth and health but there are really no comparable instruments for gauging environmental health. If there were, perhaps we would be more alarmed about the state of things.

Thus far, scientists have been able to identify c. 1.7 million species. Some speculate that there may be 10 million species altogether; yet others, peg the number very

much higher, while yet others think that it might perhaps be only 5 million species. Regardless of the actual number, most animal species are minute. *All* of them exist in an interdependent network of life. As humanity's adverse impact on Nature increases, we can expect the extinction rate to likewise spike.

A domino effect of extinction can already be detected, and it is definitely not favoring the survival of life but is distinctly heading toward the collapse of the Earth's precious biosphere. How many threads of wool can you pull out of a sweater before the sweater amounts to rags and can no longer protect you from the cold?

Biologists and other scientists have warned of these dire consequences for decades. Their voices have been all but ignored, and the Earth is the worse for it. We must urgently learn the lesson of interdependence: that all life forms can live only because they are related and indeed dependent on other life forms.

When Marpa, "the worthiest of the worthiest of men,"\* trained Milarepa, he had his disciple build all kinds of towers, just to diminish the burden of Milarepa's unfavorable karma accumulated from evil sorcery.<sup>5</sup> At one point, Marpa asked Milarepa to merely remove a large corner stone from the latest, nine-storey tower he had laboriously built, because the boulder had been lifted in place by three of Marpa's chief disciples. Marpa knew of course that this would spell the collapse of Milarepa's entire construction, thus plunging the disciple once again into the intended purifying despair.

By not taking recourse to the wisdom of the Dharma, humanity is busy removing cornerstones from the "building" of life itself, which has taken several billion years for the Earth to assemble. The outcome is also predictable. We ought to understand the vital Dharmic concept of dependent origination and behave differently, more conscientiously and kindly, toward the environment. No master of the stature of Marpa would ever ask us to disassemble life itself. Nor would such an act gain us any dharmic merit. Yet, this is exactly the kind of insane behavior in which our species is indulging every day.

The Bodhisattva vow of Mahayana Buddhism includes the pledge to lead all sentient beings to enlightenment. We cannot do so by killing other beings. The same vow looks sensitively upon all sentient beings as our "mothers." What collective karma are we reaping by decimating whole species and by plunging our planet into biological gloom? Is there a special karmic category for biocide? Is ignorance of the facts a good enough

excuse for escaping the karmic consequences? And who can justifiably claim such ignorance of the environmental crisis after decades of news media coverage, however inadequate it might have been?

A related question that must be posed here is briefly how we ought to define life in terms of the Bodhisattva vow? The most comprehensive definition and one we ourselves endorse is that offered by Thich Nhat Hanh whose *bodhisattva* vow, based on the *Flower Garland* or *Avatamsaka-Sutra*, includes the following phraseology, first formulated back in the 1980s:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.<sup>6</sup>

The inclusion of minerals in the above vow has struck many Westerners as curious, but Thich Nhat Hanh has repeatedly emphasized that the widely made dualistic distinction between living organisms and inorganic matter is false. Some biologists, notably the German zoologist Bernhard Rensch, would agree.<sup>7</sup> Minerals do not appear to have intelligence, but they do have resonance, which can be deemed the lowest level of mind, or *sems* (pronounced: *sem*) in Tibetan. We just need to think of the marvelous, almost magical resonance of crystals and the strange behavior of metals.

In adopting Thich Nhat Hanh's version of the Bodhisattva vow, we are in the good company of philosophers like Baruch de Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, Henri Bergson, psychologists like Gustav Fechner and William James, and physicists like Arthur Eddington, Albert Einstein, and David Bohm, as well as influential writers like Aldous Huxley, the brother of the renowned British biologist Sir Julian Huxley. Regarding Aldous Huxley, it was noted that his visit to Jagadish Candra Bose's institute in Calcutta in 1926 convinced him of the sentience of plants.<sup>8</sup>

Buddhist monastics of the Far East pray for the enlightenment of both sentient and nonsentient beings, which would include minerals. Thus, everything is endowed with Buddha Nature and therefore is potentially able to attain full Buddhahood.

The above-mentioned *Avatamsaka-Sutra*, which is one of the most influential Buddhist scriptures, was first rendered from Sanskrit into Chinese by Buddhahadra about 420 A.D. This *Sutra*, which is the most extensive of all Mahayana *Sutras*, offers a magnificent glimpse of universal interdependence, speaking of universes within universes and of the monumental fact that all things teach all the time. We are reminded of the great Nagarjuna's radical statement at the highest philosophical level articulated in his *Precious Garland*, an epistle to a royal disciple:

Ultimately, the world and nirvāna do not come (into existence),  
Nor do they go (out of existence), nor do they remain (existent).  
So what kind of distinction could there really be  
Between the world and nirvāna?<sup>9</sup>

Upon enlightenment, everything has “one taste,” as the medieval Sahajayana masters put it paradoxically or “a strong taste of nothing,” as the contemporary Zen master Seung Sahn would have it. In his *Song of Human Action* (verse 2), the eighth-century Indian adept Sarahapada says: “To a fool who squints / One Lamp is as two.”<sup>10</sup> Making distinctions is the endless game of the conceptual mind. The enlightened mind, which is as vacant and as all-embracing as space, is the mind of all the Buddhas.

On a practical level, whenever we gesture toward the “one taste,” we connect with other beings and the environment at large through an act of empathy. This is Dharma practice. This is the *bodhisattva* path. This is healing and sanity. Without empathy we remain self encapsulated and estranged from the world.

A significant form of empathy is our reverence for life in all its myriad forms, for all living beings, or what has been termed “biophilia,” love of life. This love, or reverence, seems to come naturally to most human children but is drummed out of them by ignorant adults:

Biophilia should normally awaken in children as they grow, then continue to develop in complexity throughout the rest of their lives. . . . There are a number of factors that I think are at the root of why so few people are developing a deep bonding with the living earth—factors contributing to the loss of biophilia. Arguably among the most powerful are: the epistemological perspective that the Universe (and Earth) is not alive but simply a machine assembled from a large number of parts; the loss of natural regular access for children to nearby wild places that contain a diversity of life-forms; public schooling; and television.<sup>11</sup>

This is a powerful indictment of modern civilization and the lovelessness and disregard it tends to breed. Through the cultivation of biophilia, which we see as perfectly congruent with the path of the Bodhisattva, we can “bond” with other life forms and discover that Nature is a wonderful teacher. Nature speaks to us constantly, but we have largely lost the ability to hear her wisdom. As we forget how to listen, which is a matter of respect and attention, we also cease to benefit from Nature as our best ally.

Our amnesia about the healing properties of plants, for instance, has become almost complete. Instead, we have chosen to rely on the concoctions of the chemical corporations, which have more interest in profit than in our welfare. It is as if we wanted to silence Nature altogether.

Even if we were to exclude minerals and plants from the category of “living beings,” we still ought to act protectively toward them, since we are interdependent with both minerals and plants and since our modern civilization has been ravaging both ever since the beginning of the so-called Industrial Revolution. We have treated animals as feelingless machines and minerals as mere marketable commodities. Renaissance humanism turned the human being into the “measure of all things,” thereby setting the stage for anthropocentrism.

We sharpened this biased attitude further into the unbridled egocentric orientation of modern times buttressed, as pointed out by eco-philosopher Henryk Skolimowski, by the economic-technological values of power over things, control, manipulation, and efficiency.<sup>12</sup> These materialistic values have pushed aside benign and humane values

such as reference for life, responsibility, frugality, compassion, universal justice, and not least the celebration of diversity.

This shift allowed us to radically objectify Nature and treat every natural being as just a thing to be discarded or to be exploited. We will talk about our exploitation of the mineral kingdom in Chapter 7. In the present context, we will focus on the plant kingdom, especially on the predicament of forests and medicinal plants.

We already mentioned the destruction of forest after forest, denuding the soil and exposing it to the elements, which inevitably leads to soil erosion and, in some areas, to land slides burying pathways, villages, and people. But deforestation not only turns living trees into dead lumber; it also kills and maims millions of other living creatures—from mammals to birds to insects to microbes. Every destroyed forest represents a mass grave of individuals from many species.

Clear-cut areas are heart-breaking. Trees are not a “renewable resource” and clear-cut areas are not “temporary meadows,” as governmental advertising would have it.<sup>13</sup> Having seen and even walked through clear-cut areas, we know they are like an open wound in the environment. Even though they give rise to new growth eventually, that brutalized area never heals completely. It is as though the trauma of clear-cutting, which is similar to rape, is lingering on, transferred through time. It is extremely difficult to obtain reliable figures from anyone. Government agencies apparently are deceptive about clear-cutting, as Derrick Jensen and George Draffan argue in their book *Strangely Like War*.<sup>14</sup>

Between 70 and 90 percent of the trees felled in the so-called Third World become firewood, which is the only way our poverty-stricken fellow humans can cook or keep warm. Everywhere trees are turned into CO<sub>2</sub> instead of having trees convert CO<sub>2</sub> into wood. Globally, around 40 percent of felled trees end up as paper, most of which ends up in the developed countries. The remainder is converted into construction timber or furniture. Moreover, logging frequently involves the practice of burning trees, fallen branches, stumps, and shrubbery, which are considered commercially unviable, and this also adds to the existing surfeit of greenhouse gases.

Let’s look at the paper situation more closely. Our modern civilization’s appetite for paper is truly voracious. Americans use up about 600 pounds of paper per person per

year, while 80 percent of all people in the so-called Third World lack adequate amounts of paper, which is hampering their education and literacy.

Compare this with the fact that every 30 minutes, a novel is published in the United States. The same country contributes a total of some 175,000 books, with a comparable figure of 115,000 in Great Britain. Worldwide the book publishing industry releases about 1 million books annually. There are undoubtedly many worthwhile books; but a large number of them hardly deserve to be published. In terms of quantity and quality of contents, the figures look even worse for the magazine and newspaper publishing industry. Given the fact that every second approximately 1.5 acres of forest are lost due to logging, paper consumption has become a moral issue. Next time you wish to buy a newspaper, magazine, book, and envelope or print a flier or business form, think twice before you do. We ourselves are feeling guilty for adding to the paper mountain, and our only excuse is that our book, which by the way are printed on recycled paper, may bring some necessary awareness to this huge problem.

What's more, few publishers have thus far developed enough of an environmental awareness or conscience to switch over to recycled paper. At this stage, it is simply not enough to print on acid-free paper. The ranks of offending publishers include even many so-called spiritually oriented publishers and publishers of environmental books, who should know better. We praise the Green Press Initiative, which is a nonprofit program of SEE Innovation that seeks to transform the book publishing industry in the direction of conserving natural resources (notably trees and water). Thus far, only 60 publishers have signed up with them and adopted an environment-friendly orientation.

The world's total consumption of paper for various applications amounts to an estimated 786 million trees per year. The United States alone gobbles up one third of this staggering quantity, which is over 90 million metric tons. China and Japan are in second and third place respectively, each using between 30 and 40 million metric tons. Saddest of all, over 5 million tons of paper are consigned to land fills where they produce the greenhouse gas methane.

Biophilia obviously comes in many forms. Readers ought to be aware of this problem and demand recycled paper for the books and periodicals they enjoy reading and

consider switching over to digital books. As readers, we are inevitably consumers, and as Dharma practitioners, we ought to be responsible consumers.

Another atrocious misuse of trees in the U.S.—15 million to be exact—is in the use of c. 10 billion paper grocery bags. As in Europe, North Americans should be discouraged from using paper bags by being made to pay for them. Ideally, they should simply not be made available to shoppers, who should bring their own permanent bags.

The most frivolous use of virgin forests is for trees to be converted into toilet paper. The average roll of toilet paper has 500 sheets. The U.S. alone could save around 300,000 trees and some 122 million gallons of water if toilet paper manufacturers would switch to using recycled paper stock. Additionally, a massive amount of wood goes into wooden pallets, with American businesses using a staggering 500 million of them every year, two thirds of which end up unrecycled in landfills.

China has its own wasteful practice by converting 45 million disposable chopsticks every year, which represent about 25 million trees. Given China's enormous environmental problems, this strikes us as shortsighted—a clear demonstration that cerebral impediment has assumed global proportions. Even though China asks each citizen to plant 11 trees every year, its ban on logging has had a disastrous effect on other countries, because they are destroying their own forests to meet the growing demand for wood by the Chinese. Was this not foreseeable and avoidable?

The destruction of the world's rainforests is singularly blameworthy. Rainforests are extraordinary habitats, the homes of untold numbers of beings. Rainforests are estimated to contain half of all animal and plant species on Earth. They are especially precious ecosystems but also the most threatened in the world. The case of Brazil is particularly disturbing. Brazil, which once enjoyed vast forests, has lost half of them. Since 1970, over 232,000 square kilometers (600,000 square kilometers) of Amazon rainforest have been destroyed. One fourth of this area was lost in just six years—between 2000 and 2006. Up to 70 percent of the cleared land is used for cattle ranching, which is devastating to the environment, while most of the remaining percentage is used for subsistence agriculture.

One of the most tragic and unforgivable effects of logging old growth forests is the loss of plants with medicinal properties. No one knows just how rich the Amazon



rainforest is, but that wealth of biodiversity is rapidly vanishing along with the indigenous people who know its secrets. In an effort to preserve their cultural heritage and with the help of nonprofit organizations like the U.S.-based Amazon Conservation Team, some shamans of the few remaining Amazon tribes have started to educate their children in their gradually disappearing environment.

Eighty percent of people in the world rely on herbal remedies for their primary source of healing. Even in the so-called industrialized West, more and more people are using herbal medicine, which has become a \$20 billion industry worldwide, with the United States claiming roughly one fifth of the market. The large-scale commercialization of herbal remedies, however, is placing a huge strain on the plant kingdom, and many well-known herbs like goldenseal, echinacea, and ginseng are now considered at risk. Globally, some 12 percent of plants are at risk.

Combining our overconsumption of healing plants with the loss of the habitats in which they grow, we have a formula for large-scale disaster in the world of medicine and health, especially considering that global warming is expected to cause pandemics. A major 1997 study conducted by the World Conservation Union, involving 16 organizations and extending over 20 years concluded that 34,000 plant species are so rare that they could easily become extinct.<sup>16</sup> This organization described the state of affairs as grim, pointing out that we cannot survive without plants. We must expect that in the meantime the situation has grown even worse. Organizations like United Plant Savers in Vermont are dedicated to conserving and cultivating at-risk native medicinal plants, and a number of companies in America and Europe have started “heirloom gardens” to grow organic herbs, fruits, and vegetables, making seeds available to others.<sup>15</sup> Such efforts have grown out of a deep concern over the loss of biodiversity and also over the increasing influence of genetically engineered plants that are designed to *not* reproduce.

Lester Brown’s comments about the Amazon rainforest epitomize the colossal problem we are facing:

As we burn off the Amazon rainforest, we are in effect burning one of the great repositories of genetic information. Our descendent may one day view the

wholesale burning of this genetic library much as we view the burning of the library in Alexandria in 48 BC.”<sup>17</sup>

Our descendants, however, are likely to be a lot more emotional about the loss of medicinal plants than we are about Alexandria, because their welfare will be at stake. They cannot be as cavalier as we are. It is up to us to look ahead and take the necessary steps to avoid further environmental destruction and the inevitable bitter consequences for future generations of human and nonhuman beings alike. This is an absolute obligation for Dharma practitioners. Writing in 1992, Peter Timmerman put it bluntly:

Contrary to the popular view of Buddhism as a “refuge” from the world, to become a Buddhist today is definitely a political act.<sup>18</sup>

We are *of* the world. We are *in* the world. We *are* the world. We must take responsible action in the world. Our actions are inevitably connected with the state of the world and humanity as a whole and therefore our actions are necessarily political. Some Dharma practitioners don’t like politics or don’t want to be political, yet as long as we are in community with others, political action is inescapable. Hence we ought to stop hedging and simply make our actions count for the good of all.

It could all be so different! One of our Dharma heroes, the Nyingma yogi Shabkar, put it graphically thus in one of his many poems:

E ma! This extraordinary wilderness!  
Here, where so many learned and  
    Accomplished lamas have stayed,  
The gathering-place of dakinis<sup>19</sup> and Dharmapalas<sup>20</sup>,  
Is the place here I stay in solitude.

Tsehung, this secluded mountain place:  
Above—a slow, soft rain drizzles down.  
Flocks of eagles flying—north, south—

Beaked mothers and their young  
Trying their wings—  
Rainbows vividly appear.

Below me—the curved necks of geese,  
Glancing, and the Tsechu river flowing on,  
Sinuous. Behind them, deer dance on the slope  
Of a mountain whose peak penetrates space.

On both sides, meadows blaze with wild  
    Flowers;  
Myriad bees whirl above them.  
In front, rocks ornament the mountain  
    meadows,  
A cuckoo's cry fills me with sadness.

Up and down the valley, cattle and sheep  
Owned by the faithful  
Dot the land. The young girls  
Watching over them are busy,  
Making up songs and plays and dances. . . .<sup>21</sup>

Such unspoiled, idyllic environments as Shabkar was able to enjoy, which are now virtually nonexistent, set the right mood for contemplating silence and the purpose of life, as well as delving into the practice of the Dharma. As we lose this kind of uplifting natural environment, we deprive ourselves of delight and the opportunity to realize the great bliss of ultimate realization.

Shabkar, like many other recluses, lived a life of utmost simplicity which yet, as the Buddha had intended, was filled with joy. His environmental footprint was miniscule, his inner life immeasurably rich. What is a small ecological footprint? We can find a deep answer in the *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* where in chapter 21 he states (p.

209) that he is a stupa, white and small.<sup>22</sup> He explained that he is white because he practices deeds of whiteness [i.e., of good karma] and is small because his desires are few. Thus, a small ecological footprint represents—and must be based in—good morals and in scarcity of desires.

The phrase “ecological footprint” was invented by William Rees, a professor of human ecology at the University of British Columbia at Vancouver. The concept behind it evolved out of a dissertation by Rees’s former student Mathis Wackernagel and stands for an individual’s or entire nation’s demand or impact on the environment in terms of hectares. One hectare equals 2.47 acres. For 2003, the per-capita ecological footprint in the world amounted to 1.8 hectares (or 4.5 acres). The average American’s footprint is 9.6 hectares (or 17.3 acres). There are several online calculators to measure your individual ecological footprint, a very sobering exercise even for someone committed to a green lifestyle as we ourselves are. In their book *Our Ecological Footprint*, Rees and Wackernagel calculated that present humanity exceeds the Earth’s productive capacity by 20 percent.<sup>23</sup>

By comparison with this modern standard, Shabkar’s impact on the environment was minute. Unless we adopt the rigorously ascetical lifestyle of a Shabkar or a Milarepa, who resigned himself to a nettle soup diet, our ecological footprint will most certainly be much larger and not sustainable. Since few of us have the capacity and karmic inclination for an austere life, we must accept that our environmental impact will inevitably much greater. We can, however, still nurture the spirit of empathy and of biophilia and make apposite lifestyle changes. In fact, as apprenticing Bodhisattvas, who wish for Nature to endure for the benefit of all life forms now and in the future, this is our only option.

In this undertaking we must allow ourselves to be aided by Nature herself. Since, as the Buddha pointed out, physical health is anyway a rare gift and since today most of us are suffering from the negative repercussions of planetwide pollution, we ought to protect Nature, especially its remaining forests. We would like to end with a quote from one of Derrick Jensen’s fervent books:

We have been the obedient servants of Gilgamesh for five thousand years. We have cut a path of destruction, ignored the spreading deserts, disregarded the

disappearing animals, the fouled air and water, the warming planet. We have destroyed most of the earth's natural forest cover, and we pretend we can live without it. The story we have been handed down says that Gilgamesh defeated the forest protectors and that the forces of civilization won the battle for the forest, but it's not true. The epic is not over, and Enlil's curse will not be lifted until we reject the easy and false promises of Gilgamesh, and return with respect and humility to the forests.<sup>24</sup>

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 4

1. Paul Harrison and Fred Pearce, *AAAS Atlas of Population & Environment*. Foreword by Peter H. Raven (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000), p. 3.
2. See Lester R. Brown et al., *State of the World 1992* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).
3. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 3d edition 1987).
4. See S. L. Pimm *et al.*, "The Future of Biodiversity," *Science*, no. 269 (1995), pp. 347–350.
5. W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa: A Biography from the Tibetan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed. 1951), p. 87.
6. Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Five Wonderful Mindfulness Trainings," [www.plumvillage.org/HTML/practice/html/5\\_mindfulness\\_trainings.htm](http://www.plumvillage.org/HTML/practice/html/5_mindfulness_trainings.htm).

7. See Bernhard Rensch, *Homo Sapiens: From Man to Demigod* (New York: Columbia University, 1972).
8. See Lambert Schmithausen, “Aldous Huxley’s View of Nature” in: C. C. Barfoot , ed. *Aldous Huxley Between East and West* (New York: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2001), pp. 156.
9. John Dunne and Sara McClintock, trans. *The Precious Garland: An Epistle to a King* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 1997), p. 18. The citation is from chapter one, verse 64.
10. H. V. Guenther, *The Royal Song of Saraha: A Study in the History of Buddhist Thought* (Berkeley, Calif.: Shambhala Publications, 1973), p. 63.
11. Stephen Harrod Buhner, *The Lost Language of Plants* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2001), p.63.
12. See Henryk Skolimowski, *Dancing Shiva in the Ecological Age* (New Delhi: Dr. Henryk Skolimowski International Centre for Eco-Philosophy and Indian Institute of Ecology and Environment, 1995).
13. See Derrick Jensen and George Draffan, *Strangely Like War: The Global Assault on Forests* (White River Junction: Chelsea Green, 2003), p. 3.
14. Ibid., p. 3.
15. Ibid., p. 3.
16. See Rosemary Gladstar and Pamela Hirsch, eds. *Planting the Future: Saving Our Medicinal Herbs* (Rochester, Vt.: Healing Arts Press, 2000).

17. Lester R. Brown, *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2006), p. 95.
18. First published in Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, eds., *Buddhism and Ecology* (London: Cassell, 1992), p. 66.
19. A *dakini*, as the Tibetan word *khandro* suggests, is a female “sky walker,” who can be either a minor (and often volatile) deity or a realized Dharma practitioner with the ability to make herself visible or invisible as needed.
20. A *dharmapala* is literally a protector of the Dharma, and this Sanskrit word (in Tibetan: *chö kyong*) generally refers to a male or female deity or Buddha/Bodhisattva who is thought to have a special connection to the sacred task of protecting the Dharma and Dharma practitioners from undesirable or evil influences. In Tibetan Buddhism, eight principal Dharma Protectors are distinguished, including Mahakala and Yamantake and the Goddess Shri Devi (Palden Lhamo).
21. Matthieu Ricard, trans., *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogi* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion, 2001), p. 82.
22. Garma C. C. Chang, *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* (Boulder and London: Shambhala Publications, 1977), vol. 1, p. 209.
23. See William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel, *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 1996).
24. Derrick Jensen and George Draffan, *op. cit.*, p. 143.





## *CHAPTER 5*

# **TROUBLED WATERS**

The Buddha was born in the Himalayan foothills of what is now northern Bihar (called Magadha in ancient times). He did not live near any large body of water, certainly not near the ocean, so that we could have expected an abundance of metaphors relating to a maritime environment. But his pronouncements about Nature anyway include clarifying statements about the water element that apply to the ocean as well.

We have been able to find only a single discourse that relates to the ocean more directly, which is contained in the Pali Canon<sup>1</sup>, where the Buddha instructs Paharada, the chief of the Asuras, who are semi-divine beings dwelling in the ocean. "I suppose," said the Buddha, "the Asuras find delight in the great ocean." Paharada agreed, and the Buddha asked why, to which Paharada responded by listing eight specific qualities of the ocean that they found so delightful. Then he respectfully asked the Buddha what qualities of the Dharma brought delight to the monks. Picking up on the qualities that Paharada had listed for his oceanic home, the Buddha extolled the marvelous qualities of his teaching:

Like the ocean, the Dharma "slopes away gradually," that is, it proceeds gradually rather than abruptly—a fact we can especially appreciate from the graduated (or lam-rim) teachings of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism. Like the ocean, the Dharma is "stable," that is, the monks maintain the disciplines given to them by the Buddha. Like the ocean, the Dharma expels "corpses," that is, it does not tolerate immoral individuals. Like the ocean, which assimilates without distinction all rivers pouring into it, the Dharma assimilates ascetics who then lose their former names and lineages to form the Sangha. Like the ocean neither increases nor decreases, nirvana neither increases nor decreases, regardless of the number of realizers. Like the ocean has only one taste, the taste of salt, the Dharma has only the single taste of liberation. Like the ocean contains numerous

astounding creatures, the Dharma includes stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners, and Arhats and all those training in these categories.<sup>2</sup>

Because the Earth's five-limbed ocean<sup>3</sup> and rivers are today so polluted and in many regions are in fact dying, we need to dedicate a whole chapter to the water element and its importance for all living beings and especially for Dharma practitioners. Anyone who has ever braved the ocean in a small boat will have had a gut-level experience of the ocean's immensity and power. It helps to remind ourselves that the total area of the ocean is 139 million square miles (or 361 million square kilometers). The ocean's estimated volume is c. 319 million cubic miles (or 1,340 million cubic kilometers). These are incredible figures. Yet, in our disregard for Nature, we have in a very short time managed to pollute this vast expanse to the point where the ocean is withering. Some people think that the ocean is actually dying. We agree. How much evidence of deterioration do we need to see before we are ready to make a more stringent appraisal? How sick does a patient have to be before he or she is declared seriously ill and in need of emergency care?

When we stand on an isolated beach and watch the waves rolling ashore, we cannot believe that this mind-boggling expanse of water should be endangered. But then, when we look around us on the beach, between boulders, we see all the tell-tale signs of human indifference and disrespect—bottles, cans, hypodermic needles, plastic chairs and toys, and much more, all washed ashore from who-knows-where: a disheartening sight. This is just the tip of a huge proverbial iceberg! At some beaches, which are subject to strong ocean currents, the discarded or lost flotsam arrives daily in large quantities. Often local volunteers take on the never-ending task of regularly picking up all the junk.

