

# ECODHARMA

*Buddhist  
Teachings  
for the  
Ecological  
Crisis*

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# Introduction

## *On a Precipice?*

IT IS NO EXAGGERATION to say that today humanity faces its greatest challenge ever: in addition to burgeoning social crises, a self-inflicted ecological catastrophe threatens civilization as we know it and (according to some scientists) perhaps even our survival as a species. I hesitate to describe this as an *apocalypse* because that term is now associated with Christian millenarianism, but its original meaning certainly applies: literally, an *apocalypse* is “an uncovering,” the disclosure of something hidden—in this case revealing the ominous consequences of what we have been doing to the earth and to ourselves.

Traditional Buddhist teachings help us wake up individually and realize our interdependence with others. Now we also need to consider how Buddhism can help us wake up and respond to this new predicament. And what does the eco-crisis imply about how we understand and practice Buddhism? Those are the themes this book explores.

The first chapter, “Is Climate Change the Problem?” offers an overview of our present situation. Although the overwhelming urgency of escalating climate change requires our unwavering attention and wholehearted efforts, we nonetheless need to realize that it is actually not the fundamental issue that confronts us today. That is because “global warming” is only part of a much larger environmental and social crisis that compels us to reflect on the values and direction of

our now global civilization. It is necessary to emphasize this because many people assume that if we can just convert quickly enough to renewable sources of energy, our economy and society can continue to function indefinitely in much the same way. We need to realize that climate change is merely the proverbial tip of the iceberg, the most urgent symptom of a predicament that has more profound implications.

The chapter explores this by looking at what's happening with the oceans, agriculture, freshwater aquifers, persistent organic pollutants (POPs), nuclear accidents, radioactive waste, global population, and—of particular concern from a Buddhist perspective—the fact that we are already well into the planet's sixth great extinction event, in which a large percentage of the earth's plant and animal species are rapidly disappearing. This summary can offer only a snapshot: changes are happening so quickly that much of what I write is likely to be outdated by the time this book is published. You can add your own "favorite" issue to this litany (the collapse of honeybee colonies, anyone?), but another dimension also needs to be emphasized: the "intersection" of these environmental issues with social justice concerns such as racism, ethnicity, gender, neocolonialism, and class. Recently it has become clearer that the ecological problems mentioned above, and the inequitable and hierarchical structures of most human societies, are not separate issues. The 2016 Standing Rock resistance movement in North Dakota, which brought together Native American "water protectors" with nonindigenous groups such as war veterans, was a watershed event in consolidating those movements. In the last few years American Buddhism has begun to address such concerns, including the lack of diversity within our own sanghas. This conversation is being led by an increasing number of teachers of color, who discuss the relevant social issues far better than I can do in this book—they include, for example, Mushim Ikeda, Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, Rod Owens, and angel Kyodo Williams.

In response to ecological challenges, many Buddhist teachings can be cited, but this first chapter focuses on an issue that recurs in later chapters: the problem of means and ends. The extraordinary

irony is that we have become so obsessed with exploiting and abusing our actual treasure—a flourishing biosphere with healthy forests and topsoil, lakes and oceans full of marine life, an unpolluted atmosphere—in order to maximize something that in itself has no value whatsoever—namely, digital numbers in bank accounts. Because all the world’s economies are wholly owned subsidiaries of the earth’s biosphere, our preoccupation with ever-increasing production and consumption is now disrupting the ecosystems of our planet.

Another important factor should not be overlooked: we abuse the earth in the ways we do because our predominant worldview about nature rationalizes that misuse. It is our collective (mis)understanding of what the world is, and who we are, that encourages obsession with economic growth and consumption. It is no coincidence that the ecological crisis has developed when and where it has. Most of the problems discussed in this chapter are connected to a questionable mechanistic worldview that unreservedly exploits the natural world because it attributes no inherent value to nature—or to humans, for that matter, insofar as we too are viewed as nothing more than complex machines. This implies that the ecological crisis is something more than a technological problem, or an economic problem, or a political problem. It is also a collective spiritual crisis, and a potential turning point in our history.

This brings us to the topic of chapter 2, “Is the Eco-Crisis Also a Buddhist Crisis?” The ecological and social challenges we face now go far beyond the individual suffering that Buddhism has conventionally been concerned with, so it is not surprising that Buddhist practitioners and institutions have been slow to engage with those issues. On the positive side, Buddhism clearly has the potential to do so. From the beginning its basic teachings have emphasized impermanence and insubstantiality, and this applies to itself. Buddhism is not just what the Buddha said but what he began, and what he began soon spread far beyond its birthplace by interacting with other cultures. Chan/Zen

Buddhism, for example, developed in China due to cross-fertilization between Mahayana Buddhism and indigenous Daoism. Today, however, the Asian Buddhist traditions face their greatest challenge ever, as they infiltrate a globalized, secular, hyper-technologized postmodern world that may be self-destructing.

On the negative side, some traditional Buddhist teachings discourage us from social and ecological engagement. If the spiritual goal is an individual salvation that involves not being reborn into this world of suffering, craving, and delusion, why should we be so concerned about what is happening here? In contrast to such an *otherworldly* orientation, however, many contemporary Buddhists doubt the existence of any transcendent reality and are skeptical of karma as an ethical law of cause-and-effect built into the way the universe functions. They understand the Buddhist path more psychologically, as a therapy that provides new perspectives on mental distress and new practices to promote *this-worldly* well-being. Otherworldly Buddhism (which aims to escape this world) and this-worldly Buddhism (which helps us harmonize with it better) seem like polar opposites, yet they usually share an indifference to the problems of this world. Neither is much concerned to help it become a better place.

There is another way to understand the essential teaching of Buddhism. Instead of trying to transcend this world, or fit into it better, we can awaken and experience the world, including ourselves, in a different way. This involves deconstructing and reconstructing the sense of self, or (more precisely) the relationship between oneself and one's world. Meditation deconstructs the self, because we "let go" of the habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting that compose it. At the same time, our sense of self is reconstructed in daily life, by transforming the most important habitual patterns: our motivations, which affect not only how we relate to other people but how we actually perceive them and the world generally. In chapter 2 this alternative perspective is explored by unpacking an enigmatic aphorism of