A sad symbol of maritime waste pollution is the area of 10 million square miles (or 26 million square kilometers) of polluted waters of the North Pacific Subtropical Gyre, which has been dubbed the "Garbage Patch." Like a slow-rotating washing machine, this area, which is 38 times the size of Texas, tumbles clockwise untold numbers of pieces of discarded plastic in all stages of disintegration—some pieces so small that fish confuse them for plankton, fill their bellies, and gradually die. The plastic waste is carried downstream by numerous rivers around the world or dumped by the 90,000 or so ships traversing the ocean.

In Chapter 1, we already addressed the terrible noise pollution of the ocean and the great harm this does to maritime creatures. The chemical pollution of the ocean is even more alarming. The most visible pollution is from oil spills involving ships and drilling rigs. Less obvious are the regular dumping of hazardous waste (including radioactive materials) by cruise ships and the volumes of raw sewage, pesticides, and toxic metals (such as lead and mercury) that are carried by heavily polluted rivers downstream and into the ocean. The higher up on the food chain a maritime creature is, the more it is pumped full of toxins. The toxicity level of the ocean has reached such a magnitude that when, for instance, Beluga whales strand themselves, their corpses are typically regarded as hazardous waste. In addition, the ocean must deal with thermal pollution from the expulsion of heated water by coastal power stations and also assimilate many pollutants from the air.

The destructive impact of our civilization manifestly extends far beyond our cities and towns, which is why we all must learn to be mindful about what and how much we consume. Anything that we consume—from food to goods—has a complex production history, which as a rule involves processes and materials that are detrimental to the environment and our fellow beings on this planet. We ought to oblige ourselves to look carefully into that, so that we can select those products that are the least harmful to the environment.

To continue our consideration of the barrage on the deep sea, the most insipid and frivolous use of the ocean is surely the cruise ship industry. This booming industry, which in North America alone netted \$2.5 billion in 2004, is outrageously damaging to the marine environment. You could never tell this from the smooth advertising by cruise lines! But again and again, their many infringements of harbor and other laws are exposed by the media. Pleasure seekers tend to ignore such exposés and the caveat implied in the stiff fines regularly leveled at cruise ship lines. The public's shortsighted goals of personal pleasure and comfort stand in the way of seeing cruise ships in the right light.

Despite the bad news about the environment, the leisure industry in general, ever eager to pleasurize the self-cherishing personality, is flourishing unimpededly. In our

book *Green Yoga*, we have had to criticize Yoga teachers for holding Yoga workshops on cruise ships or at glamorous beach resorts. Considering that Yoga, though originally and authentically a spiritual tradition, is today practiced chiefly as a health and fitness system, we can understand but by no means condone that some Yoga students would want to combine a good healthy sweat with the kind of material pleasures offered on a cruise. From a dharmic perspective, this amounts to a self-involved individual merely combining two ego-based activities, the fun of “doing” Yoga and the gratification of doing so in a circumstance of great leisure. We are, however, frankly dumbfounded when we hear that even Dharma teachers hold workshops, retreats, and international conferences on foreign soil involving lengthy airplane flights and convenient but environmentally unfriendly hotel accommodation at the destination. To our relief, we have never heard of Dharma teachings being formally given on a cruise ship. Hopefully, this will never be the case. Hopefully also, we will witness Dharma practitioners availing themselves of electronic conferencing and taking workshops and retreats closer to home.

Our civilization has given us all sorts of technological “wonders” but all too often has done so at a hidden cost. Jet flights, as we have shown in Chapter 2, are a case in point, as are cruises. Both have highly undesirable environmental consequences. Because those consequences are not immediately visible, we seldom consider them and are even inclined to push this knowledge out of our awareness. Again, as Dharma practitioners, we have no choice but practice mindfulness.

Down on the ground and destined for the ocean, ever bigger cruise ships are being built, and Carnival Cruise Line’s “freedom-class” ship “Project Pinnacle” is designed to have a carrying capacity of around 6500 people and to weigh in at up to 180,000 tons. Bigger is not inevitably better. In the case of cruise ships, we in fact need to invert this popular maxim. From Ross Klein’s books we know that the greater a cruise ship’s carrying capacity, the more likely it will significantly pollute the ocean.<sup>4</sup> Given their poor environmental history, cruise lines are eager to publicly greenwash their performance through clever advertising and by supporting well-known environmental organizations.

Turning next to commercial shipping, there are thousands of freight ships in operation conducting 90 percent of international trade, including very large oil tankers. All too frequently, we hear of major oil spills devastating beaches and killing thousands

of birds and other wildlife, never mind the fish in the ocean. Everyone will remember the *Exxon Valdes* disaster of 1989, which polluted an area of 125 Olympic-size swimming pools in the Gulf of Alaska's Prince William Sound. The 978-foot-long *Exxon Valdes* ran aground after leaving the Canadian port town of Valdez and spilled nearly 11 million gallons (or 240,000 barrels) of crude oil, killing an estimated 3 million birds and over 25 million fish, and despoiling 1,300 miles of shoreline. It took 10,000 people, 1,000 boats, and 100 aircraft to clean up the mess, though not completely or entirely satisfactorily. This enormous disaster forced the U.S. government to pass more stringent maritime laws.

Every year, there are about 300 chemical spills in the United States and 50 or more oil spills, which require the intervention of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. That's just in the United States! Other countries neither have adequate laws nor the financial means to control tanker traffic, and oil spills continue to happen. Ten years prior to the *Exxon Valdes* disaster, which was the biggest in U.S. history, a drilling rig off the coast of Mexico spilled ten times the amount of oil. Rigs are like time bombs, and spills of varying magnitude occur quite regularly but are rarely reported.

The commercial shipping industry not only severely pollutes the ocean but is also a major polluter of the air, generating up to 800 million tons of carbon dioxide annually, which, taking the upper end, amounts to c. 30 percent of humanity's yearly total generation of greenhouse gases, which weighs in at c. 30 billion tons.

And then there is the fishing industry, which represents a whole other problem area, both for sea creatures and birds, as well as for humans. In 1950, that industry emptied the ocean of some 19 million tons of fish, that is, billions of individual fish. In 1997, 93 million tons of fish were "harvested." Today, 90 to 95 percent of all large fish—marlin, blue fin tuna, sturgeon, shark, swordfish, and cod are all but gone. In addition, an estimated 1 million sea birds are killed in the process of industrial fishing. Humanity's appetite for seafood has proven too voracious.

Industrial super trawlers, which are hundreds of feet long and can easily hold 50 million pounds of fish, drag a 30-mile-long driftnet with tiny mesh that captures just about everything in its fatal path. Like pirates, these giant trawlers plunder the international waters of the ocean, which are not governed by stringent laws like the coastal regions. This type of fishing has been compared to clear-cutting forests. Apart

from stripping the ocean of its natural inhabitants, it often does damage to coral reefs and other maritime features, which took a long time to accrete and in its devastation can be compared to shelling a town.

As a result, fisheries everywhere are either in decline or have already collapsed. While this is obviously a loss for fishermen, we also sympathize with the fish and will address fish consumption in a moment. Fish are sentient beings, demonstrably can experience pain, and—like cattle, pigs, or chicken—should not be destined for the dinner plate. No sentient being should end up in our stomach. No sentient being should be harmed in our unceasing pursuit for food. We can adapt our lifestyle, whereas they cannot. Thich Nhat Hanh quoted the following Vietnamese saying:

This plate of food,  
so fragrant and appetizing,  
also contains much suffering.<sup>5</sup>

Roughly 1 billion humans, mainly but not exclusively in developing countries, depend on fish for their primary food. They do not consume fish merely for variety, as is the case with most inland dwellers. Industrial fishing and worldwide overfishing are rapidly robbing them of their sustenance. Industrial fishing feeds the wealthy, not the poor. Here is yet another glaring instance of global injustice. What is most disheartening is that the governments of developed nations heavily subsidize this destructive and vicious industry, as they do other damaging industries—from fossil fuel and nuclear power generation to air transportation and mining.

Apart from anything else, commercial fishing, to say the least, is a gruesome affair. When fish are pulled up to the surface, often the rapid change in water pressure is enough for them to explode. Others suffocate to death. In the process, hundreds of billions of individual fish are killed, while sea turtles, dolphins, and whales become entangled in the nets and drown. Shrimp trawlers are notoriously devastating. They catch a lot of unwanted or disallowed sea creatures and have to return 85 percent to the ocean, most of them dead. This is not only outrageous but also irrational.

The ocean has lost its wondrous plurality referred to in the above-cited quote from one of the Buddha's discourses. The ocean's biodiversity is rapidly dwindling. Here is an idea: If we were to leave the ocean and its creatures to themselves, the 22,000 species of fish—representing billions upon billions of individuals—would be grateful to us.

The severe pollution of the ocean, as well as acidification and warming of the ocean's waters, can also be seen in the dying coral reefs, such as the Great Barrier Reef off the shores of Queensland, as well as the multiplying dead zones. Reefs are veritable heavens for all kinds of marine creatures, and their decline everywhere bodes ill for the ocean and for us. The Great Barrier Reef, which is 1243 miles long, harbors some 1,500 species of fish and 4,000 species of mollusks apart from the corals themselves. Each coral is made up of the skeletons of literally thousands of tiny polyps and to survive needs clear, shallow water and sunlight, as well as the nutrients it extracts from a certain type of plankton. In terms of the ocean's health, corals are like the proverbial canaries used in old coal mines to detect the presence of lethal gases. Ecologists have been anxiously watching the decline of the Great Barrier Reef, hoping against all odds that it would not share the misfortune of numerous other, smaller, and less spectacular reefs around the world.

Dead zones are oxygen-starved (hypoxic) areas in the ocean, which appear to be caused by pollutants from river runoffs. They were first observed in the 1970s and have since multiplied to more than 140. The largest known dead zone is the one found in the Gulf of Mexico, which is of variable size but at times comprises an area of about 8,500 square miles (or 22,000 square kilometers). Naturally, fish avoid such zones since they would die, but bottom-dwelling sea creatures become easy victims of these human-made disaster areas.

The sorry state of the ocean is paralleled by the miserable condition of Earth's rivers to which we will turn next. Thousands of rivers, big and small, terminate in the ocean, emptying their waters into this vast pool but today also releasing into the ocean all the garbage and toxins dumped into them along their course by careless individuals and uncaring industries. As if this were not enough of an insult to our aquatic fellow beings, we have also constructed very large sewage pipes that dump their noxious load into rivers and even directly into the ocean.

Could you imagine the members of the Sangha at the time of the Buddha polluting rivers or the ocean the way contemporaries do almost as a rule? There are passages in the Pali Canon which speak of rivers being clean, pure, and potable. The worst condition anyone would worry about was mud swirled up at a river crossing. Today, no one in his or her right mind would take a sip of water from a river. Rivers have become toxic waste dumps for industry and agriculture and the recipients of literally trillions of gallons of untreated sewage. This includes “Mother” Ganga (the Ganges River), traditionally revered as sacred and still used as a place for the daily ablutions of pious Hindus. Apart from raw sewage as well as industrial and agricultural waste entering its hallowed waters, it also carries bloated animal and human corpses.

Even though the Indian government has thus far spent \$500 million to clean up the Yamuna River running through Delhi, contamination—mostly from raw sewage—continues to push this river relentlessly toward ecological collapse. Pollution also is the fate of the 1800-mile-long Brahmaputra River, which originates in Tibet near Mount Kailash and meanders through the Himalayas to pour itself into the Bay of Bengal along with the Ganges. The dykes and dams built after the big 1950 earthquake compromised the river’s ecology, which in 2007 was made much worse by pollution from a new oil refinery in Assam, killing large numbers of fish. All of India’s other major rivers are severely or very severely polluted.

China’s rivers include the worst polluted rivers in the world. The Yangtze, China’s longest river, has been styled “cancerous;” it is virtually lifeless. Yet, along its 3,915-mile-long course, it supplies water to 186 cities. The 3,398-mile-long Yellow River, the cradle of Chinese civilization, is likewise an ecological disaster and in places runs red from chemical spills. The severe pollution of the Songhua River, which China shares with Russia, has become a special political focal point. Even ground water has become widely polluted from China’s all-too-rapid industrialization. This explains why some 360 million people reportedly do not have access to safe drinking water, as the Chinese government has admitted.

The story of inadequate potable water is similar in India, which, too, has tried to leap ahead in the race for modernization, disregarding its precious water courses and natural water reservoirs. India’s Central Pollution Control Board found that groundwater



is unfit for drinking in all twenty-two major industrial areas. If China and India seem too remote to be of concern to Western readers of our book, they are not. Their plight affects everyone on Earth, because many of the world's polluted rivers end up in the ocean, which becomes more and more toxic as well. And the ocean is the matrix of all life.

Of course, the United States and Europe have their own share of polluted rivers, lakes, and underground water. Almost all the rivers of the European Union, now comprising 27 member states, are suffering from high nitrate content due to agricultural runoff, which kills of any life. Farming has a similar disastrous effect on the waterways of the United States due to the almost universal use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Annually, in the United States some 8.97 billion gallons (or 34 billion liters) of highly hazardous liquids are injected deep into the ground where they supposedly cannot—but have—polluted underground water reservoirs. This includes radioactive liquid waste!

In the meantime, as groundwater is being polluted and rendered undrinkable, groundwater levels are dropping and global warming is shifting weather patterns, causing droughts in vital food growing areas. Drinking water, which is essential to life, is fast becoming scarcer and scarcer while the human population keeps growing. This is a global problem of enormous magnitude, and some authorities conjecture that the next world war will be fought over fresh water.

In our attempt to get enough water where it is needed by our civilization, we have taken to rerouting rivers and constructing more and more massive dams, which are environmentally hugely destructive. A striking example in North America is the technological manipulation of the Colorado River, which once poured into the Gulf of California, seldom carries enough water to reach the ocean. In South America, the giant Amazon, the largest (but not the longest) river in the world, carries 20 percent of the Earth's fresh water. Yet, its waters bring ill health and death to countless indigenous people along its course.

In Asia, China's large rivers have all been subjected to modification through dams and to excessive pollution, making the country's future water supply dubious. Like China, India's situation is tragic. Overpopulation combined with rapid industrialization has ruined India's network of rivers, and the proposed governmental plan to connect all the rivers through canals, in our opinion, is likely to worsen the situation. In Africa, the

water situation can only be described as tragic. Many countries are drought stricken. Rivers like the Nile, the longest river on Earth, the Zambezi, and the Congo (or Zaire) are inundated with sewage and industrial discharges.

Europe's largest river, the 820-mile-long Rhine, which flows through Germany and The Netherlands, is heavily polluted by industry and shipping despite efforts by the European Union to clean it up. In 1995, the river flooded catastrophically and in 2003, a year of record heat and drought for Europe, the Rhine became unnavigable. The 1,771-mile-long Danube originates in Germany, traverses nine other countries, and terminates in the Black Sea. This great river is likewise spoiled and no longer deserves its traditional poetic label of "blue Danube." Other European rivers are similarly contaminated.

The Australian continent has 58 rivers many of which are polluted. Pollution particularly affects the two big river systems of Queensland and New South Wales. The pollutants of the coastal rivers of Queensland in eastern Australia contribute to the deterioration of the Great Barrier Reef. Given that Australia has been suffering severe drought conditions, the rampant pollution of its rivers is, to say the least, incredibly myopic.

Rivers were once sufficient to cater to the water needs of the residents living along their banks. Now the water has become so degraded that it can no longer serve as drinking water, and yet many poor regions are reduced to consuming polluted water, which adversely affects peoples' health. In fact, millions of people die each year from water-borne diseases, because they lack access to safe drinking water. In addition, potable underground water is more and more difficult to reach. Many aquifers are being exhausted from overuse and many others are polluted from the toxic chemical runoff due to bad agricultural and industrial practices. So-called Third World governments tend to regard the complexities involved in the water crisis as intractable, and little is done to ease people's burden.

Meanwhile, the citizens of the developed nations consume water casually and mindlessly as if this element were inexhaustible. As with so many other natural resources, the United States is the largest consumer of water. Per-capita consumption for the United States is 1,730 cubic meters as compared to Canada's 1,420, Great Britain's 230, and Denmark's mere 130 cubic meters.

The vast Ogallala aquifer, located beneath the Great Plains in the United States, is the largest natural reservoir in the world. It is estimated to contain some 4 trillion tons of water but is no longer replenished in adequate amounts, because the annual withdrawal rate is extremely high to meet the water requirements of eight states. The aquifer is expected to run dry between 2030 and 2040—a tragedy in the making, because it caters to 20 percent of the United States' agricultural needs.

One percent of the world's surface and ground water is accessible for human use. One third of the world's population lives in what are known as water-stressed regions, which practically means that they consume more water than Nature supplies. By 2025, an estimated 4 billion people could be without clean drinking water; 1 billion people presently find themselves in this quandary.

One day, perhaps all too soon, drinking water will be hard to come by for everyone. Perhaps then even North Americans will have a better sense of water's preciousness. At this point in time, about 30 percent of North American water usage literally goes down the toilet at a rate of 4.8 billion gallons per day. Our parents have known food rationing; we and our children, we fear, will come to know water rationing as well. Let us hope that we will never have to fight over drinking water or drink heavily contaminated water, as is the case in certain areas of the world. Let us hope that our generation, which is largely in charge of the money, will demonstrate sanity and make our economy sustainable.

This is the place to recall the ethics instituted by the Buddha, which shows a great conscientiousness about the use of water. For a monastic, the downfalls that require forfeiture include sporting in water frivolously. Among the downfalls that require confession alone, we find the act of scattering water (such as sprinkling a lawn) or using it for washing and drinking, knowing that the used water contains life forms. According to one of the Buddha's discourses, the Brahmin Uttara, a disciple of a certain Brahmayu, followed the Buddha for seven months to determine whether the enlightened master displayed all thirty-two marks of a perfected being, which the Buddha did.<sup>6</sup> Uttara related to his teacher his various findings, which included an account of the Buddha's ever mindful conduct. Here we learn, among other things, that the Buddha used just enough water to wash his hands and begging bowl simultaneously and that he did not scatter the

water remaining in the bowl but mindfully poured it neither too high nor too low, presumably to avoid accidentally drowning creatures on the ground.

This conduct strikes us as truly noble and beautiful. By contrast, there is something quite vulgar about the squandering of water by individuals and organizations in the so-called developed world. Georg remembers an incident during his travels in the desert of the Sultanate of Oman, at the southernmost edge of the Arabian peninsula, once the home of the famous Queen of Sheba. On one of his outings, he encountered a lonely sheep herder in the middle of nowhere. He offered him a bottle of water from which the youngster gladly took a swig. When he wanted to return the bottle, Georg, who (just in case) had the backseat of his car stacked with water bottles indicated in broken Arabic and gestures that he should feel free to keep the bottle. The youngster, who was in his early teens, just as vigorously declined and simply refused to keep the bottle of water. Water is incredibly precious in the desert, and he would not think of depriving anyone of more than a swig. This was a very touching and rather sobering scene.

At the time of the Buddha, it was deemed virtuous and auspicious to create a grove, a park, construct a bridge, or make a place to drink for the general public.<sup>7</sup> In our own time, there are many problems associated especially with making water reservoirs and digging a well. More often than not such projects are self-serving and not sustainable.

At this point, we must address the issue of fish consumption. Neither meat nor fish is an absolute dietary requirement for humanity. Both are an acquired taste, which then, historically, fostered certain cultural developments, such as the building of settlements near or on beaches. Seen correctly, they are an aspect of our fundamental craving. This brings us to the Second Noble Truth formulated by the Buddha. The first is the apparent omnipresence of suffering. The second is that all suffering has craving for its root-cause. It has three aspects, namely greed, hatred, and delusion. In developed countries, people's appetite for meat and fish generally belongs to the category of greed. Eating fish tickles many people's taste buds; that is, it gives them pleasure.<sup>8</sup>

On a more prosaic level, today there is another side to eating fish, which we must mention here. This is the high level of toxicity in the rivers and the ocean, which now shows up in the elevated mercury contents of many fish. For a number of years, Health Canada has cautioned consumers to limit their intake of certain kinds of fish, notably

tuna, swordfish, and shark, which are anyway becoming rarer and rarer. While, amazingly, some governmental agencies in North America and elsewhere encourage consumers to avail themselves of fish protein, the Eighth International Conference on Mercury as a Global Pollutant, which was held in 2007, declared methylmercury, as found in fish, a threat to public health in most parts of the world. Mercury exists naturally in the ocean but raised levels are due to pollution. Even in minute quantities, mercury is toxic to humans, particularly pregnant women and young children. It affects the kidneys and the brain and is deleterious to the neurological system.<sup>9</sup> *Caveat emptor!*

In some parts of the world, eating fish—or sea otters, or dolphins, or whales—is an age-old tradition. Perhaps these are the only food source in a region. But historically, we would argue those cultures long ago opted to be near the ocean because of a preference for marine food. From the perspective of the Dharma, we would say that living in an environment that offers no alternative food to fish and meat is regrettable. Nonharming is one of the key virtues of the Dharma. At the same time, we understand that because of their karma, people find themselves in situations where the ethical conditions of the Dharma cannot be met.<sup>9</sup> The Buddhist authorities all agree that it is exceedingly rare for a sentient being to encounter the Dharma and then for conditions to be just right for practicing it. Here is a relevant excerpt from Nagarjuna's *Letter to a Friend*, where he mentions the eight obstacles that prevent one from maturing in the Dharma:

Holding wrong views, being an animal,  
A hungry spirit, or birth in the hells,  
Bereft of Buddha's teachings,  
Born in outlying lands, as a barbarian, mute or idiot  
Or as a long life god. These births  
Are the eight defects of having no leisure.  
Being free of them by finding leisure,  
Make effort to avert birth.<sup>10</sup>

Just to attain a human birth, reminded Nagarjuna his royal disciple King Gautamiputra<sup>11</sup>, is more difficult than for a turtle to put its neck into a yoke that is tossed about in the ocean at random. Freedom from the above-mentioned eight impediments affords one the right conditions for encountering and benefiting from the Dharma—a unique opportunity, which, according to Buddhism, may not present itself again in eons of lifetimes.<sup>12</sup> In the face of the untold suffering experienced by sea creatures, but, as we will see, also by land animals, we can more readily appreciate the opportunities of a human birth.

Earlier on, we mentioned the first two noble truth discovered by the Buddha. We would like to conclude this chapter by briefly referring to the third and fourth noble truth; these are that suffering can be eliminated and that the way to eliminate suffering is by means of the noble eightfold path: right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right exertion, and right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Right view, the first step on the path of liberation, is all important. It allows Dharma practitioners to discover what there *really* is; what is *really* relevant about human existence. Here they learn the vital fact that there is in fact no stable entity anywhere—including the apparently stable sense of self—and that everything is ephemeral. This lesson holds special significance today when we are witnessing the progressive demise of so many species, and the likelihood of the termination of our own human species.

Right resolve also is particularly weighty nowadays, because we end up individually and collectively based on the direction we decide to take. Dharmically, the only direction that is worthwhile is liberation, because it spells the end of suffering. At the same time, on the Bodhisattva path, we strive for liberation in order to develop compassion and all sorts of skills, so that we may better serve our suffering fellow beings. Thus, our personal spiritual goals need not and, indeed, must not deter us from responding to the suffering of others—all those trillions of individuals of the animal kingdom who need our help.

Right speech, which is the mindful employment of our distinct human faculty of vocal expression, also has a contemporary application: We ought to use our speech to heal other humans and nonhumans by making it comforting and encouraging.

Right conduct is ethical behavior that promotes wholesome conditions inside and outside. In our era of moral confusion and laxity, this seems like an obvious commendation. Nowadays, for our conduct to be wholesome and meaningful, it must include an environmental dimension.

Right livelihood must above all honor the sound moral principle of nonharming.

Right exertion is the integrated, wholesome effort to develop wholesome internal conditions that further promote self-transformation. For right exertion to make sense in our time, it surely must include the Bodhisattva vow.

Right mindfulness is proper attentiveness to all things, including how our actions impact on the environment and others.

Right concentration is the progressive cultivation of self-transcending states of mind, which again, we feel, should include a component of compassion, such as in the wonderful practice of the Four Immeasurables, or Brahmīc Abidings.<sup>13</sup>

As the great master Je Tsongkhapa noted in his *Lam Rim Chenmo*, Hearers and Solitary Buddhas

have the immeasurable love and compassion whereby they think, “If only beings could have happiness and be free from suffering,” these non-Mahayana followers do not think, “I will take on the responsibility to remove the suffering and to provide the happiness of all living beings.” Therefore, you must develop wholehearted resolve that surpasses all other courageous thoughts. It is not enough to think, “If only all living beings could have happiness and could be free from suffering.” You must also wholeheartedly assume the responsibility of producing this yourself.<sup>14</sup>

## ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 5

1. See the *Anguttara-Nikaya* (Chapter 8.19). Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara-Nikaya* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 1999), pp. 202ff. From a footnote in the above English translation, which we found on p. 305, we learned that the simile of the ocean is also used at *Udana* (5.5) and *Vinaya* (vol. 3) and that the Asura had waited eleven years before approaching the Buddha and then being too shy to ask him any questions, so that the Buddha had to take the initiative.

2. A stream-enterer is someone who has taken refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha; a once-returner is a Dharma practitioner whose karmic baggage compels him to take rebirth as a human being only one more time; a non-returner is exempt from taking rebirth; an Arahant is someone who has transcended all negative tendencies of the mind and thus attains nirvana. An Arhat has the same fundamental realization of enlightenment as the Buddha, though by common consent the Buddha's qualities far exceed those of other awakened ones, which is why even those with amazing yogic abilities like Moggallana all showed a natural reverence for that great being already during his lifetime.

3. There is only a single ocean, which is generally segregated into five areas, or seas: the Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, Southern, and Arctic oceans.

4. See Ross Klein's two books *Cruise Ship Blues: The Underside of the Cruise Industry* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2002) and *Cruise Ship Squeeze: The New Pirates of the Seven Seas* (Gabriola Island, B.C.: New Society Publishers, 2005). Klein, a professor of social work, has taken more than 30 cruises himself, at first for his own pleasure and diversion and later in order to gather all the necessary details for his revealing publications. Needless to say, his incriminating findings have not slowed down that industry, which, on the contrary, is experiencing a boom.



5. Cited in “Look Deep and Smile: The Thoughts and Experiences of a Vietnamese Monk—Talks and Writings of Thich Nhat Hanh,” ed. by Martine Batchelor, in Martine Batchelor and Kerry Brown, *Buddhism and Ecology* (London: Cassell Publishers, 1992), p. 100.

6. See the *Brahmayu-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (91.15). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 747–748.

7. See the *Devata-Samyutta-Sutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (1.154). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 122.

8. We will speak of the traditional Tibetan custom of eating meat, which has come under fire by many Western practitioners, in Chapter 6.

9. For the presence of all sorts of toxic metals in our body, see the frightening report by Canada’s Environmental Defence “Toxic Nation,” which can be found online at [www.environmentaldefence.ca](http://www.environmentaldefence.ca).

10. Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, *Path to Enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism* (Melbourne, Australia: Tushita Publications, 1993), p. 199. This is verse 102 (or 63-64) in the translation by Leslie Kawamura, *Golden Zephyr: Instructions from a Spiritual Friend—Nagarjuna and Lama Mipham* (Emeryville, Calif.: Dharma Publishing, 1975), p. 56. According to some accounts, there are altogether eighteen kinds of freedom that make Dharma practice possible. See, e.g. the commentary to verse 59 by Ven. Lozang Jamspal et al., *Nagarjuna’s Letter to King Gautamiputra* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978), p. 36.

11. The attribution of Nagarjuna’s letter to King Gautamiputra is likely but not completely certain.

12. See verse 97 in Leslie Kawamura, trans. *Golden Zephyr: Instructions from a Spiritual Friend—Nagarjuna and Lama Mipham* (Emeryville, Calif.: Dharma Publishing, 1975), p. 54.

13. The Four Immeasurables, or Brahmic Abidings, refer to the meditation practice of the combined projection of friendliness (*maitri*), compassion (*karuna*), joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upeksha*) toward all beings.

14. Je Tsong-kha-pa, *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment—Lam Rim Chen Mo*. The Lamrim Chenmo Translation Committee (Ithaca, N.Y.: Snow Lion Publications, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 32–33.

## *CHAPTER 6*

# **THOUGHT FOR FOOD**

We can count ourselves fortunate to be human beings endowed with comprehension and the capacity for treading the virtuous path of the Dharma and realizing the precious aspiration to accomplish enlightenment for the benefit of all beings (and the environment at large). We can count ourselves even more fortunate to live at a time where the Dharma is widespread and in principle accessible. Our good fortune is even more distinct when we have the “leisure” to ponder the Dharma and practice it. To have such “leisure,” or freedom, means that we are not bogged down in ideologies or false views and also that we are not prevented from practicing the Dharma by external circumstances.

Unfortunately, billions of people live at or below the subsistence level and thus are too embroiled in the toils of daily life to have the necessary time for learning and significantly engaging the Dharma. When you are struggling for survival, you lack the free attention to do anything else. You don’t even have the means to acquire a book on the Dharma, never mind the leisure or opportunity of going to Dharma talks and initiations, as many North Americans and Europeans have the advantage of doing. Much of the so-called Third World is in this deplorable condition.

When we look around us, however, many people living in the supposedly “progressive” or developed nations are enslaved to work. They do not have or take the time for anything else. Work and the money realized through work appear to be their ultimate concern. They too, like so-called Third World citizens, are subject to exploitation—the exploitation by the consumer society and its numerous agents. They are kept or keeping themselves frantically busy in order to pay taxes, keep up with the Joneses, or “get ahead.” Possibly, they might bury themselves in work, often even in their spare time, in order to avoid having to think about the deeper questions of life. Then when they have exhausted themselves, they can justify collapsing in front of the

television. With their mind preoccupied with worldly affairs, they pay little or no attention to sacred matters. And if they do profess this or that religion or spiritual path, they more often than not simply pay lip-service and could be described as merely nominal practitioners, or hangers-on.

While those enslaved to the secular routines of the industrialized world are certainly unfortunate, the underprivileged of the so-called Third World are truly unfortunate. They could not improve their life circumstance even if they saw that as a possibility, however remote. With the mass media increasingly infiltrating even the villages of the so-called Third World, growing sections of the impoverished people in India and Africa have our own opulent lifestyle dangled before them. Understandably, they desire to escape their state of poverty and oppression and clamor for the apparent plenty and contentment of the developed countries. They seldom realize that the seeming affluence portrayed on television is limited to the middle and upper classes and that it is purchased at the cost of the rest of the world, both commercially and environmentally. They cannot possibly know that what looks like a privileged life is illusory, corrupt, and corrupting. Looking deeper into the twenty-first century, some experts see the specter of a mass revolt of the world's poor against the rich, born from envy and resentment. In the meantime, the poor in the world are getting poorer, hungrier, as well as sicker.

Part of the problem is that as a species we have been neither wise nor caring in the production and equal access to food and other necessities of life. Those who are well off cater to their own kind and tend to get better off. Those who are poor, underprivileged, and exploited are trapped in a downward-moving spiral from which there is no escape other than through the virtue of kindness from their more fortunate fellow humans. Let's not shrug this off by thinking, "Well, that's their karma."

As long as we find ourselves in the world of change (samsara), we are all subject to karma. The real question is: are we creating inauspicious karmic repercussions for ourselves when we turn a cold shoulder to the suffering of others? Of course, we are! Next time round, we might well be in exactly their unenviable position. Unless we cultivate the great virtue of generosity, the Dharma teachers tell us, we can expect to be reborn in a less advantageous situation:

In this present life, what little advantages of power, wealth, good health and other things we enjoy might fool us for a few years, months, or days. But once the effect of whatever good actions causes these happy states is exhausted, whether we want to or not, we will have to undergo poverty and misery or the unbearable sufferings of the lower realms.<sup>1</sup>

The above statement merely mirrors the wisdom of the Dharma, as expounded by the Buddha and many generations of teachers after him. The great eighth-century master Shantideva put it radically and graphically as follows:

At first, our guide instructs us to donate vegetables and so on.

In the end, by doing this [regularly], we gradually [become able to] give away even our own flesh.<sup>2</sup>

We could easily bring many more quotes from the Buddhist scriptures in praise of generosity and in censure of miserliness and indifference to the suffering of others, but let these two quotations suffice.

For a fact, there is enough land on Earth to grow everything that many hundreds of millions of human beings would need to live a long and healthy life in peace with the environment and in the company of hundreds of millions other sentient beings. In about 950 A.D., there were an estimated 250 million human beings, which our planet could easily sustain, especially because there was no extravagant overconsumption in those days. There is, however, not enough fertile land on Earth to feed today's 6.6 billion people in a *sustainable* fashion. This stark truth was energetically pointed out by the Stanford professor of population studies Paul Ehrlich back in 1968.<sup>3</sup> It is fair to say that few individuals and no governments heeded his dire warnings. Today, the unpleasant consequences of human overpopulation are everywhere in stark evidence. Yet still, very few people voluntarily curb their reproductive urge and, apart from China, no government has taken drastic enough measures to attempt to reduce the population growth rate. Overpopulation is a highly touchy subject.

In the case of China, population control has a rather unethical side to it, and in any case China's population of 1.3 billion people is still growing by at least 0.6 percent, which amounts to 7.8 million people per year. Equally importantly, as with India where population control is scarcely a concept, China's industrial growth is so rapid that the damage done to the environment by that country is colossal. It affects not only the Chinese but everyone on the globe.

With the world population hovering just below the 7 billion mark, and with c. 20 percent of them overconsuming, food production and access to drinking water have become a very critical matter. Every year, we add about 75 million people to our planet, which amounts to the size of a large nation like Germany or Ethiopia. Some population experts have predicted that even with encountering certain developmental glitches (such as pandemics), our species will likely expand to 8 billion by the year 2024 and 9 billion by 2042. This is a horrifying prospect, as the attendant suffering will be correspondingly high.

Even though the United Nations resolved in 1986 to reduce world hunger by half by the year 2015, the sad fact is that world hunger has increased by 4 million people every year. Already in 1965, the then Director of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations wrote to ministers and secretaries of agriculture throughout the world to impress on them that the outlook for the world was "alarming" and that the immediate future held "serious famines." Today, an estimated 2 billion people are malnourished; some 850 million people live with chronic hunger; 25–30 million individuals actually die of hunger every year, including 15 million children. This is an intolerable but undeniable fact.

Statistics like the above do not tend to convey what all this represents in terms of human suffering. But imagine it is you and your children who are condemned to live in an area troubled by drought and lack of foreign aid. You can scarcely bear your own hunger pangs but seeing your young children cry from hunger and literally eating dirt to comfort themselves, your heart will break over and over again. Then you helplessly watch your children become sick, fade away, and die. Your agony will know no end. You will look forward to your own death as a form of relief from your physical and mental suffering.

Given the overconsumption and wastefulness of over 1 billion of the world's population and the total number of mouths to feed, the strain on the Earth's natural resources, especially fertile land, is enormous. Out of a total land mass of 57.5 million square miles (or 149 million square kilometers), only a little over 12 million square miles (or 30 million square kilometers) constitute arable land, that is, land on which things can grow or are presently growing. Of this, every year 38,600 square miles (or 100,000 square kilometers) are lost in various ways. At the present time, an estimated 7.7 million square miles (or 20 million square kilometers) of the planet's arable land is being used. A good portion of this land is depleted or of poor quality. How will we be able to feed further billions of people in the not-too-distant future?

Partly because of the scarcity of useable land, clear-cutting forests (which also is profitable) proceeds almost unchecked. Deforested areas are often promptly transformed into grazing land for the large herds of livestock that can then be converted into meat and monetary profit. Cattle consume huge amounts of crops, specifically corn. More than 1.2 billion acres (or 1.87 million square miles) are seeded with crops for feeding the over 1 billion heads of cattle on this planet of which, in turn, humanity consumes about 300 million tons every year—an absolutely mind-boggling figure.

Just as mind-boggling is the fact that Americans consume annually c. 275 pounds of meat per person, Canadians about 238 pounds, while the Chinese eat roughly 115 pounds each per year, as compared to Indians, who consume c. 11.4 pounds per person per year. Regrettably, meat consumption is rising in India, as the country's expanding middle class is moving away from its traditional vegetarian diet, thinking that meat eating befits their social status and elevates it further.

At the risk of overwhelming our readers with too many figures, we must bring to mind that to produce a single pound of beef is said to take 2,500 gallons of water and 17 times more land than is required for plant-based food production to feed humanity. In other words, a nonvegetarian diet is far from optimal. Even worse, cattle are responsible for 4.3 billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalents (mostly from methane) every year, which amounts to 18 percent of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. The meat industry, which in the United States alone annually rakes in about \$100 billion from growing and “processing” animals, is predictably silent about this highly undesirable

effect. If we were to trust that industry's slick advertising, which we definitely ought not to do, we would think that livestock lives an idyllic, pain-free life under the blue sky and warm Sun, happily munching on clover and lush grass. The exact opposite is the truth and is one of the saddest aspects of modern life.

The brutality of the meat industry is largely hidden from the consumer's view. Meat is hygienically presented and packaged in stores as if it were some other consumer product. Whenever exposés are published, they seldom make it into the mass media and are quickly forgotten. Most individuals would be horrified if they knew the level of pain and suffering that livestock (including poultry) must endure because of our appetite for meat. Because of radical organizations like PETA, we are at least periodically reminded of the large-scale suffering inflicted by humans on animals around the world.<sup>4</sup> Yet, their work, like the work of other animal-rights organizations, has in our opinion not made a significant enough difference.

If you prefer a gentler approach to learning about animals—their sentience and individuality—we can heartily recommend Jeffrey Masson's *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon*<sup>5</sup>, Marc Bekoff's *The Emotional Lives of Animals*<sup>6</sup>, and Ethan Smith's *Building an Ark*<sup>7</sup>. These books include many touching episodes that, if the reader is at all capable of empathy, will undoubtedly open his or her heart to animals in a big or bigger way. While the ranks of vegetarians in the so-called developed countries are slowly swelling—probably about 1 percent of the Western population now—often the motivation for discontinuing their meat-eating habit is not any great concern for animals but for their own health. We see this, however, as a beginning. Often, our own suffering serves as a gateway to a greater sensitivity toward the suffering of others.

Nowadays most meat that can be purchased over the counter contains synthetic hormones and thus is really unfit for human consumption. Also, various studies have shown that frozen red meat contains sodium nitrite, which makes meat look fresh but is a likely carcinogenic. Monosodium glutamate, which is added to all sorts of meat products, is likewise dangerous to consumers. Thus, meat eating has been related to a variety of diseases, notably heart disease, stroke, and certain types of cancer.<sup>8</sup> More and more physicians are open to recommending a meat-reduced or even meat-free diet.



From the perspective of the Dharma, the consumption of meat and fish is a moral problem, because it entails great suffering for animals. Some people who would not dream of eating meat still think of fish as perfectly edible creatures. Apart from the fact that the rivers and the ocean are heavily polluted and many kinds of fish contain high levels of mercury and thus have become a health hazard, fish also have been shown to be sensitive to pain.<sup>9</sup> They are not automatons but sentient beings who deserve our regard and care.

The matter of eating meat and fish has become perhaps the single most controversial aspect of the Dharma for Western practitioners, who either like their meat and fish and resent being told to shed this habit or who have conscientiously adopted a vegetarian diet but watch Tibetan Buddhist monastics relish meat dishes. As Dharma practitioners of the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, we ourselves have been pained by the fact that many Tibetan teachers see nothing wrong with an omnivorous diet. We appreciate the opportunity to address this vital issue here.

Let's look at the legacy left by the Buddha himself. Given his diverse statements in the Pali Canon and elsewhere, no one can doubt that the Buddha was an immensely kind and caring person. This view also corresponds to the comments made about him in the Pali Canon and other scriptures. According to the Buddha's own words,<sup>10</sup> he came into the world for the welfare and happiness of all beings. He did not keep enlightenment for himself but out of compassion started to teach others, so that they too may become enlightened. Having completely conquered all the negative tendencies of his own mind, he was able to teach without creating new fetters for himself.

There always seem to have been skeptics and detractors who were eager to question the Buddha's compassion or his lifestyle. As told in one of the Pali discourses,<sup>11</sup> at one time a certain Asibandhakaputta asked the Buddha a question that has a rather modern ring to it: How was it possible for the Buddha, who preached compassion for everyone, to go on his daily alms round with a large group of monks when the town of Nalanda was stricken by drought? With his usual great equanimity, the Buddha replied that going back ninety-one eons in his mind, he could not find a single family who had been disadvantaged by giving alms. On the contrary, the predictable karmic result of generosity was abundance in a future life. In the case of those who are suffering from

poverty, however, he could point to eight sources: a ruler, a thief, fire, flood, the unavailability of stored goods, misguidance, abandoning work, or a destructive family member.

Furthermore, even though fully enlightened, the Buddha is known to have practiced the four Immeasurables or Brahmic Abidings (*brahma-vihara*) consisting in the intense meditative projection of friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity into all directions and toward all beings, and he recommended the same practice to his disciples. His mind was firmly settled in the pristine virtue of nonharming (*ahimsa*). One of the Buddha's discourses records an incident in which a monk was bitten by a snake because, as the Buddha calmly explained to the victim, that he had failed to radiate kindness.<sup>12</sup>

Just how seriously the Buddha took the virtue of nonharming can be gauged from another anecdote related in the *Vinaya-Pitaka*, the Basket of Rules.<sup>13</sup> While staying at Rajagriha, a favorite place of the Buddha, the monks built numerous grass huts on the slopes of Vulture's Peak. At the end of the rainy season, they carefully dismantled their huts. One monk, Dhaniya, decided to stay on. During his round of begging for alms, village women took his hut apart for grass and firewood. Dhaniya rebuilt his hut, and again upon returning from his regular alms round, he found it completely gone. After this happened a third time, Dhaniya, a former potter, decided to construct a more permanent and brightly colored hut out of baked mud. When the Buddha came across it at the next rainy season, he promptly had the monks demolish the hut and reprimanded Dhaniya for using mud as a building material, because it was the home of numerous small creatures. He proscribed the construction of huts made from mud, making this a major breach of the moral rules. He instituted a good many other rules protecting the animal kingdom, and numerous utterances also attest to his mindful sympathy for all human and nonhuman beings.

The Buddha disapproved of occupations that involve harming creatures, such as butchering, fishing, and hunting. He felt similarly about the occupations of jailor, executioner, or actions like cutting and flogging, as well as suicide or inciting to suicide. He carefully strained water before sipping it and asked his monastic community to do the same, lest one should accidentally destroy the life of a small creature. He also advised that one should eat only fruit that does not yet contain mature seed or has lost its seed

already. At one point during his teaching life, he instituted the new rule that monastics should not travel during the rainy season, because they might inadvertently wound or kill small creatures, like worms, that seek to escape the soaked soil.

The Buddha did not admit soldiers into the monastic fold of the Sangha, while the monastics were not allowed to dig up the ground for any reason. At the same time, however, the Buddha condoned the use of skins for covering oneself in cold regions. Knowing that he could not enforce among his lay followers any of the stricter rules he imposed on the monastics, the Buddha adopted a more lenient approach toward the laity.

What, then, do we know about the Buddha's attitude toward meat eating? On the occasion of yet another accusation against him at the hands of a member of the Jaina community, the Buddha clarified his views on receiving meat from a donor. Even though he decidedly condemned harming and killing, the Buddha explained that no blame was attached to a monastic or the donor for offering meat as alms providing the animal was not specifically maltreated and killed for that purpose. In other words, he deemed it allowable for a monastic to consume meat if he or she did not have visible or audible evidence or suspect that an animal had been killed to provide meat. Devadatta, the Buddha's sinister-minded cousin, urged him to ban meat altogether, but this the Buddha was unwilling to do, presumably because of his "middle path" orientation in all matters. He did, however, disallow the use of raw meat but then again advocated the use of meat and fish in the case of a sick individual.

All this came, frankly, as a shock to us. Originally, our information about this came chiefly from Arvind Kumar Singh's book *Animals in Early Buddhism*.<sup>14</sup> This publication also has a judicious review of the cause of the Buddha's terminal illness—probably dysentery—due to eating *sukara-maddava* or "boar tender." With reasonable plausibility and in line with the thinking of many other scholars, Singh explains this food, which was served by the metal worker Cunda, a lay disciple of the Buddha, not as being literally boar's flesh but as the kind of truffles that a wild boar might seek out.

In any case, we had pictured the Buddha as totally avoiding meat because of his strict rules relative to nonharming and killing. While we do trust and respect the Buddha's judgment that no karmic fallout derives from eating meat under the above

ethical stipulations, we feel that we have a special situation today that requires a careful reconsideration, for the following five reasons.

First, we know or can easily find out that most animals destined for the dinner plate are “factory farmed.” Second, we know or can easily find out that this involves a variety of cruel practices. Third, we know or can easily find out that the slaughter of animals involves much suffering for them. Fourth, we know or can easily find out that a meat diet is not optimal for our health and that there are many alternatives for it. Fifth, we know or can easily find out that in large numbers, as is the case nowadays, livestock is detrimental to the environment.

Our own primary consideration, however, is the pain and suffering caused to livestock (and poultry) in the course of farming and at the time of their inevitable slaughter. For this reason alone, we strongly feel, Dharma practitioners should unfailingly adopt a vegetarian diet. In this view, which we realize is not sufficiently popular in Buddhist circles, we are in the good company of great Dharma masters like the eighteenth-century Tibetan yogi Shabkar Tsogdruk Rangdrol, the twentieth-century Nyingma master Kyabje Chatral Rinpoche, and the spiritual head of the Karma Kagyu branch of Tibetan Buddhism H. H. the Karmapa XVII.

Shabkar, who gave up the widespread Tibetan habit of eating meat when he was thirty-one and who would not even consume the meat of an animal who had died of natural causes, wrote in *The Faults of Eating Meat*:

The eating of the flesh and blood of beings once our parents,  
This evil food intensifies desire, which is samsara’s<sup>15</sup> root,  
It cuts away compassion, root of Dharma.  
Therefore all the faults that come from its consumption  
I here again repeat in verse and tuneful song.

.....

There is no doubt that eating meat brings harm  
To other beings’ lives.  
No other food brings so much death.  
Far worse than alcohol therefore is meat,

Which harms to such degree the lives of other beings.  
This dreadful food therefore is to be shunned  
By anyone who is compassionate.<sup>16</sup>

Shabkar, in his own time, had heard all the excuses from meat eater for their taste for flesh. In his *Nectar of Immortality*, he even specifically addressed the popular Tantric explanation that meat eating could benefit the slaughtered animal by blessing it with mantras and visualizations. He bluntly commented: “[T]heir actions are wholly wrong.”<sup>17</sup> For eaters of meat or fish, Shabkar foresaw only a terrible destiny after death. His dire warnings may not convince modern readers, who generally dismiss the twin ideas of karma and reincarnation. They certainly failed to change the mind and heart of most of his contemporaries and fellow travelers on the Mahayana path of compassion. Sincere Dharma practitioners, however, ought to heed Shabkar’s good counsel of shunning meat, which in today’s developed countries cannot even be deemed the kind of heroic act it once was in Tibet, a country of meager dietary resources. In our own time, it is relatively easy to adopt a balanced and wholesome vegetarian diet.

The widely respected and sagely Chatral Rinpoche, who was born in 1913, is famous for his strict vegetarian stance, which he adopted at the age of forty-seven, and for rescuing millions of animals every year. In an interview with Tibetan Volunteers for Animals given in Nepal in 2005, he remarked:

What a shame if even the lamas can’t give up meat! . . . Abstaining from meat is a means of attaining world peace.<sup>18</sup>

In January 2007, H. H. Orgyen Trinley Dorje, the Karmapa XVII, instructed all Kagyu monasteries to stop preparing, buying, or eating meat and for all his lay disciples to stop trading in meat. He, moreover, in no uncertain terms announced that anyone drinking alcohol or eating meat as part of the traditional tsok offering ceases to be part of the Karmapa’s lineage. This was a major proclamation by the young tulku<sup>19</sup> of the previous, much-loved Karmapa XVI, who had left his body with full yogic control in 1981, which hopefully will have a lasting impact.<sup>20</sup> H. H. Orgyen Trinley Dorje’s,

Shabkar's, Chatral Rinpoche's, and the Gyalwang Karmapa's vigorous advocacy of a non-meat diet is firmly rooted in the Mahayana tradition, which emphasizes compassion toward all beings and which derives its authenticity from authoritative Mahayana works like the *Lankavatara-Sutra* (Sayings on the Descent to Lanka), the *Mahaparinirvana-Sutra* (Sayings on the Great Extinction), the *Angulimala-Sutra* (Sayings on Angulimala),<sup>21</sup> and the *Saddharmasmrityupasthana-Sutra* (Sayings on Close Mindfulness of the True Teaching)—all scriptures with which Shabkar appears to have been thoroughly familiar.

Returning to the problems of our own era, we must next consider crops and the unsightly underbelly of industrial agriculture, which is agriculture pursued for profit in the biggest possible way, as an intensively mechanized affair involving heavy equipment and the toxic products of the petrochemical industry. This is another giant industry that in 2006 generated \$55 billion in revenue in the United States alone, while wreaking unparalleled havoc with the environment. In its agricultural applications, the purpose of the petrochemical industry is to extract as much food as possible from the soil, which, because of the systematic overuse of chemical fertilizers, is everywhere becoming rapidly depleted and in fact is yielding less and less.

Trying to make a living and paying off their bank loans, many North American farmers become unhappy participants in the aggressive agribusiness. In so-called underdeveloped countries, often misguided governmental policies and pressure from local racketeers paid off by transnational chemical giants are forcing poor farmers to follow suit. Around the world, every year some 145 million tons of fertilizers and other chemicals are dumped on arable land in the misplaced hope of making it more productive and therefore more profitable. The actual outcome of this approach is to make agriculture unsustainable in the long run.

The problems with chemical fertilizers are numerous. They progressively deplete rather than enrich the soil, invite rather than deter so-called pests, produce feebler crops, generate lots of greenhouse gases in their production, and involve all sorts of toxins, which kill small creatures intentionally or inadvertently, as well as adversely affect the health of farmers and the end consumer. Moreover, in producing phosphate fertilizers, the chemical industry is left with mountains of phosphogypsum, which must be stored safely

because of its radium content. As if this were not enough, fertilizers all too often end up in waterways and ultimately in the ocean, where they lead to dead zones. We would do well to recall the eloquent words of Rachel Carson, the intrepid pioneer of the environmental movement who first exposed the hazards of chemical substances used in agriculture, in households, and elsewhere, and whose own health succumbed to them prematurely:

The new environmental health problems are multiple—created by radiation in all its forms, born of the never-ending stream of chemicals of which pesticides are a part, chemicals now pervading the world in which we live, acting upon us directly and indirectly, separately and collectively. Their presence casts a shadow that is no less ominous because it is formless and obscure, no less frightening because it is simply impossible to predict the effects of lifetime exposure to chemical and physical agents that are not part of the biological experience of man.<sup>22</sup>

To maximize profit, the agribusiness has introduced two myopic and morally reprehensible practices into farming. One is monocrop agriculture, which is particularly liable to crop failure from so-called pests or drought. The other is the use of biogenetically engineered crops, which do not reproduce. Every year, farmers have to purchase new seeds—a highly profitable business for agricultural corporations like Monsanto, which has an annual revenue of \$7.6 billion. It is easy to see how this gives transnational corporations economic and political leverage not only over individual farmers but potentially over entire nations. Little wonder that farmers particularly in the so-called Third World are vigorously resisting “terminator seeds” and monocrop farming methods. Nevertheless, bioengineered crops are increasingly used in developing nations that cannot see, or refuse to acknowledge, that they have made a pact that is proving damaging to the land and sooner or later will prove injurious to their people.

On the other side, it is encouraging that organic farming is on the increase around the world and that the sale of organic foods worldwide is also increasing every year. In 2002, the figures for the United States were c. \$11 billion, for Canada c. \$900 million,

and for the whole of Europe c. \$10 billion. While it is costly for farmers to switch from conventional chemical to organic farming, once the switch has been fully made, organic farming is more cost effective, restorative of the environment, all-round healthier, and very much saner. But many farmers, even with subsidies in certain countries, are both conservative and financially marginal, which renders it difficult for them to make this switch. Also, farmers—the food producers for the world—are a dying breed. The young are disinclined to take up farming. In his book *Peak Everything*, Richard Heinberg commented on this trend as follows:

The proportion of principal farm operators younger than 35 has dropped from 15.9 percent in 1982 to 5.8 percent in 2002. Of all the dismal statistics I know, these are surely among the most frightening. Who will be growing our food 20 years from now?<sup>23</sup>

Farming is a form of gambling at the best of times. The destabilization of the weather due to global warming and the precipitous shortage of fresh water make farming more challenging than ever. Farmers have to be willing to take risks and become increasingly knowledgeable. Yet, this occupation is absolutely vital to the rest of us. Who indeed will produce our food in the coming decades, and which regions will be fertile and stable enough for farming? We may learn the answer in our life time.

In the meantime, we can contribute toward sustainability by buying *organic* food and by doing so as *locally* as possible in order to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from transportation. On average, the food a North American consumes has to travel 1500–2500 miles (or 2,500–4,000 kilometers) from farm to dinner plate. By buying locally grown food, we are also doing our part in undermining the ongoing globalization of what has been called “McWorld,” or the commercial unification and standardization of the entire planet under the control of a handful of huge transnational conglomerates, such as the U.S. corporation Altria Group (with net revenues of over \$80 billion) or the German corporation Siemens (with net sales of nearly \$100 billion).

Useable land that is not used for growing forests, grazing, or farming is paved over. Every year, urban sprawl claims hundreds of thousands square miles of our planet.



In the United States alone, the network of roads amounts to over 3.7 million miles (or 6 million kilometers). These are traveled by 243 million passenger cars and about 5 million trucks, and their combined annual greenhouse gas emissions amount to over 300 million tons. Psychologically urban sprawl is just as devastating. In his commendable book *It's a Sprawl World After All*, Douglas E. Morris, an American who has experienced the life-style of seven different countries, commented:

A field of study called environmental psychology has established a clear link between the places where people live and how they behave. These findings bolster the understanding that in the short period of time since its emergence in 1945, suburban sprawl has transformed America from “one nation, indivisible” into a polarized and fragmented society. Secluded in our suburban homes, we now live in a society of strangers. . . . America’s oppressive levels of violent behavior create a pervasive sense of foreboding that permeates the very essence of everyday life.<sup>24</sup>

And the rest of the world is following America’s bad example, as in so many other respects.

Urban environments have another highly undesirable aspect to them, which is the amount of garbage produced by their inhabitants. Everywhere the garbage mountains are increasing and are increasingly becoming a big problem that is both costly and environmentally destructive. To quote figures for the United States again. The annual amount of garbage is reckoned at 245 million tons, which is nearly 1 ton per person per year. Garbage disposal has become a profitable business, consisting in passing the buck from city to city, state to state, or country to country.

Twelve percent of garbage in the United State consists of plastic items. Plastic has become virtually omnipresent in our far-flung civilization. It is impossible to go shopping without coming back with a heap of plastic, usually in the form of packaging. The only way to avoid having plastic pile up on us, we found, is to avoid shopping and start growing our own food as much as possible. Even then, the netting used to keep deer from

devastating one's crop is made out of plastic, the bucket that contains water is also plastic, and so are a dozen other items.

In 2006, the United States alone produced 30 million tons of plastic pellets, which are then transformed into garden tools, household gadgets, toys, and furniture—not necessarily in this order. Apart from the toxicity of plastic products, they take hundreds, possibly thousands, of years to disintegrate. Worst of all, they are fatal to water creatures, because plastic garbage has the uncanny tendency of floating down rivers and ending up in the ocean where it slowly crumbles into ever smaller pieces.<sup>25</sup>

The most treacherous kind of waste, however, stems from nuclear power stations. Thus far, we have managed to accumulate hundreds of thousands of tons of radioactive waste, and there is no viable solution to this mounting problem in sight. In the meantime, burial and storage sites leak their lethal content into the environment, and ageing nuclear installations are a growing threat to the population. The nuclear accidents of Three Mile Island in 1979 and of Chernobyl in 1986 should be vivid reminders of what can happen, but they are not. Radioactive waste is a terrible legacy to leave future generations, and they will have to deal with that deathly legacy, because plutonium-239, for instance, will be dangerous for some 250,000 years. The destructiveness and durability of radioactive materials notwithstanding, governments intent on ridding themselves of their nuclear mountains are perched to bury their radioactive waste in deep shafts that earthquakes could easily breach or, even worse, to dump it at the ocean floor in supposedly stable geological structures.

Only someone trapped in his or her own belief system can be so self-deluded and be so out of touch with reality that their actions become dangerous to all others. In his remarkable book *Staying Alive*, the well-known psychiatrist and Dharma practitioner Roger Walsh addressed this problem as follows:

While all beliefs are powerful, those we hold about ourselves are especially so. When we believe something about ourselves we make it part of ourselves. For our self-image, what we think we are, is a construction of our beliefs. These beliefs are selected on the basis of our past, but they themselves select our future, telling us not only what we are but also what

we can and cannot become. . . . Faulty beliefs about beliefs can be downright dangerous. When people forget that their ideologies and political systems are beliefs and mistake them for “the truth,” then they become willing to fight, kill, and die for them.<sup>26</sup>

When the high-tech nations of the world rushed into using nuclear fission in the production of weapons and then in the generation of electricity for peaceful means, the scientists demonstrated a singular tunnel vision resembling certain states of insanity. The same acute shortsightedness seems to still hold them in their grip. In attempting to cater to short-term needs, scientists and the politicians supporting and pressuring them appear intent on ensuring humanity’s rapid demise. They behave like a crazy parent who hands his toddler a loaded gun.

Here the remarks by Eric Hoffer, who voluntarily chose the life of a longshoreman and has made a name for himself through several books—including *The True Believer* and *The Ordeal of Change*—seem highly pertinent. Eric Hoffer wrote:

The creativeness of the intellectual is often a function of a thwarted craving for purposeful action and privileged rank. . . . The advancement of the masses is a mere by-product of the uniquely human fact that discontent is at the root of the creative process: that the most gifted members of the human species are at their creative best when they cannot have their way, and must compensate for what they miss by realizing and cultivating their capacities and talents.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps, if those who champion nuclear energy and nuclear arms were mandatorily obliged to join clean-up teams at sites of radioactive accidents, they might change their views on the technological use of nuclear fission. They might begin to associate radioactive fallout with human and nonhuman suffering and even envision a healthier and saner world for everyone. The ability for empathy and sympathy often manifests through hard knocks of life. As human beings, we do however have the faculty of insight and imagination, which can spare us actual, painful dress rehearsals and allow

us to project ahead and ponder the consequences of our actions. This fundamental capability of our human species most certainly underlies all Dharma practice. By simply adding 2 and 2 together, we can map out our future destiny based on our present destiny, which is the outcome of our past thoughts, attitudes, and actions. In principle, the same capability underlies science, which celebrates rationality but doesn't always use it beyond the narrow confines of scientific work. But surely, rationality must hold good in all areas of life, including practical daily living.

The kind of nightmarish world we have created would have been impossible during the Buddha's era. It would in fact have been unthinkable. It is safe to say that had we followed the Buddha's ethics, which places a premium on nonharming and simplicity, our human civilization would never have become the lethal virus it is today for the entire planet. As Dharma practitioners, we cannot bury our heads in ostrich-like fashion in the sand of consumerism. We must acknowledge and understand the enormous problems of our society and the environment. This entails that we must remain informed and bravely face the bad news, as the responsible media and scientific reports deliver it to us. We personally see this as an integral part of the Bodhisattva path. As Shantideva said:

What is valor? It is skillful striving. What are said to be its opposite? It is lethargy, energy associated with unwholesome things, despondency, and self-depreciation.<sup>28</sup>

When we see the havoc around us, which by all accounts will only get worse, we ought definitely not to succumb to dejection. Dejection is a kind of self-cherishing, which for a Dharma practitioner is unacceptable. We know from the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination that the sense of "I" is only apparent, a habitual but ill-founded mental construct that can and must be overcome. The heroic stance of the ego-transcending Bodhisattva is maintained by equanimity, by gazing upon everyone and everything with an even eye, by seeing all beings as our mothers or fathers, and by understanding everything as having Buddha Nature. In Shantideva's *Bodhicaryavatara* we can read:

Thus one should first make an effort to contemplate the equality between oneself and other beings because all experience joy and sorrow.

Just as the body is to be nurtured as a single whole (*eka*), even though it has many parts like hands etc., likewise this entire variegated but indivisible world is [of the single] nature of joy and sorrow.<sup>29</sup>

Just as I am apt to protect myself against unpleasantness, I will cultivate a caring attitude, a compassionate attitude toward others.<sup>30</sup>

Compassion must become our second nature, like an automatic reflex action, except that it is accompanied by mindfulness. A caring mother naturally embraces her child with love and joy. The Bodhisattva path calls for the same attitude in regard to all beings, without exception. For the Dharma practitioner, this is no mere sentimentalism but a spontaneous expression of his or her bodhicitta, or mind inclining toward enlightenment for the sake of all beings.

Such bodhicitta begins as a small trickle and, with appropriate practice, becomes a veritable torrent. Accordingly, the Mahayana and Vajrayana scriptures speak of two levels of the “mind toward enlightenment.” The first level is relative bodhicitta, which is a sustained conscious effort to attain enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. The second level is absolute bodhicitta, which has no graduation, no shading, but is identical with invariable enlightenment itself.

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 6

1. Patrul Rinpoche, *Kunzang Lama'i Shelung: The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, Transl. by the Padmakara Translation Group (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994), p. 62. The nineteenth-century Nyingma master Patrul Rinpoche was an accomplished meditator, who wandered from cave to cave and whose mind was entirely given to contemplating love and compassion for all beings.

2. Shantideva's *Bodhicaryavatara* (7.25). Translation from the Sanskrit by Georg Feuerstein.

3. See Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, new ed. 1986). Ehrlich reiterated his conclusions in his subsequent book *The Population Explosion* (New York: Touchstone Books, repr. 1991).

4. As an alternative to the rather graphic PETA documentaries, we can recommend Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002).

5. Jeffrey Masson, *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals* (London: Vintage, 2004).

6. Bekoff, *The Emotional Lives of Animals: A Leading Scientist Explores Animal Joy, Sorrow, and Empathy—and Why They Matter*. Foreword by Jane Goodall (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 2007).

7. Ethan Smith with Guy Dauncey's *Building an Ark: 101 Solutions to Animal Suffering* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2007).

8. See John Robbins, *A New Diet for America* (Tiburon, Calif.: H. J. Kramer, repr. 1998).

9. There is now good neuroanatomical evidence that fish feel pain—which really shouldn't come as a surprise. See, e.g., V. A. Braithwaite, "Fish Pain Perception," [www.aquanet.ca/english/research/fish/vb.pdf](http://www.aquanet.ca/english/research/fish/vb.pdf).

10. See the *Anguttara-Nikaya* (1.8). Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara-Nikaya* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 1999), p. 37.

11. See the *Gamani-Samyutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (42). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 1336ff.

12. See the *Anguttara-Nikaya* (2.72–73).

13. See the *Parajika II* of the *Vinaya-Pitaka*. Dhaniya also got in trouble over lying and stealing planks from the royal timber yard for constructing a more permanent hut.

14. See Arvind Kumar Singh, *Animals in Early Buddhism* (Jawahar Nagar: Eastern Book Linkers, 2006).

15. The Sanskrit word *samsara* means literally “confluence” and refers to the world of change in which we live.

16. Cited in Shabkar, *Food of the Bodhisattvas: Buddhist Teachings on Abstaining From Meat*. Trans. by the Padmakara Translation Group (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2004), pp. 94–95.

17. Shabkar, *Food of the Bodhisattvas*, p. 106.

18. Cited at [www.shabkar.org](http://www.shabkar.org), a nonsectarian website dedicated to vegetarianism as a way of life for all Buddhists.]

19. The Tibetan word *tulku* means something like “pure embodiment” and refers to the conscious reincarnation of a high lama. Such lamas are “confirmed” by other great masters.
20. On the astonishing yogically controlled death of the Gyalwang Karmapa XVI, see Reginald Ray, *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2001), pp. 462ff.
21. Prior to his conversion to the Dharma, Angulimala or “Finger Garland” was a murderer who collected his victim’s fingers and whose grisly story is related already in the *Angulimala-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (86).
22. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring: The Classic That Launched the Environmental Movement* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, repr. 2002; first publ. 1962), p. 188.
23. Richard Heinberg, *Peak Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Declines* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2007).
24. Douglas E. Morris, *It’s a Sprawl World After All* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2005), pp.2-3.
25. See our comments about the Subtropical South Pacific Gyre.
26. Roger Walsh, *Staying Alive: The Psychology of Human Survival* (Boulder, Colo.: Shambhala Publications, 1984), p. 24.
27. Eric Hoffer, *The Ordeal of Change* (New York: Perennial Library, repr. 1963), p. 47.
28. Shantideva’s *Bodhicaryavatara* (7.2). Translation from the Sanskrit by Georg Feuerstein.
29. *Op. cit.*, verses 9.90–91.
30. *Op. cit.*, verse 9.110.



## *CHAPTER 7*

# **DIGGING DEEP**

In the course of its development, humankind has not only transformed the land surface of the Earth but also has prodded, probed, and made significant changes under the ground. If agriculture scrapes the surface, mining can go miles deep. Recently, a Canadian company announced that it had found a way to mine even the ocean floor—a technology that, should it go ahead, will predictably devastate vast areas of an already fragile ecosystem. The Buddha looked askance at even tilling the soil, because this inevitably kills small creatures. What would he have said about mining? We actually know the answer to this question, because mining involves acts that are censured for monastics, such as destroying vegetation, poking holes in the ground, using water or wood that contains small life forms, the construction of large buildings, and not least usury (most mining companies are publicly traded). In many instances, mining enterprises are involved in deliberate public deception and worse, which would be considered a major breach of the moral disciplines for Dharma practitioners.

Mining has a very long history and dates back to the Paleolithic when early humanity clamored for flint to produce tools and weapons and hematite, which, ground down, produced the pigment ochre. Our remote ancestors used whatever techniques they could muster to get at these resources. In the Neolithic era, humanity added to its mining repertoire quarrying for stone (for housing and chorals), copper and quartz (for tools and weapons), and turquoise and lapis lazuli (for jewelry). Humankind gradually extended its appetite for mining to ever more mineral resources. However, until the eighteenth century—when Nature and the human personality came to be equated to clockworks, which set the stage for industrialization—mines were few and far between. The nineteenth century introduced a new and, we think, fatal change. As Lewis Mumford put it:

So immersed are we, even at this late date, in the surviving medium of paleotechnic beliefs that we are not sufficiently conscious of their profound abnormality. Few of us correctly evaluate the destructive imagery that the mine carried into every department of activity, sanctioning the anti-vital and the anti-organic. Before the nineteenth century the mine had, quantitatively speaking, only a subordinate part in man's industrial life. By the middle of the century it had come to underlie every part of it. And the spread of mining was accompanied by a general loss of form throughout society: a degradation of the landscape and no less brutal disordering of the communal environment.<sup>1</sup>

At the unconscious core of our modern civilization is a profound wound stemming from a mental error: the reductionist mistake that we are somehow less than human—robotic creatures—and that our planet's biosphere is designed solely to serve our robotic purposes, to the exclusion of the welfare of all other creatures. Of course, few people would want to admit to this warped but hidden self-image. We also readily admit that our articulation of the situation is intentionally radical. But consider this: at the biological level, we have very strong survival programs running, which only the most mindful and disciplined individual can modulate—the sexual drive being an obvious aspect. At the basic psychological level, we have other programs running, which psychologists have labeled “needs,” or “subconscious impulses” and “neuroses.” At the social level, we have yet other programs in operation, which tend to govern our interactions with each other. We give these programs such great latitude that we generally don't focus on the higher or deeper potential within us.

The Dharma takes humanity's basic dysfunctionality into account when it places ignorance/delusion, anger, and greed at the pivot of conventional human behavior. These three motivating factors are graphically depicted at the center of the well-known Buddhist image of the Wheel of Life in the shape of a pig (ignorance), a snake (anger), and a cock (greed)—a symbolism that, admittedly, is uncomplimentary to the three animals involved: pigs are cleaner than their reputation, snakes have a useful function within their ecological niche, and without cocks there would be no fertilized eggs. This necessary

correction notwithstanding, the Wheel of Life is a compelling depiction of the life of the ordinary worldling and a blatant reminder that what we cannot transcend, we must repeat—endlessly.

There are three circles to the Wheel of Life graphic. The innermost circle is composed of the three creatures mentioned above. The second circle indicates the six realms of worldly existence through which beings can cycle life after life: hell beings, ancestral ghosts, animals, humans, demigods, and deities in ascending order. The third circle suggests that beings can either rise or fall in their progression through one life after another. The fourth and outermost circle shows the twelve links of co-dependent arising represented by symbolic imagery as follows: primal ignorance (a blind person), karmic factors (a potter making pots), consciousness (a monkey in a tree), the five skandhas (a ferry with a ferryman), the six sense bases comprising the five senses and the mind (an empty house), touch (a couple), feeling (an arrow piercing an eye), desire (a person drinking), upadana (a man or a monkey gathering fruit), becoming (a woman and a child), birth (childbirth), and, finally, old age and death (a man carrying a corpse). This illustration depicts the karmic “programming” of an individual’s life according to the Dharma.

It is easy to see how our multilevel “programming,” or conditioning could lead someone to believe that this is all there is to us, that we are in fact robots. While it is true that the unreflective person lives predominantly under the spell of his or her genetic, somatic-experiential, psychological, and social programming, humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have clearly opened the window onto the vaster human potential. Many of the insights of these disciplines into what Abraham Maslow called the farther reaches of human nature were inspired by and convey the wisdom teachings of the East, especially the Dharma.<sup>2</sup>

The Buddha’s teaching has transcendence at its core. It maps out a path of what Maslow styled “meta-motivation.” In his terms, we might call a Dharmic kind of life as “plateau living,” which taps into our full potential, notably our untold spiritual possibilities. This includes the realization of latent psychophysical possibilities, which are fully acknowledged in the great spiritual traditions of the world, including Buddhism where they are known as iddhis or siddhis, that is, so-called paranormal abilities. Lest we

should shrug off this side of traditional spirituality as mere fantasy or myth-making, we ought to carefully consider the existing parapsychological literature and especially Michael Murphy's mind-opening monograph *The Future of the Body*.<sup>3</sup> These abilities and other transpersonal capacities play an important role in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, where the Bodhisattva employs them in order to better assist beings in overcoming their state of suffering.

From a dharmic perspective, human life is incredibly precious, precisely because it gives us the possibility of great inner growth. But in order to resonate with this view, we must be willing and able to see the common trajectories of our personal and collective lives very clearly. This involves understanding humanity's dysfunctional relationship to Nature.

It is our warped and deficient self-image that blinds us, among other things, to the destructive realities behind our modern technology and the twisted ideology of "bigger and better" supporting it. It does not allow us to see the devastating effects of overconsumption and the out-of-balance technological means that make overconsumption possible. It clouds our moral vision relative to the existence of worldwide injustice and hunger. We ought to bear this larger picture in mind when considering mining in this chapter.

It all started with open-pit mining, which involved scraping off more and more soil in order to get to the desired mineral. In due course this led to the various types of sub-surface mining calling for tunneling down into the bowels of the Earth. Presently, the deepest mines are gold mines operated in South Africa by the transnational corporation AngloGold-Ashanti, which has 21 branches on four continents. It has drawn the attention of Human Rights Watch for its allegedly exploitative treatment of locals in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. According to the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, in 2005, this corporation even admitted to paying extortion money in order to gain access to certain gold mines.

One of AngloGold-Ashanti's South African mines—at TauTona—is over 2.2 miles (or 3.6 kilometers) deep, and is currently being extended even further. At the time of writing, gold prices are at a premium, and companies, motivated by the profit motif (read: greed), are eager to dig deeper and deeper to follow rich ores of the precious metal.

But deep mining has its own risks, which include rockfalls, toxic gas explosions, earth tremors, and flooding. Miners are forced to work in very high, debilitating temperatures and at great risk to themselves. In October 2007, 3,200 miners were trapped deep underground for three days before, fortunately, they could be rescued. Not so fortunate were the over 6,000 miners that lost their lives in Chinese mining operations in 2004 alone.

Apart from all this, which is regrettable enough, mining in general is damaging to the environment because of the mountains of debris, processing methods (which often involve toxic runoffs), and transportation (which produces high CO<sub>2</sub> emissions) involved in this industry. In the meanwhile, the Earth's mineral resources are dwindling, some of them—like oil—rather rapidly.

Oil, on which our contemporary high-tech civilization depends, can be considered one of the most damaging pollutants of all. Burning any kind of fossil fuel (oil, coal, gas) creates greenhouse gases and therefore is hard on the environment. Every year, humanity adds some 30 billion tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere. We generate CO<sub>2</sub> by generating electricity in fossil-fuel-based power stations, burning wood fires (especially in the so-called Third World), operating motor vehicles, shipping, as well as simply exhaling air from our lungs.

Oil, which is almost as dirty as coal, accounts for over 40 percent of carbon emissions worldwide. The biggest oil-consuming nations—the United States, the European Union, Japan, China, and India—all have a significant deficit between oil production and consumption and therefore must import this “black gold” in vast amounts, generally from the Middle East (notably Saudi Arabia). The extraction, transportation, and refining of crude oil is polluting and so are its diverse uses. It takes over 80 million barrels (or c. 2,500 gallons) of oil per day to keep our modern civilization afloat.

An estimated 13 million tons of oil—of various kinds—end up in the ocean with predictable disastrous consequences for marine life. For decades, the oil industry believed—or at least advertised—that the world was abundantly rich in oil reserves. This has turned out to be somewhat illusory, because of overestimated reserves. In 2004, there was a steep rise in oil prices, pushing the cost of a barrel above \$50 (currently the barrel stands at \$100). The public belatedly began to wonder what was happening, and experts

started to talk about the phenomenon of Peak Oil, which is the point at which global production can no longer keep up with demand.

At this point, oil companies and entire nations are scrambling to secure as much of this resource as possible. In 2007, environmentally aware people watched with dismay the hunt for oil in Alberta's tar sands by oil companies from around the world. The tar sands, located in the north of the Canadian province of Alberta and covering an area of 54,440 square miles (or 141,000 square kilometers), are thought to contain almost as much petroleum as Saudi Arabia. To flush out one gallon of oil from the sand requires 4 gallons of water. The oil is so dirty that it generates five times as many greenhouse gas emissions as conventional oil to make it useable. As if this were not enough of a negative tally, the extraction process of open mining also is hugely destructive of the vegetation. In his bestselling book *Stupid to the Last Drop*, William Marsden called the tar sand mining in Alberta an "environmental Armageddon."<sup>4</sup>

Here we must know that British Petroleum (BP), which several years earlier had started to market itself as a wonderfully green corporation with the slogan "Beyond Petroleum" (BP), surprised the naïve by joining the international corporate chase in the tar sands, demonstrating that the policies of corporations (which are run by boards under pressure from investors) can change at a moment's notice when profitability is at stake.

Most experts are agreed that Peak Oil is about to happen any day now, if it hasn't happened already. Lester Brown, who for years has provided everyone with reliable annual information about the state of the world, observed in his book *Plan B 2.0*:

Oil has shaped our twenty-first century civilization, affecting every facet of the economy from the mechanization of agriculture to jet air travel. When production turns downward, it will be a seismic economic event, creating a world unlike any we have known during our lifetimes. Indeed, when historians write about this period in history, they may well distinguish between before peak oil (BPO) and after peak oil (APO).<sup>5</sup>

Oil will become scarcer and more and more expensive. Before long—since there is no credible alternative in sight—we will all have to leave our cars in the garage, stop

taking pleasure cruises and whizzing around the skies. More importantly, we will have to turn our thermostats up in summer and down in winter and cease expecting the range of food and other consumer articles to which we have been accustomed. Supermarkets on average stock about 30,000 items, and we can fully expect to find empty shelves and, in due course, no supermarkets at all.

In his gripping book *Peak Everything*, which is appropriately subtitled *Waking Up to the Century of Declines*, Richard Heinberg has included an imaginative “Letter From the Future” in which a denizen of the year 2107 addresses people of the year 2007. The fictional letter includes this wholly realistic statement:

You are living at the end of an era. Perhaps you cannot understand that. I hope that by the time you have finished reading this letter, you will.<sup>6</sup>

Recounting the history leading up to the twenty-first-century disaster, the old historian from the future continues:

In the era when I was born, commentators used to liken the global economy to a casino. . . . Early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the global casino went bust. Gradually, a new metaphor became operational. We went from global casino to village flea market.<sup>7</sup>

In *Peak Everything* and his other economy-related books, Heinberg managed to sum up our perilous situation very well. He and many others who have studied our world crisis in depth see very similar tragedies looming on the horizon: lack of adequate food and drinking water, life-threatening weather, collapse of the industrial complex, pandemics, and desperate resource wars with millions of victims. This is not science fiction. This is a rational extrapolation based on the current evidence. When you gamble in a casino, to use Brown’s metaphor, chances are that in the long or short run you will lose.

Fossil fuels—coal, oil, and natural gas—are all definitely running out all too soon, because of the world’s huge and accelerating demand for them. The production of other

vitaly important resources is anticipated to peak in short succession, which spells disaster. This includes fresh water and grain. Also, the extraction of metals and minerals, many of which are required by industry, is predicted to slow down. Yet, at the same time, as the population especially of the overconsuming part of the world grows, the demand for more energy will likewise increase: a formula for disaster. At the back of all of these threatening developments is the scenario of global warming with its foreseeable disastrous consequences, which we will address in the next chapter.

Here are some figures to put things into proper perspective. In 1990, the world mined an estimated 11 billion tons of stone, 9 billion tons of sand and gravel, 552 million tons of pig iron, 500 million tons of various kinds of clay, 191 million tons of salt, 28 million tons of potash, 18 million tons of aluminum, approximately 9 millions tons of copper, nearly 9 million tons of manganese, over 7 million tons of zinc, 216,000 tons of tin, 15,000 tons of silver, and 200 tons of gold.<sup>8</sup> Let's try to make at least one of these figures a bit more graphic: Eleven billion tons of stone translates into 2.2 billion dump trucks with a 5-ton payload and of roughly 23.5 feet in length, which lined up bumper to bumper would form a line long enough to go round the equator approximately 393 times—an absolutely staggering and crazy figure!

Just as crazy is the industrial mining practice, started in the 1970s, of what is called mountaintop removal, which consists in blowing mountain tops to smithereens in order to get at the metals and minerals (usually coal) buried in them. This practice, which radically changes the topology and ruthlessly destroys the local environment, truly demonstrates the aggressiveness and destructiveness of the mining industry. The devastation that is normally hidden from view is here exposed without apology. As if to applaud and encourage such horrible practices, many countries not only subsidize the mining industry but also give miners hefty tax exemptions.

We must draw special attention to uranium mining, which generally requires the disturbance of large volumes of rock and is considered highly dangerous for the miners because of the presence of radioactive radon gas. In 1999, the world mined over 34,000 tons of this fateful metal; today it is roughly 40,000 tons. Apart from the harmful impact on the environment of uranium mining, we ought to consider the dreadful effect of enriched uranium, as produced in the 440 nuclear power stations worldwide and as used



in military applications. Here craziness unquestionably reaches the level of insanity, first because of the great destructiveness of nuclear bombs and second because of scientists' utter cluelessness about how to dispose safely of radioactive waste.

Against this ugly and menacing backdrop of the systematic ravaging of Earth's natural resources by industry, humanity continues with its "business as usual" sleepwalk. Old mines continue to be exploited as much as possible and new ones are opened. They continue to deface the Earth and ruin the environment. Like other forms of industry, the mining industry is maintained by mass consumption. Mining, as we see it, is symbolic of the worst aspects of industrialization and mass production. It is a vivid testimony to the greed that powers much of our modern civilization.

While few business people would regard their core aspiration of making profit as a form of greed, we beg to differ. Only because we have institutionalized greed under the mercantile category of profit and because just about every member of our civilization thinks in monetary terms doesn't turn greed into something else, something nobler. The Dharma tells us that greed is an unwholesome emotion, which has unwholesome karmic consequences. Greed is basically inexhaustible. However many objects or experiences we accumulate in the quest to satisfy our "thirst," we will never be satisfied. Instead, our thirst is likely to grow and grow and grow.

Our consumer-oriented civilization revolves around the pivotal emotion of greed, manifesting in the insatiable impulse to acquire more and more. In his essay "Desire, Delusion, and DVDs," the American Buddhist meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein recollects the following story about H. H. the Dalai Lama:

Some time ago, his Holiness the Dalai Lama was giving a series of teachings in Los Angeles. Every day on his way from the hotel to where he was speaking, he was driven down a particular street filled with people selling all the latest high-tech gadgets. At first he just looked with interest at the different things in the windows as he passed by. By the end of the week, he found himself wanting things even though he didn't know what they were! Desire is *very* strong. It is hardwired into our biology as part of what helps us survive.<sup>9</sup>

Our contemporary civilization is designed to relentlessly stimulate our desire through packaging, “special offers,” and slick and often deceitful advertising. Unless we have penetrated the façade of consumerism, we are even made to feel inferior or guilty for not wanting a particular product or for saying “no” to consumerism altogether. Businesses don’t like a consumer who is noncovetous and content. The function of advertising is to destabilize us inwardly, with a promise that the advertised product or program will restore us to harmony and balance.

We must cultivate great mindfulness in the midst of all this onslaught on our senses and sensibilities. Our overconsuming society follows the exact opposite arc to the kind of voluntary simplicity adopted and recommended by the Buddha, who observed:

Those of great wealth and property,  
Even khattiyas who rule the country,  
Look at each other with greedy eyes,  
Insatiable in sensual pleasures.

Among these who have become so avid,  
Flowing along in the stream of existence,  
Who here have abandoned craving?  
Who in the world are no longer avid?<sup>10</sup>

According to the Pali Canon, a Brahmin named Esukari quizzed the Buddha about the Vedic ideal of wealth, which is specific to each of the four social estates—Brahmin (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (merchant), and Shudra (laborer).<sup>11</sup> The Buddha responded by calmly stating that the supramundane Dhamma [Dharma] was a person’s true wealth, regardless of his social status and material wealth. Furthermore, the Buddha emphasized that anyone is capable of cultivating wholesome states of mind—a mind devoid of greed, lust, and anger.

How can we rid ourselves of greed? When we go deep enough in our analysis of our covetous impulses, we will discover that at the bottom of it lies a profound

dissatisfaction with worldly life itself, which is unstable and unpredictable: Deep inside we know that conventional life will never be able to fulfill us and that we must dig into the layers of our own mind to learn what will quench our existential thirst.

In the Pali Canon, we find a wise discourse given by Mahakaccana at the request of the Buddha. At the end of the discourse, Ananda praised Mahakaccana's discourse to the Buddha thus:

Venerable sir, just as if a man exhausted by hunger and weakness came upon a honeyball, wherever he would taste it he would find a sweet delectable flavour; so too, venerable sir, any able-minded bhikkhu [monk], wherever he might scrutinize with wisdom the meaning of this discourse on the Dhamma, would find satisfaction and confidence of mind.<sup>12</sup>

By his silence the Buddha agreed with his cousin and disciple Ananda. Indeed, the satisfaction we seek but fail to find in worldly things, we can find by pondering and understanding the Dharma. It puts us in touch with the truth, which is inherently satisfactory to the open mind freed from the clutches of the ego.

Joseph Goldstein, who has taught insight meditation since 1974, made the following astute observation about the unwholesome mental state of greed:

Silence is another strong support for weakening greed. With relatively little eye contact and no talking, people feel less need to present themselves to other people. The whole self-image machine goes into slow motion.<sup>13</sup>

We started out the present book by emphasizing the healing power of silence. Formal meditation retreats, such as Goldstein had in mind when making the preceding comment, provide a structured environment in which silence, self-inspection, self-transcendence, and self-transformation are fostered. If done correctly, such retreats are always a confrontation with oneself, one's uninspected habits and motivations—the stuff we don't like to admit as present in ourselves but like to point out in others. As the

practice of silence quiets and fills our mind, we become increasingly freed from the iron grip of the ego and its multiple desires and aversions.

Another powerful means of undermining greed is the conscious practice of generosity, as it is developed on the path of the Bodhisattva. To quote Goldstein again:

Generosity enacts the quality of nongreed; it is a willingness to give, to share, to let go. It may be giving of time, energy, resources, love, and even in rare cases, one's own life for the benefit and welfare of others.

Generosity weakens the tendency of attachment and grasping and is intimately connected with the feeling of lovingkindness. People who experience the power and joy of generosity will also experience its effect on consuming. The cultivation of generosity offers a very strong antidote to the wanting mind and would be a powerful corrective if taken up in a widespread way across our culture.<sup>14</sup>

Our desiring nature is transcended the moment we abandon the artificial center of self—the “I”—which, like the erstwhile Berlin wall, makes a false and noxious divide between “us” and “them,” between us and everything else. Like the Berlin wall, which was smashed in 1989, we must dismantle the sense of I by coming to understand it as something that we *do* in every moment; something that is neither necessary nor productive of happiness but on the contrary causes us great suffering.

The pursuit of happiness, as it is guaranteed as a basic human right in the United States Declaration of Independence, has become largely demeaned as the pursuit of pleasure. It has undoubted value when understood as the urge to find lasting happiness, which cannot be found in the realms of conditional existence. If we wish to become deeply and lastingly happy, we must find silence and simplicity within us. We must stop exploiting Nature to yield ever more products thought valuable, worthwhile, profitable, or pleasurable by the conventional mind-set. Instead, we must retrieve from deep within us the joy of the unconditional, which is content with leaving things as they are, with regarding everything with an equal eye and with reverence. This is the sublime stage of

human development. This is human nature at its best. We agree with eco-philosopher Henryk Skolimowski:

[W]ho is the *anthropos*? A bio-machine? An egotistic, selfish, greedy, parasitic individual? Or the Buddha? The meaning of *anthropos* can be sublime and can be despicable. If we articulate our consciousness in the image of the Buddha, we can be proud of the *anthropos* in us.<sup>15</sup>

When we witness such global destructiveness as mining, it seems logical to call for a simpler way of life, which protects and preserves Nature and all her children and which uplifts human beings to the level of a Buddha. Those who chase the Will-o'-the-wisp of progress will no doubt dismiss this as outmoded Ludditism—and they would be right, minus the violence that was involved when those early-nineteenth-century British textile workers angrily destroyed manufacturing equipment that they felt was robbing them of their livelihood. In order to survive the coming environmental calamity, we must learn to simplify our lives, and do so very quickly. We must make our civilization sustainable, or it will be lost.

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 7

1. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego, Calif.: Harvest Books, repr. 1989), p. 450.
2. See Abraham Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking Press, repr. 1972).
3. See Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body: Explorations Into the Further Evolution of Human Nature* (Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, 1992). See also Roger

Walsh and Frances Vaughan, eds., *Paths Beyond Ego* (New York: J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993).

4. See William Marsden, *Stupid to the Last Drop: How Alberta is Bringing Environmental Armageddon to Canada (and Doesn't Seem to Care)* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2007).

5. Lester R. Brown, *Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), p. 21.

6. Richard Heinberg, *Peak Everything* (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2007), p. 173).

7. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

8. These figures can be found in Lester R. Brown's *State of the World 1992* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), p. 102.

9. Joseph Goldstein, "Desire, Delusion, and DVDs," in Stephanie Kaza, ed., *Hooked!* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2005), p. 17.

10. The *Devata-Samyutta-Sutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (71-72). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta-Nikaya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 103.

11. See the *Esukari-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (96). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2d ed. 2001), pp. 786–790.

12. Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, pp. 205–206.

13. Joseph Goldstein, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

15. Henryk Skolimowski, *The Participatory Mind: A New Theory of Knowledge and of the Universe* (New York: Arkana, 1994), p. 377.





## *CHAPTER 8*

# **A GATHERING STORM**

According to the Pali Canon, the Buddha addressed his son Rahula thus:

Rahula, develop meditation that is like air; for when you develop meditation that is like air, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain. Just as the air blows on clean things and dirty things, on excrement, urine, spittle, pus, and blood, and the air is not repelled, humiliated, and disgusted because of that, so too, Rahula, develop meditation that is like air; for when you develop meditation that is like air, arisen agreeable and disagreeable contacts will not invade your mind and remain.<sup>1</sup>

The Buddha's advice is, as usual, profound. It reflects, however, a time in history when the air was still so clean that it lent itself as an example for purity. If the Buddha were alive today, he would have to find another symbol for purity, for our atmosphere is heavily polluted. Yet, at the same time, the air can serve as a symbol for another significant fact: it is a great unifying environment. Through the atmosphere, whether clean or polluted, all breathing beings—plants, animals, and humans—are intimately connected. For, the molecules making up the air are engaged in a continuous dance that leads them around the world over and over again. Thus, every single human being alive today has breathed at least one molecule of the same air that the Buddha breathed over two and a half millennia ago. We can have the certainty that the air molecule entered and exited the Buddha's body through his breath mindfully.

As we have had to learn more recently but have not yet fully comprehended, the air is also the principal medium of global warming, today's greatest threat to the continuation of our biosphere in general and to the survival of human life in particular.

Global warming can be defined as a gradual rise in the *average* temperature of the Earth's atmosphere and ocean.

The mechanics of today's global warming is understood to be as follows: Pollution in the form of particulate matter, vapor, and so-called greenhouse gases (notably carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, ozone, methane, etc.) trap the Sun's heat between the ground and the polluted layer of the atmosphere. A related phenomenon, which is seldom mentioned, is global dimming, which was discovered by David Travis, a climatologist at the University of Wisconsin. He noticed that after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, when all air traffic over the United States was banned for three days, the absence of contrails from jet planes in the sky allowed more sunlight to reach the ground and raise the Earth's temperature by a whole degree Celsius in that short span of time. Thus, cleaning up the atmosphere alone and taking no steps to also drastically reduce consumption—ergo pollution—around the world would have an unwanted and even disastrous effect. It would accelerate global warming even more.

The best available scientific evidence shows that during the twentieth century, the average surface temperature of the Earth has risen by 0.6 degrees Celsius (or 1.08 degrees Fahrenheit). This doesn't seem like very much at all. It is, however, extraordinarily significant from the perspective of the Earth's biosphere and its trillions of inhabitants. The significance of global warming lies in that on the one side it reduces our planet's snow and ice cover and on the other side it gives rise to extreme low temperatures in certain parts of the world. Global warming is accompanied by complex and rather unpredictable phenomena, such as severe drought in one area and flooding in another. It means that as Earth's temperature rises there will be more megahurricanes, wildfires, unexpected massive precipitations of rain, snow, or ice, which will kill people and cause widespread damage to the environment and human property.

Global warming is causing the polar ice caps and glaciers to melt, some deserts to bloom, the ocean to rise and swallow up islands and low-lying coastal land, mountains to shift shape and crumble, formerly stable ground to collapse, allergies to worsen, chronic diseases that were once thought to have been conquered to return, animal behavior (such as migrations) to change, and entire species to vanish. Worst of all, we do as yet not have a reasonable understanding of global warming to be able to foresee how this will affect

our planet in the decades and centuries to come other than the certainty that the weather will become increasingly unpredictable and severe, which will make our life more and more difficult.

The severity of global warming even at the present rate was demonstrated in 2007, at the time of writing this book, by several events: a huge junk of sea ice the size of Ontario melted in the Arctic (amounting to 552 billion tons) and thus open the fabled north-west passage; Greenland's ice sheet retreated faster than any scientist had predicted and giving Greenland its own series of Niagara Falls, which propel the melting ice caps into the ocean so fast that sea levels could rise by 7 feet not in centuries, as previously thought, but possibly in decades or even years; Alaska's permafrost is warming and is in danger of thawing; January 2007 was the warmest January on record (since record keeping was launched in 1880) worldwide with 0.85 degrees Celsius above normal; the International Federation of the Red Cross announced that global warming caused 27 percent more natural disasters, following a 70-percent increase between 2004 and 2006.

Natural disasters usually spell hardship and suffering for human beings, which alone should have us pay attention. Dharma practitioners are, so to speak, in the business of lessening suffering—both their own and that of other sentient beings. How many more natural disasters will it take before we conclude that we must champion a green lifestyle and green political action in order to re-balance our Earth environment? How much more suffering do we have to witness before our compassion will be triggered? If we are adopting a “wait and see” attitude, no doubt Nature will deliver to us more and more occasions to witness her “bloody tooth.”

As sea ice melts, the reflective power of the Earth (known as its albedo) decreases, and with diminishing ice reflection in the Arctic, the Sun's heat is absorbed by the ocean, which, in turn, accelerates global warming—a fateful cycle and one that will affect adversely every being on this planet. It is already affecting numerous species, including those members of the human family who—like the Inuit—for thousands of years have made their home in the inclement latitudes of the globe, or those who—like the Pacific islanders—have long enjoyed a simple but for the most part gentle life in the tropics. Both are now being rendered homeless. As fellow humans, they are able to knock at their neighbor's door for shelter. Displaced animal species don't have this possibility.

What makes matters worse, possibly even far worse, is that there are already indications that the ocean, one of our planet's two major "carbon sinks" (the other being forests, which we are destroying), is failing to assimilate carbon dioxide as efficiently as in the past. This means that we can expect much higher CO<sub>2</sub> content in the atmosphere and therefore quicker and greater global warming, with the increased possibility of catastrophic spikes.

Scientists generally confidently assume that the Holocene—the period from c. 10,000 B.C. to present times—has been one of extraordinary climatic stability. By and large, this has been the case, which allowed human civilization to take root on Earth and grow to its current preposterous magnitude. But, as Eugene Linden has shown in his book *The Winds of Change*, which draws on highly specialized research since the 1970s, ice cores from experiments in Greenland have shown otherwise. There have, in fact, been a number of climatic shifts (notably the sudden "Little Ice Age," which began in the fourteenth century and continued on and off until the nineteenth century A.D.) that adversely affected humanity at the time. There also have been sudden shifts toward higher temperatures, which likewise caused great problems for humanity.

The current phenomenon of global warming has been distinctly and reliably connected with human civilizational activities rather than any natural climate cycles. It is now expected that global temperature will rise by another 0.3 degrees Celsius in the decade from 2004 to 2014. No one has any idea what this will unleash on Earth.

Yet, ignoring the facts and gambling that everything will be fine, in November of 2007 the governments of the world agreed to a temperature cap of 2–2.4 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. That would take all of us into a climate territory that the Earth has not witnessed in 1 million years—a thoroughly foolhardy and risky decision! Some policy makers even proposed a rise of 6 degrees Celsius, which, according to most climatologists, would take us straight to biosphere collapse. As Mark Serreze, a glaciologist at the U.S. National Snow and Ice Data Center, observed, in terms of the Arctic ice melt, we are already "100 years ahead of schedule."<sup>2</sup>

Our atmosphere currently contains c. 383 parts per million of carbon dioxide. We are fast heading toward 450 parts per million. Three million years ago, our planet was about 2–3 degrees warmer—the temperature range eyed by many policy makers. What

did the Earth look like, then, during the Pliocene when the atmosphere had c. 350-450 parts per million of carbon dioxide? It most certainly was free from Arctic sea ice; sea levels were about 50 feet (or 15 meters) to 115 feet (or 45 meters) higher; there was a constant oscillation in temperature and aridity, with the weather being overall much wetter. At a rise of 6 degrees Celsius, as deemed conceivable by some, the ocean and the land will warm even more, and the climate will likely be even less predictable. Past this point, further warming of the ocean might release the 10,000 billion tons of methane that are currently trapped at the ocean floor. This would plunge the Earth into the boiling cauldron of 4.5 billion years ago, with surface temperatures of 230 degrees Celsius—the geological period known as Hadean, rightly named after the Greek Hades (or hell).

In light of what scientists already know, it makes absolutely no sense for governments to allow for a 60-percent increase of greenhouse gas emissions between now and 2030. Even if humanity were to continue at the present level of carbon dioxide emissions, we can expect a temperature rise of 1.7 degrees Celsius, which many scientists consider critically dangerous.

In his #1 U.S. bestseller *The Weather Makers*, published in 2004, Tim Flannery admitted that for years he had resisted to devote research time to climate change, adopting a “wait and see” attitude. By 2001, the scientific evidence of global warming had piled up enough to galvanize Flannery into action. By late 2004, his interest had “turned to anxiety”<sup>3</sup> His book is a sober and sobering account of the climate changes that are afoot, and careful reading of it will give the reader a correct, if scary, perspective on what is happening at an alarming speed.

Even U.S. president George Bush, Jr., who also wanted to “wait and see,” has meantime reluctantly accepted the verdict of scientists around the world that global warming is a fact to be reckoned with. Possibly, public pressure underscored by the devastation of New Orleans by superhurricane Katrina in 2005, which claimed 1500 human lives and caused damages to the tune of \$135 billion, played a role in the president’s change of opinion, even though to date he is still unconscionably dragging his political feet about appropriate national and international measures to curb global warming.

Recognizing the threat to social, economic, and political stability, most governments of the world have, since 1992, thrashed out strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and control pollution in order to stop further global warming. Unfortunately, national interests have until now thwarted fully coordinated worldwide action. Thus, the critical 1997 Kyoto Protocol, a legally binding agreement, was rejected in 2001 by its most important cosigner, the United States, which practically disempowered the remedial efforts of the 126 nations that ratified the Protocol in 2004. Unfortunately, China, India, Brazil, and Australia—all megapolluters—were not even among the original signatories. Fortunately; Australia, which is already in considerable environmental trouble, finally joined the league of sensible nations in 2007 under the new prime minister Kevin Rudd. He agreed to meet the stipulated rate of reduction in greenhouse gas emissions for his country. Recently, China, India, and Brazil also ratified the Protocol but have thus far limited their participation to monitoring pollution in their respective countries, which really means very little at this point.

While the Kyoto Protocol is deemed flawed even by those countries that have ratified it, at least it was a beginning. But in order to meet the challenge of global warming in a significant way, we must without fail radically reduce humanity's greenhouse gas emissions. That means we will also have to do our part as responsible individuals. First, we must reduce our personal production of CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases. Secondly, we must oblige local and national government officials to represent our will. There is no time to hesitate or to simply hope for the best. Practically speaking, how can we tell our contribution to the specter of global warming? Specifically, what are *your* personal CO<sub>2</sub> emissions? This is not merely a rhetorical question. If you want to find out your personal contribution to planetwide disaster, you are able to calculate this easily by utilizing one of several online calculators.<sup>3</sup> We recommend that you take the time to do this sobering exercise and then, in light of it, make *major* changes in your lifestyle. There is no other way to avoid global catastrophe.

The total atmosphere comprises some 5 billion million tons of gases, notably oxygen. Although human-caused greenhouse gas emissions make up a mere 2 percent of this total, they decisively change the quality of the atmosphere. This situation is similar to adding just a drop of black ink to a white medium; it inevitably yields not white but gray.

More dramatically, even 150 billionth of a gram of tetanus will prove fatal to a human individual. Since humanity has thus far failed to respond decisively to the present planetary crisis, we can only conclude that our species is acting from a level of profound ignorance, which is effectively suicidal.

In early 2007, a panel of international scientists representing 113 nations predicted that global warming has already gathered enough momentum to continue for centuries regardless of any remedial steps taken now. This bleak prospect should have alarmed every single citizen of the world. It did not. Rather, pollution is continuing at an accelerating rate. While the United States, a major polluter, has managed to reduce its overall greenhouse gas emissions, China is now taking the first place among polluters, with India ranking third, one place after the United States. The statistical compilations offered by various international organizations drive home the point that we are facing this global challenge collectively. Climate change is not a local matter. Pollution is not merely a national problem. As we stated at the beginning of this chapter, through the atmosphere we are all linked in a single destiny. We remember Shabkar's poetic lines:

Like a fan that waves back and forth,  
The cool breeze tempers the ardor of the sun;  
The fresh winds as well bring many fragrances,  
“You, hermit, have no incense.”<sup>5</sup>

Alas, today, the breeze is growing warmer and will bring less and less relief to Earth's creatures. Tibet, Shabkar's homeland and the highest plateau in the world, escaped the repercussions of the world's industrialization during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nowadays, even this remote region is showing signs of environmental stress. The winter of 2007 was up by 1.4 degrees Celsius (or 2.52 Fahrenheit) from the regional average of -4.4 degrees Celsius—the third winter in a span of seven years. Lhasa, Tibet's capital, had a temperature that was 6 degrees higher than normal. Climatologists are anxiously watching the Himalayas as miners would watch their canaries.

That we all share the same atmosphere became strikingly obvious when researchers discovered in 2005 that a vast plume of pollution had drifted from China and India and then, crossing the Pacific Ocean, to the United States. The heavily polluted air over Los Angeles was found to consist 25 percent of pollutants stemming from the East. Largely because of the overconsuming nations of Europe and North America, both China and India went into an industrialization frenzy in the 1980s, which in turn led these large nations into a downward spiral of environmental pollution. To put it starkly, our own greed triggered a chain of reactions, which now brings us a harvest of highly undesirable and unforeseen consequences.

Similarly, whatever positive action we are taking individually and nationally will positively affect the rest of the world. If, however, we individually and nationally allow pollution and global warming to proceed unchecked, we can be sure that our disregard will increasingly inflict planetwide suffering not just to our human species but to all living beings on this Earth. For a Dharma practitioner, especially one committed to the bodhisattva ideal, this is not an option.

We must become more fully mindful of the environmental and social context in which we live. Mindfulness—“I am breathing in, I am breathing out”—is excellent. Compassionate mindfulness is even better. When mindfulness is turned into a mechanical meditation technique, or an automatic habit, it omits the power of empathy and hence comes to lie outside the orbit of bodhicitta, the dharmic impulse toward the liberation of all beings.

This dharmic impetus includes a heartfelt concern for the welfare of fellow beings. As long as sentient beings are caught in the immediacy of suffering, they will not have the free attention to pursue the ideal of liberation. Thus, a bodhisattva will pay careful attention to the physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being of others. He or she will diligently care for the physical and mental needs of a suffering human or nonhuman being, so that one day—in this or a future life—that being may come to enjoy better conditions, which then permit the contemplation of a higher, dharmic existence.

In immediate practical terms, as Dharma practitioners we ought to be aware of and concerned about the impact of air pollution especially on children, the sick, and the elderly. In 2006, the David Suzuki Foundation in British Columbia issued a report



compiled by David R. Boyd and entitled *The Air We Breathe*, which drove home the terrible effects of poor air quality on the health of Canada's citizens.<sup>6</sup> In his foreword, Suzuki mentions that according to the Canadian Institute of Child Health, exposure to toxins in the environment has probably increased childhood cancer by 25 percent over the past quarter of a century. The report itself refers to the sad fact that, according to the Ontario Medical Association, there were an estimated 5,800 premature deaths, 16,000 hospital admissions, and 60,000 emergency room visits in Ontario due to air pollution, never mind the more than \$7 billion in healthcare costs, loss in productivity, and welfare loss due to premature death.

The situation is similar or worse in other parts of the world. In 2005, the European Environment Agency estimated annual health care costs due to air pollution to range between \$300-800 billion for the European Union. The estimate for the United States is as high as \$55 billion, though this figure is probably not high enough. A naïve question: would this kind of money not be better invested in prevention?

Obviously, we do not want to follow the bad example of the Chinese city of Linfen, where the air quality is so poor that most of its 3.5 million residents are suffering from chronic breathing difficulties. The air is so polluted that many people have taken to wearing masks. They get to see the Sun only very rarely, because the city is enveloped in a permanent hazardous haze. According to a well-known 2001 survey conducted by the World Bank, China has 16 out of 20 of the world's worst polluted cities. A subsequent survey by the New York-based Blacksmith Institute put forward a different list of not-so-proud contenders, but it too included the city of Linfen.

Studies done in Mexico City have shown that in neighborhoods where air pollution is particularly bad, cells in the linings of nose and throat in children are permanently altered to possibly give rise to cancer in later life. Yet, with worldwide pollution, the concept of neighborhood pollution is becoming less and less meaningful. Pollution pollutes everyone on Earth.

For sure, all of us value our health. North Americans and Europeans are spending billions of dollars on over-the-counter health products and health foods. Yet, relatively few people actively pursue personal and communal strategies to improve the quality of the air they breathe for themselves and others, such as minimizing car use and

maximizing bicycling and walking, favoring locally grown food and locally made products over food and products requiring long-distance transportation, avoiding jet travel, and above all reducing consumption.

If we don't even take care of our own kind, we are unlikely to respond to the plight of other species, who or which are also suffering from the ill effects of a polluted atmosphere and the related adversity of global warming.

While many nations regard air pollution as a high priority problem—presumably because it adversely affects people's physical and mental health—global warming is generally viewed as a long-term predicament. In its negative consequences, however, global warming is just as urgent and even more dire. The health of the entire biosphere is at stake here. Clean air legislation in various countries certainly has helped to decelerate air pollution locally, but we must learn to think on a larger scale and, primarily by lowering our customary level of consumption, reduce the sources of pollution everywhere and stop giving incentives to those nations that are intent on following the destructive path of the industrialized world.

The argument, which we sometimes hear, that by reducing our demand for more and more products, we will deprive developing nations the opportunity of gaining a higher standard of living, is flawed. As we see in India, for instance, only the middle class benefits from the country's economic boom; the rest of the country is experiencing abject poverty. In the slightly longer run, no one will benefit, because industrialization will have polluted land, water, and air. Thus, we would argue, from a rational and dharmic perspective, furthering the rapid industrialization of developing nations is a disservice to the people of those countries, just as failing to curb our greed and overconsumption is harmful to us.

Humanity is facing an entirely new situation. For the first time in its history, it must consciously and collectively choose a developmental direction that will either guarantee its further survival or propel it into extinction. During war times, individuals and even entire nations can demonstrate an extraordinary will and resourcefulness. World War II is a good example, when many nations mobilized to oppose the Hitler regime. Humanity as a whole is at an even more momentous crux of crisis.

We ourselves see this as an opportunity for humanity to make a spiritual and moral leap. Global warming could yet prove as the kind of transformative and integrative event that will accomplish what so-called globalization has accomplished only at the economic level. As we, as individuals, endeavor to reduce our carbon emissions, we inevitably will have to inspect the way we live. This will put us in touch with our desires, especially our acquisitive impulses. You could say that Nature is forcing us to become more introspective, more aware. If we at all have a conscience, we will want to make our lifestyle sustainable.

At least indirectly, if not deliberately, our own efforts at sustainability will help other beings to live and thrive rather than to become extinct. Thus, whether we mean to or not, we will favor all of life. This would bring human beings, whether or not they are Buddhists, into proximity to the ethical teachings of great spiritual teachers like the Buddha.

In the face of the brewing storm, we cannot but ask: How would the Buddha regard the present dangerous situation? While we cannot second-guess an enlightened being, in the Pali Canon we have the following pertinent statement by the Buddha:

I do not say that all undertakings should be performed; nor do I say of all undertakings that they should not be performed. . . . But if in performing undertakings . . . unwholesome states wane and wholesome states grow, then, I declare, all these practices should be carried out.<sup>7</sup>

Paraphrasing the above comment, we could say that the Buddha would simply counsel all Dharma practitioners to engage in *wholesome* action determined by due consideration. Now, clearly, wholesome actions in regard to the environment are those that benefit all beings, that are anchored in wise compassion or compassionate wisdom.

In terms of our polluted atmosphere and global warming, wholesome action is any initiative that decreases greenhouse gas emissions and prevents our Earth from becoming a cauldron unfit for human and nonhuman habitation. For individual Dharma practitioners, wholesome action begins at home—in our use of electricity, mode of transportation, preferred diet, and acquisition of consumer goods. To the degree that we

can simplify our lifestyle and make it more sustainable, we can directly impact on the state of the environment and on the survival rate of our species and all other species on Earth.

When, day after day, we take care of the practicalities of a sustainable lifestyle, then the Buddhist practice of radiating friendliness, compassion, joy, and equanimity toward all beings gains true significance. For compassion or love to be meaningful, it must manifest in wholesome action. Biophilia—the love of all forms of life—is not an abstract virtue. It represents a call to the kind of selfless, heroic action that marks the sublimity of a great Bodhisattva.

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 8

1. The *Maharahula-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (62.16). Bhikkhu Nānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2nd ed. 2001), p. 530.
2. David Spratt and Philip Sutton, *Climate “Code Red”* (Fitzroy, Australia: Friends of the Earth, 2008), introduction.
3. Tim Flannery, *The Weather Makers: How We Are Changing the Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 6.
4. See, e.g., the online carbon calculator at [www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/ind\\_calculator.html](http://www.epa.gov/climatechange/emissions/ind_calculator.html).
5. Shabkar, *Food of the Bodhisattvas: Buddhist Teachings on Abstaining From Meat*. Trans. by the Padmakara Translation Group (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2004), p. 366.

6. See David R. Boyd, ed. *The Air We Breathe* (Vancouver, British Columbia: David Suzuki Foundation, 2006). This report is available online at [www.davidsuzuki.org/\\_pvw370829/files/SWAG/DSF+HEHC-Air-summ-web1.pdf](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/_pvw370829/files/SWAG/DSF+HEHC-Air-summ-web1.pdf). [You must use the appropriate capital letters for this address.]

7. The *Anguttara-Nikaya* (200). Nyanaponika Thera and Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas From the Anguttara-Nikaya* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1999), p. 261.



## *CHAPTER 9*

# **GOING BEYOND THE GREAT DENIAL**

When we are seriously suffering from an addiction, there appear to be several stages involved in the process of recovery. We begin with unawareness, which generally represents massive denial—involving both self-denial and public denial—that there is anything wrong with us at all. Then we become aware of our “problem” and acknowledge its existence, which in a monastic context corresponds to the act of confession in front of members of the Sangha. This acknowledgment includes the insight that a certain behavior has gotten the better of us, is unwholesome for us, and also that it is damaging or hurtful to others around us. Next we commit to a course of rehabilitation by which the undesirable behavior in question is brought under control. Following this, we commit to a course of maintaining our corrective behavior, if necessary for our entire lifetime.

As we mentioned earlier, from the perspective of the Dharma, conventional life appears as an addiction to the three root forms of craving—greed/lust, anger/hatred, and delusion. Ordinary worldlings are understandably slow and reluctant to accept this critical evaluation, because it would oblige them to alter their entire self-centered approach to life. The three forms of craving are not called “poisons” for nothing. They pervade our being and are systemic like a toxin in the bloodstream. They cloud our good judgment and even cause us to think that they are acceptable simply because “everyone” else behaves in the same way. Hence the three poisons require drastic detoxification, which begins with realizing that they are active within us and that they cannot possibly benefit us or others.

We wish to propose that industrialized humanity’s present condition is particularly akin to addiction. We are addicted to the advantages of industrialization, which can be summed up under the label of overconsumption. Overconsumption, as we see it, is not merely consumption for the sake of survival but consumption for the sake of mere pleasure. We consume far more than is necessary for our physical well-being and

far more than is good for our emotional-intellectual well-being. In fact, we consume so much that our body is suffering, our mind is suffering, and our society as a whole is suffering. Moreover, our overconsumption affects everyone else on this planet negatively. It causes suffering to those who can barely feed themselves, who have no access to potable water, and whose shelter from the elements is minimal to say the least. We are thinking of our poverty-stricken, hungry, fellow humans in many parts of Africa, India, and the Far East. We are also thinking of the many underprivileged men, women, and children in our own wealthy nations—those who are at the exact opposite end of the social spectrum of the nearly one thousand billionaires worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The superwealthy own as much as 20 percent of the world's total wealth and millions of well-off people own 50 percent of the global wealth.

Addiction to overconsumption, we propose, is comparable to a disease. It would not be too farfetched to look upon it as a type of mental illness. For sure, most of the millions of people suffering from this illness would not recognize or admit that this is so. They would adamantly deny that anything is wrong with them or wrong with overconsumption, since everybody “does it.” Instead, they are likely to view overconsumption as an entitlement, a birth right for any hard-working denizen of the so-called developed nations. Their attitude might even imply the judgment that many, if not all, poor and underprivileged people are lazy and hence undeserving of wealth. The underprivileged may, on the contrary, be at present rather hard working but appallingly underpaid or would prefer good, honest work over hunger and lack of opportunity. Living in a rich country, having the opportunity to make a decent living from work, even hard work, is a great privilege. However, overconsumption is not a privilege; rather, it is a huge liability, a karmic cul-de-sac, and an affront vis-à-vis widespread poverty and hunger.

Dharmically, overconsumption is definitely a vice—greed—that will reap us a disagreeable karmic return in our next embodiment or future embodiments. The Buddha made this very clear:

Greed is a producer of kammic [karmic] concatenation.<sup>2</sup>



In the Pali Canon, we can read that even the well-to-do members of the warrior estate, the ruling élite of ancient Indian society, “look at each other with greedy eyes, insatiable in sensual pleasures.”<sup>3</sup> In the same discourse, we are left in no doubt about the power of greed:

The world is led around by craving;  
By craving it’s dragged here and there.  
Craving is the one thing that has  
All under its control.”<sup>4</sup>

The Buddha also taught:

There are, O monks, three causes for the origination of action. What three?  
Greed, hatred and delusion.

An action done in greed, born of greed, caused by greed, arisen greed, will ripen wherever the individual is reborn; and wherever the action ripens, there the individual experiences the fruit of that action, be it in this life, or in the next life, or in subsequent future lives.<sup>5</sup>

Greed being deemed unwholesome, it is only logical that we should also expect an unwholesome karmic repercussion from it. This the Buddha confirmed in his instructive dialogue with the Kalama clan of Kesaputta:

Kalamas, a person who is greedy, hating and deluded, overpowered by greed, hatred and delusion, his thoughts controlled by them, will destroy life, take what is not given, engage in sexual misconduct and tell lies; he will also prompt others to do likewise.<sup>6</sup>

We know from the Buddha’s further dialogue with the Kalamas that, conversely, freedom from greed, anger and delusion has a wholesome karmic effect—an effect that tends toward what is good and auspicious and ultimately liberating. The term “greed”—

*lobha* in Pali and Sanskrit—covers all degrees of karmic acquisitive attraction to something. The range is vast, extending from a mere vague longing to an overwhelming urge to possess something. A Dharma practitioner will be mindful of the merest hint of the presence of greed in his or her mind in order to avert and abandon this inauspicious mental activity.

By abandoning greed along with anger and delusion, we are further told, we can altogether abandon the fateful sequence of birth, old age, and death through our attainment of nirvana.<sup>7</sup> As long as the root factors of greed, hatred, and delusion are operative within us, however, we are fettered to the world of change by the inescapable force of karma. This basic insight into the nature of worldly existence is absent from the philosophy and ethics of our secular civilization, which revolves around the acquisition and accumulation of money, power or influence, material goods, and social status.

Overconsumption is unethical. Period. It happens at the cost of others' wellbeing. The American psychiatrist Roger Walsh, who regularly goes on long retreats, remembers how he learned his first lesson about the "costs" of not living ethically and the sensitivity involved in ethical living:

My first meditation retreat . . . made these costs painfully apparent. I had hoped for peace and insight, and in fact these occurred eventually. But as I first settled into the routine of continuous silence and meditation, I experienced anything but peace. . . . I discovered that showers could be a wonderful way to avoid self-awareness. Under the rush of warm water I could happily drift off in daydreams and forget the self-examination and reflection I had travel five hundred miles to Oregon to learn.

But there was a problem with my solution: the showers were directly under the meditation hall. Naturally they proved a noisy distraction to the people who were actually doing what I was supposed to be doing: meditating. Consequently, we were requested to shower only between meditation sessions.

This request for fairness was no match for my greed. I continued to take long showers whenever I wanted to, whether between sessions or not.

Yet over the next few days the pleasure from the showers shriveled because, as the retreat continued, my mind became increasingly sensitive and I could no longer block from awareness the discomfort I was causing others.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes it takes the kind of radical self-inspection and sensitization involved in a retreat to get in touch with the far-reaching consequences—the costs—of our apparently harmless actions, such as having a luxurious shower. But we should not wait for the insights gained from a meditation retreat before we investigate our behavior and its possible unethical, non-Dharmic aspects. If we come to gently question everything we do or don't do in the course of our daily life, become more mindful, create more silent space, and begin to really care about others, we will detect the long arm of our psychological shadow and wish to change for *their* sake. Then, when a retreat comes about, we will be ready to go even deeper in our self-inspection and willingness to transform our personality and motivation.

Looking at Walsh's self-confessed anecdote from an environmental viewpoint, we can say that long showers might not only disturb others, but also are a terribly efficient way of squandering a valuable and dwindling natural resource and of wasting electricity, which is produced at a high environmental cost. To give another common example: if our thermostat is turned too high in winter, we may feel nice and cozy, but we are also wasting electricity, which, in turn, ups our negative impact on the environment via the power station that has to burn polluting uranium or coal to generate electricity. It would make sense for us to consider dressing more warmly instead. Or we leave the lights on in unused rooms, use incandescent rather than energy-saving compact fluorescent light bulbs, or leave equipment (like the television or computer) running when no one is using it. These are simple areas of responsibility for a green individual which require just a little bit of correct knowledge and mindfulness. There are dozens and dozens of others areas that can lead us gradually out of habitual, unconscious overconsumption into a simple and conscious lifestyle. In Chapter 11, we will furnish a whole number of suggestions for greening our personal life.

We live in an extraordinary era—a time of both unparalleled peril and incomparable opportunity. If we only perceive collapse and failure around us, we would scarcely want to invest any effort in correcting all our cultural errors, righting all our cultural wrongs. We would stand back and do nothing. But this attitude would be a one-sided, defeatist and irresponsible reaction, which would bring with it further negative karmic consequences. Instead of burying our heads in sand, as Dharma practitioners we absolutely must become more and more aware of the vast suffering triggered by the failures of our overconsuming and largely uncaring civilization. We must not allow the current state of affairs to continue but must make an honest, whole-hearted effort to reduce the suffering not merely of our fellow humans but of all sentient beings. The fact that every year, some 50,000 entire plant and animal species are becoming extinct should in itself suffice to galvanize us into concerted remedial action.

If our heart is not yet open or empathetic enough, we should at least consider the iron law of karma and how our present carelessness, indifference, and lethargy will lead to a nightmarish world into which we ourselves would eventually be reborn. It is *us* who will be our children's children or their children in the future! It is *us* who will have to live in circumstances of unbearable hardship. This straightforward consideration alone should give us strong impetus to take proper action now, to help prevent the landslide into global disaster the beginnings of which we are witnessing today.

If we are fortunate enough to have a more open heart with the capacity to empathize with all living beings—from the lowliest insect to our own family members—we ought to fervently cultivate and magnify this wonderful capacity in the spirit of the Bodhisattva path of Mahayana Buddhism. The Bodhisattva, as we mentioned before, is unreservedly dedicated to eliminating all suffering in the cosmos—an impossible task to be sure but one that the Bodhisattva nonetheless feels called to undertake with extraordinary gravity and intensity.

Buddhist history is full of masters who, following the Bodhisattva path, have demonstrated remarkable kindness toward other sentient beings. We would like to recall here several well-known traditional stories, beginning with the memorable story of Asanga, the founder of the Yogacara school of Mahayana Buddhism.

Asanga, who is generally assigned to the fourth century A.D., was the son of a member of the warrior estate and a yogini mother. She educated him in the eighteen traditional disciplines of knowledge and prepared him for a monastic life. After entering a monastery, he quickly mastered the Pali Canon and also the Mahayana scriptures, and then studied and practiced Tantra focusing his efforts on Bodhisattva Maitreya, the future Buddha. Even though he practiced vigorously in a mountain cave for a full three years, he had not the least sign of success. Discouraged, he wanted to leave his retreat, but upon exiting the cave he noticed that the rock near a bird's nest had been worn down by the wings of the nesting bird. He took this as a sign to persevere, and so he renewed his efforts. He wanted to leave his retreat several more times, but each time Nature herself taught his perceptive mind a lesson in persistence. After twelve years in the cave without apparent success, Asanga finally gave up for good and dejectedly made his way down the mountain.

On the way down, he came across a wounded, half-dead dog, who was crying out in pain. Compassion gripped his heart for the suffering creature. He acquired a sword in a nearby village and sliced off a piece of flesh from his own body. He then tried to guide the worms that had infested the dog's lower body onto the cut-off flesh. When he failed in this attempt, he stuck out his tongue to attract the worms to his own body, so as not to injure them. He closed his eyes to execute this unpalatable act, which also proved unsuccessful. When he opened his eyes again, the dog had vanished and before him stood the radiant Bodhisattva Maitreya himself.

Asanga prostrated before Maitreya's feet and, weeping, asked why Maitreya had not helped him during all those years of solitary meditation, not even when he was suffering from great thirst. Maitreya responded that he had been with Asanga all along but that Asanga had been unable to see him because of karmic impediments. Now that those obstacles were removed through diligent practice and that true compassion was awakened, Maitreya was visible to Asanga.

The Bodhisattva vow applies to all sentient beings, even worms. They, too, deserve to live and thrive. Conversely, as animal lovers around the world know full well, there also are compassionate animals who have extended their kindness to humans.

In his book *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon*, Jeffrey Masson tells the story of a pig who valiantly rescued its “owner,” who had suffered a heart attack. The female pig called Lulu

charged out of a doggie door made for a 20-pound dog, scraping her sides raw to the point of drawing blood. Running into the street, Lulu proceeded to draw attention by lying down in the middle of the road until a car stopped. Then she led the driver to her owner’s house. ..<sup>8</sup>

The idea of Bodhisattvas in animal form is of course not new. The *Jatakas*, which tell in legendary format of some of the Buddha’s previous lives, are full of animal Bodhisattvas. If we have come to trust the traditional teaching of karma and rebirth, we might still have a difficult time believing that humans can be reborn as animals and vice versa. Unless we entertain the absurd belief that numerous highly respected spiritual teachers are psychopaths who lie and are deluded, ought we not to trust their word?

Not a few lamas have impressed on their skeptical or indecisive Western students that karma and rebirth are not a matter of pale theory but an actuality that they should carefully take into account; otherwise they would only imperil their own inner growth by dismissing, ignoring, or shelving these related teachings. In an interview conducted by Georg with H. E. Garchen Triptül Rinpoche in 2001, this great Karma Kagyu master remarked:

The most important thing is really to study the law of karma. With that, if one has a very good understanding of the complexities of the law of karma, Buddhism becomes very easy. Buddhism has very elaborate empowerments, rituals, prayers—none of them is needed. If you want to understand karma, then become like a lawyer who is well trained and knows the consequence of breaking the law. Keeping the law of karma in mind, one should cultivate loving-kindness and compassion in order to develop relative and ultimate bodhicitta. That’s all that is needed.<sup>9</sup>

By carefully studying the Buddhist tradition with which we affiliate and by equally diligently examining all the scientific (parapsychological) evidence on karma and rebirth, we can dispel our doubt about this important aspect of the Dharma.<sup>10</sup> We can then also accept that our thoughts and behavior are decisive factors in determining our karmic future and that we must exert ourselves to avoid an unwholesome destiny and diligently prepare the ground for a wholesome future destiny.

In the present era, our dharmic work must entail paying careful attention to the environmental consequences of our actions. Karmically speaking, we cannot afford to be ignorant about, or indifferent to, the environmental burden of our actions. Our effects on the environment directly affect the welfare of countless sentient beings now and in the foreseeable future. As Dharma practitioners, we clearly must not compromise the welfare of others. On the contrary, we ought to do our best to help promote it.

To be able to do this, we must begin by sensitizing ourselves to the actual situation. The present book is a gesture in that direction; so was our earlier publication *Green Yoga*. A cursory look at the relevant library and bookstore shelves quickly reveals that there is a growing mountain of well-informed books and technical monographs that provide all the necessary evidence about global warming, mass extinction, socio-cultural collapse, and all the other unedifying details of contemporary living. We have referred to some of these publications in the endnotes. Even the mass media, which cannot claim to have a particular conscience, have, though without much discrimination, brought for decades gory stories of environmental disasters and socio-cultural tragedies. So, really, no one can claim total ignorance of the failures of our era.

It serves, however, to gain an integrated view of what would otherwise amount to myriads of apparently separate, even isolated facts. To see today's world in a meaningful way, we need to regard the total situation. What is more: however painful the emerging picture might end up being, we must keep ourselves informed and be in touch with the environment and with social and political developments of the world on an ongoing basis.

Next we must circumspectly analyze every aspect of our personal participation in our overconsuming society and identify practices that are environmentally unwholesome, such as we summarily map out in Chapter 11. This is a matter of continuous vigilance, as with worsening conditions in the world we will have to reassess our impact on the

environment. Maybe decades ago, recycling paper and plastic was enough (though we doubt this), now we must drastically change our lifestyle, which will be difficult for us psychologically but even more difficult socially. Governments have by and large not introduced appropriate action by passing apposite laws and making adequate resources available for the greening of our planet. When they finally will do so out of sheer immediate necessity, we fear, they will be forced to institute Draconian measures.

Inspired by Stephanie Kaza's fine essay "Penetrating the Tangle," we wish to propose a formal method of self-analysis by which we can ferret out our various unconscious or semi-conscious ties into our overconsuming civilization.<sup>11</sup> This exercise of analyzing our appetitive behavior can follow traditional Buddhist lines, as Kaza has suggested:

Sorting through my own questioning voices, I find three critiques that clearly derive from a Buddhist orientation. The first critique focuses on the role of consumerism in the process of personal identity formation. The usual idea of self is seen as a significant delusion in Buddhist thought. Consumers in today's marketplace are urged to build a sense of self around what they buy. . . . "I am what I have" has become the operative slogan, using shopping to define identity. . .

A second Buddhist critique is that consumerism promotes, rationalizes, and condones harming . . . While consumer good manufacturers may not intentionally choose to cause harm, their actions nonetheless often leave death and injury in their wake. . .

Perhaps the strongest Buddhist critique is that consumerism promotes desire and dissatisfaction, the very source of suffering for self and others. . .<sup>12</sup>

Kaza follows her theoretical observations with practical exercises built on the three kinds of Buddhist critique of consumerism, which makes this matter very personal. She takes her own preference for drinking good tea as an example:



I can observe my preferences for a certain brand or tea shop. I can study my pleasure: what delights me about the act of drinking tea? Is it the flavors, the stimulation, the social company? (All of the above.) I can study my memories of drinking tea and see how they add up to a specific subjective identity as a tea drinker conditioned over time.

Looking closely at any one of these aspects of my self as a consumer of tea, I see how dependent my idea of self is on conditions outside my “self”. . . . There is no such thing as my separate self enjoying the separate tea. It is all happening at once. . . . The delusion crumbles.<sup>13</sup>

Kaza’s example, taken from her own life, is simple but suggestive. It allows us to proceed in a similar honest fashion relative to our other preferences—all those many instances where we identify as a consuming self.

About the second Buddhist critique, which focuses on harming, Kaza comments:

This critique raises the questions of right and wrong—how do you decide what is harmful in the realm of consumerism? The Buddhist texts on ethical behavior offer specific guidance in the form of the Five Precepts: not killing, not stealing, not abusing sexuality, not lying, and not using or selling intoxicants. . .

The precept of nonharming can also be stated as a positive commitment to practice metta, or lovingkindness.<sup>14</sup>

Kaza points out that the guiding rule of nonharming can take many forms vis-à-vis consumerism. For instance, many Dharma practitioners practice vegetarianism because they want to avoid harming animals. Others choose to eat organic food to reduce harm to soil and plants, as well as to the small creatures on them, from the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Yet others refuse to consume fast food because the exploitation of workers that is generally involved in this sector of the food industry, as well as because of the negative impact on the health of consumers. Ideally, we would say, we adopt vegetarianism for all the above reasons, as well as for our own well-being. Kaza

argued that “[i]t is not necessary for one to have perfected moral practice before asking others to consider their own actions.”<sup>15</sup> True enough, but it would be good for those promoting social reform to walk their talk. It would be unconvincing, for instance, for a “part-time vegetarian” to sing the praises of a vegetarian diet or for an active soldier to promote nonharming.

The third Buddhist critique of consumerism, which sees consumerism as stimulating desire, dissatisfaction, and hence suffering, is best pursued in light of the twelve links of co-dependent origination. As Kaza notes, we can start our self-analysis with any of the twelve links depicted in the Wheel of Life, which we discussed in Chapter 7.

We can make this and the previously explained types of Buddhist critique of consumerism as personal as we care to make them. In fact, we recommend that Dharma practitioners do just that in order to “disentangle” themselves from all the myriad consumer “tangles” and begin to live simply, sustainably, and authentically. The remedial actions listed in Chapter 11 could be used as a starting-point for such a self-analysis, over and above the value they have as environmentally and socially responsible actions. The more thoroughly we investigate our behavior and the motivations behind it, the more likely we will be able to grow morally and spiritually.

At the beginning of their spiritual “career,” Bodhisattvas solemnly vow to postpone their own ultimate enlightenment, or final liberation, until all sentient beings have been saved by leading them into full enlightenment. A classic formulation of this aspiration can be found in Shantideva’s *Entering the Path to Enlightenment* (*Bodhicaryavatara*):

Those who wish to escape the hundreds of sorrows of existence, who wish to remove the suffering of others, and who wish to enjoy the many hundreds of joys must never abandon the mind of Enlightenment. (1.8)

By seizing this impure form, one can transform it into the priceless form of a Conqueror’s jewel. Very firmly seize the effective elixir known as the Mind of Enlightenment. (1.10)

I am medicine for the sick. May I be their physician and their nurse until their sickness is gone. (3.7)

May I be a protector for those without protection, a guide for travelers, a boat, a bridge, a passage for those desiring the farther shore. (3.17)

For all embodied beings, may I be a lamp for those in need of a lamp; may I be a bed for those in need of a bed; may I be a servant for those in need of a servant. (3.18)

For all embodied beings, may I be a wish-granting gem, a miraculous urn, a magical science, a panacea, a wish-fulfilling tree, a cow of plenty. (3.19)

This Mind of Enlightenment has arisen in me somehow, just as a blind man might chance upon a jewel in a pile of dirt. (3.27)<sup>16</sup>

Shantideva, who lived in the eighth century A.D., renounced the world on the night before his coronation as a local ruler. After a period of wandering, he joined the famous Buddhist university of Nalanda where he was ridiculed by his fellow monks because of his apparent laziness and lack of comprehension. At one point, the monks prepared a very high chair for him, so that he could give them teachings, fully expecting him to fail and be publicly humiliated. To their utmost surprise, Shantideva miraculously pulled down the high seat and surprised everyone even more by giving a brilliant impromptu teaching composed in verse—the *Bodhicaryavatara*. As he was speaking, some monks could see Manjushri, the Buddha of Wisdom, hovering in the space near Shantideva. It had been none other than Manjushri who had instructed Shantideva directly. Subsequently Shantideva left Nalanda and made his way to the south of the Indian peninsula. This unassuming miracle worker's kindness toward people and animals, however, repeatedly brought him unwanted public attention, which then gave him an opportunity to teach the Dharma and relieve people's suffering.

In Asanga's Sanskrit work entitled *Ornament of the Discourses on the Great Vehicle*, we can read:

Indeed, for the compassionate [Bodhisattva] there is no joy without the joy of others. Because his happiness is not isolated, the bodhisattva does not desire for himself joy as the result of [his practice of] charity [or any other virtue] without the joy [of others].<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere in this text,<sup>18</sup> Asanga makes the point that even when a Bodhisattva gains complete understanding of the world of change, he still does not jettison his compassionate impulse and also is not worried about any faults arising from his compassionate actions for the benefit of other beings. Thus, he is neither stuck in nirvana nor in samsara (the world of change). Understanding the true nature of the world of change, which is riddled with suffering, he does not become unhappy while doing his compassionate work in the world.

Just as ordinary worldlings—we and you—are motivated by self-interest, the Bodhisattvas are impelled to act out of compassion. Their irrevocable commitment to help others to attain spiritual freedom is bodhicitta, the mind bent toward the enlightenment of all beings. In contemporary terms, a Bodhisattva is the proverbial anticonsumer—not necessarily by directly opposing consumerism but by pursuing his or her own course, which values the age-old ethical ideal of voluntary simplicity and reverence for all life. “Voluntary simplicity”—a term popularized by Duane Elgin—consists, according to him, in the following:

Simplicity of living, if deliberately chosen, implies a compassionate approach to life. It means that we are choosing to live our daily lives with some degree of conscious appreciation of the condition of the rest of the world.<sup>19</sup>

Practically speaking, voluntary simplicity consists in salutary behavior such as:

- the intentional *reduction* of one's personal consumption of consumer items—from cars to restaurant meals and from clothing to skin care products—by learning to favor what is essential, functional, and durable;
- the conscious *selection* of products that are nonpolluting at the manufacturing stage and subsequently;
- the attitude of favoring items that are *reusable, recyclable, and/or repairable* and the consistent *practice* of reusing, recycling, and/or repairing;
- the habit of buying as much as possible *locally* grown food or locally produced products, which will avoid the environmental costs involved in long-distance transportation;
- the *willingness* to put up with inconvenience and even some apparent hardships that do, however, make one's life overall more meaningful and/or pleasant, such as switching to a simpler mode of transport (e.g., ride sharing, using public transport or a bicycle, or walking to work and back);
- the *preference* of making one's life self-sufficient, for example, by growing one's own vegetables and/or herbs in a garden, on a rooftop, or in balcony or indoor boxes;
- the motivation to closely examine one's mode of livelihood in light of actual energy and time expended to earn a living (what is familiar isn't necessarily what is best for us) and also in terms of one's personal satisfaction (rather than socially driven ideas or objectives);
- the willingness to *eliminate clutter* in one's personal environment by giving unnecessary items to those who need or have a better use for them;
- *conscientious investment* of one's essential backup funds in truly environment-friendly enterprises, which requires most careful checking because regular investment channels frequently use the green label unwarrantedly;
- the *readiness* to embark on local cooperative enterprises that benefit everyone, such as periodically helping out at one's local food cooperatives, or serving on the school board or town council, which might enable one to make favorable public changes of benefit to oneself and others.

Concerning “reverence for all life,” this is a well-known concept that goes back to Albert Schweitzer, who wrote:

The ethics of reverence for life guard us from letting each other believe through our silence that we no longer experience what, as thinking men, we must experience. They prompt us to keep each other sensitive to what distresses us, and to talk and to act together, just as the responsibility we feel moves us, and without any feeling of shyness. . . .

In the question of possessions, the ethics of reverence for life are outspokenly individualist in the sense that wealth acquire or inherited should be placed at the service of the community, not through any measures taken by society, but through the absolutely free decision of the individual.<sup>20</sup>

To make our wealth available to others implies that we do not squander it for our own purposes, least of all on our own sensory pleasure or comfort. Thus reverence for life entails the ideal of voluntary simplicity. Individuals who disregard all life forms other than themselves, who show no reverence to life, will allow their craving free reign and will dismiss the mere idea of curbing their desires for the benefit of all. They will consume endlessly until they themselves are consumed by their greed, by their consumerist society, and by Nature lashing back.

Manifestly, we all are now called to reorient our motivation away from our inherited consumerism and away from our habitual egocentrism by kindling the spirit of bodhicitta within us and, failing this, to at least begin to practice kindness and generosity toward others. Then, eventually, we might come to appreciate that all beings are worthy and in need of liberation from suffering.

To conclude with a quotation from the Buddha’s sayings:

Those who are stirred by things that are truly stirring are few, while those who are not so stirred are many. Those who properly strive are few, while those who do not properly strive are many.<sup>21</sup>

May our readers be among those who are stirred and who properly strive.

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 9

1. This figure is cited after *Forbes 2007*.
2. The *Anguttara-Nikaya* 10.174. Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. and eds. *Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An Anthology of Suttas From the Anguttara Nikaya* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 1999), p. 264.
3. The *Devatasamyutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (1.-71ff.). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans./ed., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p.103.
4. The *Devasamyutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (1.208). Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.* p. 131.
5. The *Anguttara-Nikaya* (3.33). Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
6. The *Anguttara-Nikaya* (3.65). Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.* p. 65.
7. Roger Walsh, *Essential Spirituality* (New York: John Wiley, 1999), pp. 118ff.
8. See Jeffrey Masson, *The Pig Who Sang to the Moon: The Emotional World of Farm Animals* (London: Vintage, 2005), p. 27.

9. The complete interview with H. E. Garchen Triptül Rinpoche can be read online at [www.traditionallyogastudies.com/garchen\\_interview.html](http://www.traditionallyogastudies.com/garchen_interview.html).
10. See especially the published works of Prof. Ian Stevenson, who studied so-called reincarnation cases for over thirty years—e.g., *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2d rev. and enl. ed. 1980).
11. See Stephanie Kaza, “Penetrating the Tangle,” in Stephanie Kaza, ed. *Hooked! Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala Publications, 2005), pp. 139–151.
12. Stephanie Kaza, *op. cit.*, pp. 142–143.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 146–147.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 148.
16. This and the preceding Sanskrit verses from the *Bodhicaryavatara* were translated by Georg Feuerstein.
17. *Mahayanasutralankara* (17.53). Translated by Georg Feuerstein.
18. *Mahayanasutralankara* (17.32f.). Translated by Georg Feuerstein.
19. Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: An Ecological Lifestyle that Promotes Personal and Social Renewal* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), p. 3.
20. Albert Schweitzer, *Civilization and Ethics* (London: Unwin Books, 1961), pp. 222–223.
21. The *Anguttara-Nikaya* (10.). Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cit.*, p. 38.



## *CHAPTER 10*

# **THE DHARMIC RAFT**

On the preceding pages, we talked about land, water, and air, as well as their current critical condition and the impact this has on all life forms, including our human species. In the present chapter, we would like to regard land, water, and air under the traditional rubric of “the elements,” which are equally present inside and outside of us. In particular, we would like to respond to the key question: How should we relate to the material elements and, by implication to our material environment, properly from the perspective of the Dharma?

It seems best to begin by referring to the remarkable dialogue between the Buddha and his son Rahula,<sup>1</sup> which we referred to in Chapter 8. Soon after taking refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, Rahula asked the Buddha to explain to him how mindfulness of breathing could be developed with the greatest possible spiritual benefit. He received a fairly detailed discourse on the four great material elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—which exist both internally and externally.

Proceeding from the coarsest to the subtlest element, the Buddha first explained that the internal earth element manifests in one’s hair, nails, teeth, skin, sinews, bones, and so on, as well as bodily products like the contents of the stomach and intestines. The internal water element, he explained, manifests in the bodily liquids, such as bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, urine, and so forth. The internal fire element manifests in bodily heat, the digestive “fire,” and the ageing process (metabolism?). The internal air element manifests in the various “winds” or energy currents circulating inside the body, notably but not exclusively the lungs. The internal space element manifests in the bodily cavities. Similarly, the five elements are found externally in all things that are solid, liquid, airy, fiery, or spacious.

The Buddha further counseled Rahula that one should learn to regard both the inner and outer aspects of the various elements as not being one’s self or belonging to oneself and to develop an attitude of dispassion toward them.

Next, the Buddha instructed Rahula to make his meditation like earth, water, fire, air, and space. When one's meditation is like the five elements, all arising agreeable or disagreeable experiences cannot affect the mind negatively, just as earth bears equally all clean and unclean things that are discarded on it, water purifies equally all clean and unclean matter, fire burns equally all pure and impure things, air blows equally on undefiled and defiled things, and space contains equally all pure and impure matter.

The Buddha, furthermore, recommended to Rahula the cultivation of meditation on loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, because these respectively will remove from the mind all ill will, cruelty, discontent, and aversion.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, the Buddha explained meditation on foulness, which helps the meditator abandon lust, and meditation on impermanence, which helps the meditator to abandon the sense of self. He provided more detailed information about meditation on mindful inhalation and exhalation, which prepares the meditator for staying conscious and mindful during his very last breaths.

Obviously, we cannot equate the elements that the Buddha had in mind with the elements known to physics. The former elements are "phenomenal types," which, once understood correctly, can give us a whole new perspective on how the world functions in a way that is relevant to our human concerns. Among other things, the dharmic teaching of the five elements can show us how we can live harmoniously in the world.

It also occurred to us that a warped mind might misconstrue the Buddha's remarks about not identifying with the elements into an argument bolstering an antienvironmental stance. We must, however, understand his observation in the larger context of his teaching. Most certainly, the Buddha nowhere taught to be disrespectful of the elements or to regard them as utterly isolated from us. His teaching of co-dependent origination, indeed, shows that nothing is in complete isolation from anything else.

To practice dispassion toward the elements, as recommended by the Buddha, is the exact opposite of the kind of uncaring attitude witnessed by exploiters of the environment, who objectify Nature and her multitude of sentient beings and who either unconsciously or cynically treat them as exploitable things. Dispassion, rather, consists in respectfully allowing Nature and her children to exist in their own right, without

projecting our artificial sense of self and our countless designs, or desires, into them. This dispassion, to be sure, must be accompanied by compassionate caring.

In Mahayana Buddhism, these two attitudes—of dispassion on the one side and caring on the other—came to be doctrinally crystallized as the wisdom of emptiness (shunyata) and the practice of compassion (karuna) respectively. Wisdom without compassion would be like an icy wind, whereas compassion without wisdom would be like a hot desert wind. When cultivated and applied together, they furnish the right climate for our spiritual efforts to bear proper fruit. This seems like a particularly significant aspect of the Dharma in our time of crisis, where so many beings—both human and nonhuman—are crying out in suffering.

If biophilia, or empathy for life, is throbbing in us, we naturally want to reach out and help. And so we should. In the absence of wisdom, however, we might succumb to despair at the amount of distress around us. Where to begin? Whom to help? Will our fellow beings on this planet ever be free from suffering? Do our puny efforts even count? The following remarks by H. H. the Dalai Lama are pertinent here:

There are two kinds of caring. If you just think of your family exclusively and do not bother about other sentient beings, that is attachment. But if you practice caring for all sentient beings, your family too becomes a part of these sentient beings. . . . [S]ometimes when we pray, we want to benefit all sentient beings, except our neighbor! So we have to fight! Praying only for those sentient beings who are very far away is a mistake. When we pray for all sentient beings, our action reaches family members or neighbors in the first place. So, pray for your neighbor; you can then correctly say that you are really practicing for the benefit of all sentient beings.<sup>3</sup>

Directing our compassionate thoughts, feelings, and actions toward a close neighbor strikes us as very practical advice. We can extend our compassion from there to include ever more beings—in fact, all beings.

The Buddha compared the Dharma to a raft that can see us safely across the ocean of conditioned existence.<sup>4</sup> This dharmic raft can not only save us but also others if we—

in the spirit of bodhicitta—mightily row the raft for their benefit as well. If we were to care only for our own liberation and ignore the suffering of others, it is doubtful that we would be able to overcome the sense of self entirely, and therefore true liberation would escape us. On the Bodhisattva path, however, as our compassion for all sentient beings grows, this becomes a powerful force that propels us toward liberation. So, as we extend our reverence, compassion, and love toward others and wish for their ultimate good (which is freedom from suffering through spiritual liberation), we directly benefit as well. Thus, everyone is served well by compassion.

What, by contrast, motivates the average worldly individual? We can actually be reasonably precise in answering this question thanks to Steven Reiss, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Ohio State University, Columbus.<sup>5</sup> He investigated the psychological makeup of more than 6,000 people and learned that the “normal” person is motivated by one or more of the following sixteen desires: power, independence, curiosity, acceptance, order, saving, honor, idealism, social contact, family, status, vengeance, romance, eating, physical exercise, and tranquility. We see several motivations here that could be made the basis for a spiritual, dharmic practice. Thus, the impulse toward independence could be transformed into the urge for liberation; the impulse toward order could be transformed into the urge for a disciplined life; the impulse toward honor and idealism could be transformed into the urge for an honorable and a noble life, and the impulse toward tranquility could be transformed into the urge for spiritual equanimity and inner peace. All it takes for these select conventional motivations to become transmuted into wholesome dharmic attitudes is a shift of perspective—right view—which an unbiased study of the Dharma can provide.

To return to our opening consideration of the material elements, we all share the same elemental environment, and the same basic elements constitute both our external setting and our inner, or mental environment. This fundamental equivalence—as within, so without—is of great significance especially in the teachings of Vajrayana Buddhism and the Tibetan Bön tradition.

In Anuttara-Yoga, the highest level of yogic practice in Vajrayana, the five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—play a special role in the subtle process leading to enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> In this advanced yogic process, the inner elements are

consciously dissolved in rehearsal of the actual process at the moment of death. At a beginner's level, which is more symbolic than actual, we encounter this process in the practice of the purification of the elements in so-called Deity Yoga—the level of Yoga where the practitioner visualizes himself or herself as the chosen “deity,” such as Vajrasattva, Avalokiteshvara, the Medicine Buddha (Menla), or the female deity Tara.<sup>7</sup> This meditative identification is an exercise in creative imagination, which is continued at the so-called generation stage of Anuttara-Yoga. At the completion stage of this highly esoteric Yoga, however, the successful practitioner *becomes* identical with the deity (or Buddha or Bodhisattva) and also pursues the further practices *as* that deity.

Thus, as the deity, the adept practitioner endeavors to construct a new body for himself or herself. This involves working intensively with the internal “winds,” or pranas, which are also known in Hindu Yoga. The basic idea is to first harmonize the five fundamental inner “winds,” or currents, along with their associated elements, and then to dissolve them in the central channel that extends from the lowest psychoenergetic center or cakra (located at a place corresponding to the base of the spine in the physical body) to the highest psychoenergetic center (located at the crown of the head).

Most Vajrayana (or Buddhist Tantric) schools speak of a total of five such cakras—situated in the subtle or energy form underlying the physical body at the base of the spine, the sexual organ, the navel, the heart, and the top of the head. Some schools, notably that based on the medieval *Guhya-Samaja-Tantra*, recognize the same seven cakras that are also known in Hindu Yoga and Hindu Tantra.

We mention these rather recondite and complex matters here only because Buddhism acknowledges not only the presence and efficacy of the five elements in our inner environment (the subtle body and the mind) but also the fact that we can consciously influence them in order to harmonize the physical body and even to influence, through esoteric means, the elements of the outer world. The advanced practitioner of Anuttara-Yoga, who is interested in transmuting the physical body into an enlightened body, has all sorts of extraordinary faculties to his or her avail and will apply them skillfully whenever it seems appropriate to do so in order to help others.

At a more modest level of dharmic accomplishment, we can still use some of this understanding very effectively to our own benefit and also the benefit of others. For

instance, we can ensure that the elemental action in our body, emotions, and thoughts remains balanced and does not develop extremes, which would result in physical disease, emotional negativity, or mental distortion, or all of these. Even with a little know-how, we can pacify the elements when we see them becoming perturbed.

Thus, when the earth element is overactive, we can counteract this by preventing or correcting physical sluggishness, emotional inertia, or mental laziness. When the water element is pronounced, we can restore the balance by finding ways to overcome physical ungroundedness, emotional instability, or mental wishy-washiness. When the fire element is overactive, we can do what is necessary to prevent it from agitating our nervous system, aggravating our emotions, or shaking up our mind. When the air element is overly active, we can take measures to regulate physical fidgeting, emotional impatience, or mental disjointedness. Finally, when the space element is predominant, we can consciously seek to overcome our sense of physical disintegration, emotional disconnectedness, or mental “spaciness.”<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, as part of our regular meditation practice, we can creatively visualize the entire world as constituting a sacred circle, or mandala—the dwelling and body of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. As such, we visualize the five material elements of the world as completely radiant with purity. Then we seek to carry this sense of purity into our daily life. This “pretend” exercise is bound to have a very positive effect on our behavior and therefore also our experiences in the world. To put it bluntly, if we come to regard the world as a temple, or a mandala, we are less likely to treat it as a garbage dump. We are less likely to turn our back to the present environmental crisis.

We are also less likely to treat our own body—a replica of the universe—as a garbage dump. Rather, we will see it, as the scriptures recommend, as a platform for realizing Buddhahood. Instead of stuffing our stomachs with fast food or junk food, we feed it carefully and mindfully with wholesome, nutritious food, so that it can serve the higher purpose of liberation. Instead of abusing our body, we treat it respectfully and with kindness, while at the same time avoiding the risk of pampering it (and the ego). This, too, is a matter of green Dharma practice.

As we become more aware of the play of the elements within us and in the outside environment, we also will become more balanced in our life and dharmic practice.

Equanimity will not seem like a distant goal, and the growing silence within our mind will enable us to better hear the cries and sighs all around us, goading us to engage in compassionate action without losing our still center.

We wish to conclude this short chapter, which is meant to point the way to a green Dharma practice, with Shabkar's admonition:

You are now at the crossroad, which leads up and down—  
Don't take the wrong path!<sup>9</sup>

#### ENDNOTES: CHAPTER 10

1. The *Maharahulavada-Sutta* of the *Majjhima-Nikaya* (62.8ff.). Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 529.

2. These four types of meditation are well known as the Four Immeasurables, or the *brahma-viharas* ("Brahmic Abidings"), which are also known in Hinduism and are mentioned, for instance, in the *Yoga-Sutra* (1.33). For this text, see Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali: A New Translation and Commentary* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, repr. 1990).

3. Dalai Lama, *Many Ways to Nirvana: Reflections and Advice on Right Living*. Ed. by Renuka Singh (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2004), p. 39.

4. On the metaphor of the Dharma—more particularly the noble eightfold path—as a raft, see the *Salayatanasamyutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikaya* (35.238). Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The*

*Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Samyutta Nikāya* (Boston, Mass.: Wisdom Publications, 2000), p. 1237.

5. See Steven Reiss, *Who am I? The 16 Basic Desires That Motivate Our Actions and Define Our Personalities* (New York: J. P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).

6. For a good treatment of Anuttara-Yoga, see Daniel Cozort, *Highest Yoga Tantra: An Introduction to the Esoteric Buddhism of Tibet* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 1986).

7. For the theory and practice of Deity Yoga, see Gyatrul Rinpoche, *Generating the Deity*. Trans. by Sangye Khandro (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2d ed. 1996).

8. For an excellent treatment of the role of the five elements, see Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, *Healing With Form, Energy and Light: The Five Elements in Tibetan Shamanism, Tantra, and Dzogchen*. Ed. by Mark Dahlby (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2002).

9. Shabkar, *The Life of Shabkar: The Autobiography of a Tibetan Yogi*. Transl. by Matthieu Ricard (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2001), p. 352..



## *CHAPTER 11*

# GREENING YOUR LIFE

Every day we are bombarded with more bad news about the state of our planet, and rarely do we hear about the positive actions that countless numbers of people are making. Is it that the media do not acknowledge good news or that we have collectively come to think that our individual actions simply don't matter anyway? It's a very good moment right now to stop thinking that our personal actions don't count and instead begin regarding personal change as a positive and essential part of our daily practice beyond the perimeter of our meditation room.

There is no doubt that we have created the huge mess we are in, but we also have the ability to change things around. We understand that global change is not easy nor something that can happen overnight. But *personal* change can be relatively easy and can in fact happen instantly.

Are we challenging you? You bet we are, but more importantly we are hoping that you will take responsibility for your own actions and start doing as much as you possibly can *right now*. Nothing would thrill us more than to hear that everyone who reads this book decided to further educate him- or herself and others and become a spiritually minded environmental activist, or *Green Dharma* activist.

We make the optimistic assumption that our readers are either already environmentally active or ready to begin. To make things a bit easier for you we have listed several websites, documentaries, online documents, books, and a number of practical things to do. In compiling this list, we realized that finances may limit some people from taking immediate action, and so we have included various practical ideas that cost absolutely nothing as well as those that will mean more of a financial commitment.

The internet is full of resources and lists of organizations to assist you in finding ways to become more active in protecting and restoring our planet. Our suggestion is to

check out the links page on web sites because they will lead you to other remarkable sites.

## **Down-to-earth practical things that you can do to make a significant difference**

**Simplify your life as much possible.** Nowadays nearly every book we pick up, magazine we read, website we visit, or conversation we hear is in some way related to greening one's life. Green is big business! Not only have consumers embraced the green movement, but they also spend a lot of money doing so. Thus, instead of seeing this critical moment in time as an incredible opportunity to simplify their lives, they turn it into a shopping extravaganza where every facet of their lives must be made green at whatever cost, even if that means at a greater cost to the environment. As our local garbage dump would show, often people simply discard perfectly useable items just to have a newer or more fashionable "green" one.

One of the most important aspects of a green lifestyle can't be purchased, and that is the idea of simplification. If we look around our homes, we will probably have to admit that we are overconsumers. How much stuff do we need, and where do we draw the line? One of the most cost-effective ways of making a positive impact on the environment is to simply use—and buy—less. Become aware of how your lifestyle impacts the environment. Make a list of what kind of "stuff" you use daily, weekly and occasionally, as well as how you live your life in general. This practice may be mind-boggling at first, but it will definitely help you to see where you can readily make positive changes. Please take the time to watch [\*The Story of Stuff\*](#).

**Think twice before you purchase something.** Do you really need it? Can you find it used? Where is it made and under what conditions? (If it's made overseas, think not only twice about it but three or four times.) If it is broken, can it be repaired? Can it be recycled or be reused by someone else? Educate yourself about the resources in your

community and make a list of all the secondhand stores, fixit shops and individuals in your area that know how to repair the things you have.

**Be an environmentally and socially conscious consumer.** If you are thinking about purchasing something make your first choice thrift stores, vintage stores and garage sales and look into renting or borrowing it instead of purchasing it. If you still decide that you want to purchase an item, please find the product that will have the least impact on the environment and that is made in a socially responsible manner (i.e., fair trade, which does not exploit the local population).

**Reduce, reuse, and recycle!** Try to reduce waste by choosing reusable and recyclable products. Remember that a product may say it is recyclable but you may not be able to recycle where you live. Learn about what and where your community recycles. The United States generates approximately 230 million tons of "trash" annually of which 70 percent is recyclable or reusable materials, BUT only about one quarter of it is actually reused or recycled. A wonderful exercise is to visit your local garbage dump and take a look at everything that goes into it. You may be very surprised to see articles that are reusable and only ended up there because someone wanted something newer, more convenient, or simply more fashionable. People have reported finding boxes of new nails and shingles for housing projects, sheets of plywood, guitars, furniture as well as numerous other new or slightly used items. Please be sure that everything that leaves your house for the garbage dump has no other home to go to.

**Try to find products with as little packaging as possible.** A perfect example is a box of tea that has tea leaves in a bag that is wrapped in paper or plastic, that is boxed and then wrapped in plastic again. Is this over packaging or what? Buy products in bulk when possible and look for products that have little or no packaging. Encourage the stores where you shop to purchase products that are designed with the environment in mind, not the dump. Remember that you are the consumers and what you do does count. When it comes to the commercial world, you are supposed to be "king."

**Purchase only 100% recycled and chlorine-free paper products or try an alternative paper like hemp or kenaf.** This includes printing and writing paper, paper towels, toilet paper and tissue paper. The National Resources Defense Council site states that if every household in the United States replaced just one roll of virgin fiber paper towels (70 sheets) with 100% recycled ones, we could save 544,000 trees every year. There is absolutely no good reason to purchase anything other than recycled paper. New products are popping up every day, and with more pressure from consumers all stores will be forced into stocking a wide range of environmentally friendly products to suit everyone's needs.

**Go paperless.** According to [Wood Consumption.org](http://WoodConsumption.org), the United States annually consumes 350 million magazines and 25 billion newspapers. Reading your newspaper and magazine subscriptions online and switching to electronic banking and credit card payment whenever possible is an efficient way of conserving the forests.

**Remove yourself from junk mail lists.** One hundred million trees are used every year to stuff our mailboxes with junk! In Canada check out the [Red Dot Campaign](#) and in the United States, [Forest Ethics](#) or [Green Dimes](#).

**Encourage publishers of books, magazines and newspapers to use ancient forest friendly 100% post-consumer recycled paper for all their printing needs and congratulate those that do.** Make a point of looking at the content of every book, magazine and newspaper before you consider purchasing or subscribing to it. The key words to look for are: Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), 100% post-consumer recycled paper, Ancient Forest Friendly, Agricultural fibres, chlorine-free and vegetable-based inks. For a list of definitions please refer to [Market Initiative](#).

**Take a shower instead of a bath and challenge yourself to make it the quickest shower possible.** Water for bathing and showering accounts for two-thirds of all water-heating costs. If you're staying away from home, please remember that water is water no matter where you use it and who is paying for it. And water is getting scarce around the

globe! Encourage your friends and family members to be part of the ever growing water-conscious community worldwide.

**Install low-flow shower heads and low-flow faucet aerators.** Low-flow showerheads use about 2 gallons of water per minute compared to conventional showerheads, which use 4-7 gallons per minute. Consider purchasing a low-flow showerhead with a shut-off button, which allows you to be very water energy efficient—you can interrupt the flow while you lather up or shampoo and then resume at the same flow rate and temperature. This low-cost idea has significant savings for water, energy, and your pocketbook.

**Switch your washing machine to cold water wash only.** If all U.S. washers were switched from hot water to cold water it could mean a savings of about 30 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> per year. An estimated 80–90% of the energy used to wash your clothes is used to heat the water. Your clothes get just as clean in cold water as they do in warm water, and the added bonus is that cold water extends the lifespan of all your clothes.

**Recycle and Reuse Water.** Never waste water by letting it run down the drain when there may be another use for it, such as watering a plant or garden, or cleaning. Please remember that you will need to use biodegradable products in the water so as to not cause additional harm to the environment. Visit [EcoWaters Projects](#) to learn more.

**Find your local watershed and learn how to protect it.** If there are no active groups, consider starting your own.

**Use a clothesline or clothes-drying rack instead of your dryer whenever possible.** Make use of the gift of free energy from wind and sun. Not all communities allow outdoor clothes drying. So, if yours doesn't, please work toward changing that.

**Turn down your water heater to 120 F or 49 C.** Most water heaters are set to have water scalding hot, for which there is no need. If you plan to be away for an extended period of time, set your water-heater thermostat to a minimum setting, and if you are shopping for a new one, choose a high-efficiency unit.

**Promptly repair any leaks in your faucets and hot water pipes.** A typical steadily leaking tap can waste over 528 gallons a month or 6336 gallons a year! With the growing concern of global water shortage, repairing leaky taps and pipes is a must. It's also a very simple way to reduce personal water consumption.

**Practice eco-friendly flushing.** “If it's yellow, let it mellow. If it's brown, flush it down.” The average four-person family flushes the toilet about 20,000 times a year. Even if you are using a water-efficient toilet, that still amounts to 1.6 gallons (6 litres) per flush—an incredible amount of water flushed away every year.

**Choose to have an environmentally friendly yard and garden.** Choose native and/or drought-tolerant grasses, ground covers, shrubs and trees to assist in reducing the need for fertilizer, and do not use dangerous pesticides. Consider purchasing a solar or push-reel mower instead of the conventional gas or electric mower, and also educate yourself on xeriscaping, permaculture and organic gardening.

**Turn your thermostat at least 2 degrees down in the winter and 2 degrees up in the summer.** Consider installing a programmable thermostat, and program it to fit your individual needs such as having it set even lower when you are at work or gone for several days. Another cost-effective way of reducing your energy consumption is to use blinds and drapes. Window coverings can keep the heat out in the summer and in during the cold winter nights.

**Turn off everything that you are not using and unplug appliances when you are not sure whether you will be using them again shortly.** A surprising number of small household appliances use energy all the time, even when switched off. According to [Building Green TV](#) , TVs and VCRs alone waste \$1 billion in lost electricity in the U.S. annually. Take a walk around your home to see what you have plugged in and whether or not it is necessary. Plug all equipment into a power bar and turn the power bar off or simply get into the habit of unplugging things when you are finished with them.

**Purchase locally grown and produced organic food whenever possible, or better yet, if you have access to garden space, grow your own.** The average American meal travels 1500 miles to get from the farm to your plate. You don't have to be a math wizard to figure out that your eating habits can contribute to an enormous amount of carbon dioxide emissions, plus by buying local you will be making a positive contribution to your community. Find farmers' markets, family farms, community gardens, and other sources of sustainably grown food near you, and if possible, grow your own delicious and pesticide-free fruits and vegetables.

**Eliminate fast food from your diet.** The fast food industry creates an enormous amount of waste and does not support local producers. In the United States, consumers spent about US\$110 billion on fast food in 2000. That amount of money could plant approximately 1.2 trillion trees annually through [Trees for the Future](#).

**Take your own containers.** If you choose to eat out at a restaurant, bring your own reusable containers with you. According to [Bring Your Own Bags](#), a Starbucks waste audit found that its 13.5 million customers who brought their own cups kept an estimated 586,800 pounds of paper from landfills in 2003.

**Become a vegetarian or a vegan.** Animal agriculture creates soil, water, and air pollution and is a major contributor to global warming. It is also the cause of great suffering to non-human beings. The practice of non-harming not only refers to the environment but to all beings living on our blue planet. According to Viva.com, in the UK alone an estimated 850 million animals and hundreds of millions of fish are killed every year to put meat on tables. Before they are slaughtered, hundreds of millions lead desolate, disease-ridden lives on factory farms. Rainforests are cleared for grazing, methane from livestock causes global warming, soil is eroded by livestock, and their runoff poisons waterways. While some 750 million people are starving, one-third of the world's grain is fed to farmed animals. Check out the following sites for free vegan and vegetarian recipes: [Living Vegan](#), [Vegan Menu](#), [International Vegetarian Union](#), [Veg Web](#), [Vegan Chef](#).

**Compost.** If you can't do it outdoors, try indoor vermicomposting (using friendly little worms). Check out your local library for books that teach you how to compost properly or look for articles online. You can find numerous composting bin plans at the following site:  
<http://www4.uwm.edu//shwec/publications/cabinet/html/compost/Bin%20Plans.htm>

**Say no to every plastic bag that is offered to you.** According to Morsbags.com over 1 million plastic bags are consumed per minute globally—an insane practice, since plastic doesn't decompose for a very long time and tends to end up in the ocean. Make the switch over to cloth shopping bags for ALL your shopping needs, not just at the grocery store. Many communities are moving toward an environment free of plastic shopping bags. Please encourage yours to do the same. Please visit the following site to find a pattern for an easy-to-make shopping bag: [Morsbags.com](http://Morsbags.com)

**Plant trees.** Get involved with [Trees for the Future](#) and consider their program for an alternative to conventional gift giving. Plant trees around your house to save an average of 20–25% in energy cost, in comparison to an unsheltered house. Contact your community leaders and ask them if they have a tree planting program; and if so, volunteer and if not, consider starting one yourself.

**Rethink gift-giving.** Instead of gifting family and friends with more stuff (and packaging), consider some of the options featured at the following sites: [Alternative Gifts](#), [Just Give](#), [Kiva](#), [Mercy Corps](#), [Trees for the Future](#), or select any social or environmental organization that appeals to you as a target for your generosity on behalf of your family and friends.

**Make the switch to green power.** Many energy service providers have this option available, and it may only cost you a few extra dollars a month. Ask your local provider for more information.



**Learn ways to use solar and wind energy.** There are many cost-efficient ways of using the Sun's energy for everyday uses, such as cooking and heating water. Learn about what programs are available in your area and check out [Build it Solar](#) for resource materials, or order plans from [Morning Sun Press](#).

**Change your transportation habits.** Walk, bike, carpool, skateboard, rollerblade (where allowed), and use public transportation like bus and train whenever possible.

**Fly less often, if at all.** Consider vacationing closer to home (or at home). If you need to attend conferences and meetings as part of your work, look into video and phone conferencing. If you absolutely must fly, do so during the daytime, because studies have shown that flights taken at night have a greater impact on the climate. Fly economy, pack light, and please purchase high-quality carbon offsets. Please take the time to read the [Consumers Guide to Retail Carbon Offset Providers](#).

**Be a real eco-traveler.** Eco-tourism is a very fast growing industry and is not necessarily environmentally friendly. Consider exploring and volunteering closer to your own home, and please remember that air-travel is a major contributor to global warming even if your adventure has "eco" attached to it. If you absolutely must indulge in eco-traveling, please reread the preceding paragraph.

**Do not use plastic water bottles.** Drink tap water that is safe to drink and, if necessary, filter your tap water with a filtering system like [Aguasana](#). If you need to carry water with you, choose a stainless steel or glass water bottle. Commercial bottled water is not only grossly overpriced but also when packaged in plastic containers leaks phthalates; it is a major contributor to land, air, and water pollution and may be quite hazardous to your health. Check out [Sigg](#) for a safe alternative to plastic water bottles.

**Switch your investments over to socially and environmentally responsible investments, and be sure that all future investments are done by your broker or bank in the same manner.** Be proactive in learning how your money is being invested,

and ensure that the companies you support address issues relating to positive environmental and social action. Many so-called “ethical” investment packages are far from environment friendly.

**Replace your incandescent bulbs light bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs.**

They not only last about 10 times longer but also use 75% less energy than incandescent light bulbs.

**Use only environmentally friendly cleaning products.** Many of the commonly used cleaning products are full of toxic chemicals, which not only pollute our bodies but also the environment. There are several eco-cleaning products on the market, or you can make your own following the easy to make recipes at the following link (please copy and paste this link into your browser otherwise it will not work):

[http://www.davidsuzuki.org/files/NC/Green\\_cleaning\\_recipes.pdf](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/files/NC/Green_cleaning_recipes.pdf)

**Use organic body products.** The average person uses approximately 10 different products on their body in a single day! Try to reduce the number of products and only use organic products. Check out [Saffron Rouge](#) for a wide variety of organic body care products or [Mountain Rose Herbs](#). Alternatively, try your hand at making your own, which is not difficult.

**If you are purchasing or renting a vehicle, look for the most fuel-efficient and lowest polluting one available.** Perhaps, consider a plug-in hybrid.

**Be an environmentally conscious driver.** Avoid unnecessary idling, maintain correct tire pressure, maintain moderate speeds, accelerate smoothly, remove excess weight from your vehicle. Also, have regular maintenance done to keep your vehicle functioning efficiently.

**Go carbon neutral.** Going carbon neutral is a relatively easy way of taking responsibility for the negative environmental impact that we create in our daily lives. Check out [The Consumer's Guide to Retail Carbon Offset Providers](#), and please don't use offsetting as a substitute for simplifying the way you live.

**Take action by writing, emailing or calling your political leaders and voting.** Political leaders are influenced by the public, and you can make a big difference by simply speaking up. The Internet has made voicing our opinions much easier. Please take a few minutes every week to sign online petitions. Here is a list of some of the sites that offer petitions to sign: [Avaaz.org](#), [Care2 Make a Difference](#), [Co-op America](#), [Greenpeace](#) and [Biogems](#).

**Support your public library.** Not many things are free these days, but libraries still are (unless, of course, you have overdue items), and they are great resources for books, DVDs, CDs, magazines, and newspapers, which you might otherwise purchase. If you don't see it on the shelf, ask the staff if they can order it.

**Encourage your business, organization, school, family and friends to reduce their carbon emissions, and share this list with everyone you know!**

## *Websites*

**Adbusters.** An anti-consumerist organization based in Canada: [www.adbusters.org](http://www.adbusters.org)

**Avaaz.org.** A web movement that promotes action on issues such as climate change, religious conflict and human rights through global online petitions:

<http://www.avaaz.org/en/>

**Bicycle City.** This is a planned, urban design community where people live, work and play. Its eco-friendly, car-free design is healthy, sustainable and animal friendly:

<http://www.bicyclecity.com/>

**Bountiful Gardens.** A U.S. non-profit organization and a project of Ecology Action, which does garden research and publishes books. A great source of untreated open-pollinated seed of heirloom quality for vegetables, herbs, flowers, grains.

<http://www.bountifulgardens.org/>

**Build It Solar.** A renewable energy site for do-it-yourselfers:

<http://www.builditsolar.com/>

**Care2 Make a Difference.** The largest online community for people who want to make a difference, offering news, green living section, newsletters and petitions: [www.care2.com](http://www.care2.com)

**Climate Wire.** This is a leading international news service specifically focusing on the issue of climate change: [www.climatewire.org](http://www.climatewire.org)

**Co-op America.** Promotes environmental sustainability and social and economic justice through consumer education: [www.coopamerica.org](http://www.coopamerica.org)

**David Suzuki Foundation.** A science-based Canadian environmental organization with a website that is second to none for accurate, well-researched information:

[www.davidsuzuki.org](http://www.davidsuzuki.org)

**Earth Day Network.** A site that offers an Ecological Footprint Quiz for all different areas of the world. <http://earthday.net/Footprint/index.asp>

**Earth Island Institute.** Develops and supports projects that counteract threats to the biological and cultural diversity that sustain the environment. Through education and

activism, these projects promote the conservation, preservation, and restoration of the Earth. <http://www.earthisland.org>

**Ecological Buddhism.** A website dedicated to educating the Buddhist community about global warming: <http://www.ecobuddhism.org/>

**Environmental Health News.** Provides links to articles on environmental health issues: [www.environmentalhealthnews.org](http://www.environmentalhealthnews.org)

**Ecowaters Projects.** Develops, promotes and demonstrates better wastewater management systems and practices, with an emphasis on source-separation and utilization approaches. <http://www.ecowaters.org/>

**E/The Environmental Magazine.** Provides information, news, and resources for people concerned about the environment: [www.emagazine.com](http://www.emagazine.com)

**Environmental Working Group.** Educational site addressing various environmental issues. <http://www.ewg.org/>

**Forest Ethics.** A U.S. site to help you resolve your junk mail issues. <http://www.forestethics.org/>

**Friends of the Earth Canada or U.S.A.** Serves as a voice for the environment and for the renewal of communities and the Earth through research, education, and advocacy: [www.foecanada.org](http://www.foecanada.org) or [www.foe.org](http://www.foe.org)

**Global Giving.** An organization that connects people who have world-changing ideas with people that can support them: <http://www.globalgiving.com/>

**Greenpeace Canada / Greenpeace U.S.A.** A global organization that campaigns for various issues—from global warming to genetic engineering: [www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org) or [www.greenpeaceusa.org](http://www.greenpeaceusa.org)

**Green Press Initiative.** Assists those in the book and newspaper industries to better understand their impact on endangered forests, indigenous communities, and the Earth's climate. Consider referring your preferred publishers to this organization.

<http://www.greenpressinitiative.org/>

**Grist.** A trustworthy environmental news site. <http://www.grist.org>

**Kiva.** Connects people through lending for the sake of alleviating poverty. Kiva is the world's first person-to-person micro-lending website, empowering individuals to lend directly to unique entrepreneurs in the developing world.

<http://www.kiva.org/app.php?page=home>

**Liberation of Brother and Sister Animals (LobsA).** An Australian-based organization whose focus is international animal rights activism and the promotion of veganism:

[http://www.lobsa.org/About\\_LOBSA.htm](http://www.lobsa.org/About_LOBSA.htm)

**Markets Initiative.** An organization that offers valuable information about how to shift the consumption patterns of industrial paper consumers, so that their purchases do not destroy ancient and endangered forests, such as Canada's Boreal, temperate rainforests and the tropical forests <http://www.marketsinitiative.org/>

**Mercy Corp.** Mercy Corps assists in alleviating suffering, poverty and oppression by helping people build secure, productive and just communities.

<http://www.mercycorps.org/mercykits>

**National Resources Defense Council.** This is one of the most effective environmental action organizations: [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org)

**Nature Conservatory.** One of the leading conservation organizations working around the world to protect ecologically important lands and waters for Nature and people.

<http://www.nature.org/?src=t1>

**Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides.** Offers news updates, action alerts, programs and various publications on alternatives to pesticides: [www.pesticide.org](http://www.pesticide.org)

**One Planet, One Life.** Works toward educating the public about the global environmental crisis, specifically the Sixth Mass Extinction (i.e. loss of biodiversity): <http://oneplanetonelife.com>

**Planet Air.** A high quality not-for-profit carbon offset vendor. This is one of the few vendors that appears to encourage people to reduce their greenhouse gas emission not just offset them. <http://planetair.ca/>

**Post Carbon Institute.** An organization offering research and education to assist in implementing proactive strategies for our energy-constrained world. <http://www.postcarbon.org/>

**Red Dot Campaign.** A Canadian site to help you resolve your junk mail issues. <http://www.reddotcampaign.ca/>

**ReUseIt Network.** The mission of this organization is to reduce the human footprint on Earth by promoting conservation of resources and providing an opportunity for individuals and communities to take action. Reduce, reuse and recycle: <http://reuseitnetwork.org/>

**Salt Spring Seeds.** A veteran company that supplies untreated, open-pollinated and non-GMO heritage and heirloom seeds for Canadians. <http://www.saltspringseeds.com/>

**Seeds of Diversity.** A Canadian charitable organization dedicated to the conservation, documentation and use of public-domain nonhybrid plants: [www.seeds.ca](http://www.seeds.ca)

**Seed Sanctuary for Canada.** A charitable organization dedicated to the health and vitality of the earth through the preservation and promotion of heritage and heirloom seeds: <http://www.seedsanctuary.com>

**Shabkar.Org.** A non-profit website site dedicated to vegetarianism as a Buddhist way of life. This site has a wealth of information including articles, videos and audios, scriptures and teachers dedicated to vegetarianism:

<http://www.shabkar.org/vegetarianism/index.htm>

**The Green Guide.** Provides information about various environmental issues and practical advice: [www.thegreenguide.com](http://www.thegreenguide.com)

**The Simple Living Network** provides resources, tools, examples and contacts for conscious, simple, healthy and restorative living: <http://www.simpleliving.net/main/>

**The Union of Concerned Scientists.** A group of scientists who combine independent scientific research and citizen action to help implement solutions to environmental and global security issues: [www.ucsusa.org](http://www.ucsusa.org)

**Trees for the Future.** A nonprofit that initiates and supports agroforestry self-help projects in cooperation with groups and individuals in developing countries: [www.plant-trees.org](http://www.plant-trees.org)

**Transition Network.** An organization that supports and trains communities as they consider adopting, adapting and implementing the transition model in order to establish a Transition Initiative in their locale. The transition model emboldens communities to look at peak oil and climate change and work as a community to sustain themselves and thrive. <http://www.transitiontowns.org/>

**Veggie123.com.** Offers a well-researched free e-book entitled *How to Successfully Become a Vegetarian* by Rudy Hadisentosa: <http://www.veggie123.com/>

**WorldChanging.** An ongoing weblog discussing and analyzing tools, ideas, models, and technologies for building a better future: [www.worldchanging.com](http://www.worldchanging.com)



**World Resources Institute.** WRI's publications, podcasts, and articles offer in-depth treatments of issues covered in *Green Dharma*: [www.wri.org](http://www.wri.org)

**Worldwatch Institute.** An independent research organization known for its fact-based analysis of critical global issues. <http://www.worldwatch.org/>

**World Wildlife Fund.** An international organization operating in more than 100 countries, which works for a future in which humans live in harmony with Nature: [www.panda.org](http://www.panda.org)

## ***Online Documents***

***Transitions Initiative Primer*** – A 50 page document that provides an overview for communities to make a transition to a lower energy future and to greater levels of community resilience: <http://transitionnetwork.org/Primer/TransitionInitiativesPrimer.pdf>

***Consumer's Guide to Retail Carbon Offset Providers*** – A well-researched guide that everyone should read before finding a carbon offset provider: <http://www.cleanair-coolplanet.org/ConsumersGuidetoCarbonOffsets.pdf>

***Climate Code Red: The Case For a Sustainability Emergency*** by David Spratt and Philip Sutton. A well-researched call to action that reveals extensive scientific evidence that the global warming crisis is far worse than governments had expected, take into account in their policies, or would like the public to know: <http://www.climatecoded.net/>

***Cry From the Forest*** – A valuable manual that serves as a community learning tool from the perspective of Buddhism and Ecology in Cambodia: <http://www.camdev.org/Publications/Cry-English-Revised-for-printing.pdf>

***How to Save the Climate*** by Greenpeace International – An easy-to understand document about climate change, which will appeal to all age groups:

<http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/international/press/reports/how-to-save-the-climate-pers.pdf>

***Driven to Action: A Citizen's Toolkit.*** Produced by the David Suzuki Foundation

***Part 3: Shaping Decisions*** – This document describes how to be an effective lobbyist:

<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/files/Climate/Ontario/shapingdecisions.pdf>

***Part 4: Working with the Media*** – This document describes how to get media attention for environmental projects: <http://www.davidsuzuki.org/files/Climate/Ontario/sprawl-media-tips.pdf>

**Save Trees By Making Your Own Recycled Paper** – An educational document describing how to make your own paper out of the paper you use. This is a fun and easy project to do on your own or to share with children.

[http://erc.openschool.bc.ca/ERC/features/paper\\_making.pdf](http://erc.openschool.bc.ca/ERC/features/paper_making.pdf)

***Achieving a Pesticide Bylaw Toolkit*** – An excellent community action toolkit developed by the Sierra Club of Canada with action plans and fact sheets to help people get their municipality to pass laws restricting pesticides.

<http://www.sierraclub.ca/atlantic/programs/healthycommunities/pesticides/index.htm>

**The Carbon Cost of Christmas** by Gary Haq, Anne Owen, Elena Dawkins and John Barrett and The Stockholm Environment Institute – A well-researched document showing the environmental impact of the Christmas season.

<http://www.climatetalk.org.uk/downloads/CarbonCostofChristmas2007.pdf>

*Letter from Thây.* Blue Cliff Monastery. October 12, 2007

Thich Nhat Hanh's beautiful letter to spiritual practitioners on the subject of the importance of adopting a vegetarian lifestyle.

[http://www.deerparkmonastery.org/news/TNH\\_Letter\\_October\\_2007.pdf](http://www.deerparkmonastery.org/news/TNH_Letter_October_2007.pdf)

**Guide to Less Toxic Products** by Environmental Health Association of Nova Scotia

<http://www.lesstoxicguide.ca/index.asp>

**The David Suzuki Foundation.** You will find an incredible number of free, downloadable, and noteworthy publications on various environmental issues.

<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Publications/>

## ***Documentaries***

**The Story of Stuff** takes a humorous look at the underside of our production and consumption patterns. **The Story of Stuff** exposes the connections between a huge number of environmental and social issues.

<http://www.storyofstuff.com/>

**Altered Oceans.** A five-part series on the crisis in the seas by Kenneth R. Weiss and

Usha Lee McFarling: <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/oceans/la-oceans-series,0,7842752.special>

**Bullfrog Films.** One of the best sites to find documentaries on the environment, ecology, ethics, consumerism, as well as animal and human rights: <http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/>

**Earthlings.** The most comprehensive full-length documentary ever produced that addresses the correlation between nature, animals, and human economic interests. We highly recommend this film and hope that everyone who reads this book sees this

powerful and thought-provoking film and recommends it to family and friends. Please be warned that this film contains very graphic and disturbing images. <http://veg-tv.info/Earthlings>

**Frontline.** Must-see online documentaries: Hot Politics, Harvest of Fear (GM foods) Kim's Nuclear Gamble, Merchants of Cool, News War, The Persuaders, and What's Up with the Weather, Is Wal-Mart Good for America?:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/view/>

**Global Dimming.** A powerful and alarming documentary about how pollution is affecting the world we live in and how we cannot fully understand global warming without also taking into account the phenomenon of global dimming:

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## AFTERWORD

We started working on this book at the end of October, 2007, a few months after completing *Green Yoga*. It is now the end of January, 2008. In the interim period of only three months, scientists have arrived at a much clearer and much scarier picture of the speed with which global warming is occurring and busily undoing the fine balance of Nature. The melting of the polar ice caps, which is happening ten times faster than thought even a couple of years ago, has researchers alarmed. It bodes ill for the near future. Humanity's mental alarm bells should all be ringing nonstop and at 100 decibels; but they are as yet ominously silent.

Looking at the forbidding evidence as dispassionately as one can, we feel a sense of deep regret for our own co-responsibility in the unraveling disaster. We also feel a sense of great obligation to share with fellow Dharma practitioners our knowledge and understanding of the situation. We realize that some readers will shrug off our warnings in this book as alarmist. We hope that their opinion will not prevent them from checking into the abundantly available evidence themselves and to see the world as it really is. You wouldn't characterize a fire fighter who responds to a 911 call as an alarmist. He acts on the information given and must assume the emergency call is authentic and not a hoax. Similarly, our book's perspective on the environmental crisis is based on reported knowledge—the facts and figures provided by responsible scientists from diverse areas of expertise. The likelihood of thousands of scientists misinterpreting the evidence is virtually nil, particularly as the innate conservatism of science does not favor exaggerated claims, and so scientists are wary of making them. If anything, scientists have thus far been reluctant to believe their own findings: our planet is in dire trouble.

Our civilization's scientific-technological imagination has taken us and our planet's entire biosphere to the steep precipice where extinction has become a possibility, even a likely scenario. With our imaginative mind, we must now embrace a viable future for humankind and all other beings. This is the philosophical and emotional challenge before us nowadays. If we fail to exercise our imagination in a wholesome manner, which requires us to see the larger picture, our previous imaginative paths will prove a fatal cul-

de-sac. As eco-philosopher Henryk Skolimowski put it in his book *The Participatory Mind*:

If we articulate our consciousness in the image of the Buddha, we can be proud of the *anthropos* in us.<sup>1</sup>

That is, if we were to strive toward Buddhahood, we would not strive—unconsciously or otherwise—toward the demise of the human species or the collapse of the whole biosphere. We would not be suicidal. Our imagination would be wholesome.

When we pirouette on thin ice, our skates will not only make a groove but dig a hole that can destabilize the ice on which we stand and cause us to sink into icy water. We are presently pirouetting in a crazy fashion.

Unless we are totally mistaken, we cannot picture the Buddha as sitting back and doing nothing about the environment if he were alive today. Rather, we would like to think that he would invest all his spiritual powers to help the Earth from a higher plane of consciousness and at the same time exhort everyone to employ the Dharma for their personal welfare and the welfare of all beings on this planet.

We all must make a drastic turn-about, and we must do so NOW. There is no time to waste. We hope and pray that Dharma practitioners everywhere will have the wisdom to recognize the importance of this moment in time, have the will and courage to change radically, and be spared the great suffering that will be unleashed upon this planet if humanity cannot mend its ways. It is also our hope that Dharma practitioners around the world will step out of their personal comfort zone and, motivated by compassion, demonstrate true eco heroism by vigorously and quickly making their own lifestyle sustainable and by encouraging others to do the same.

Life is too precious to impair or, worse, to destroy.

#### ENDNOTE: AFTERWORD

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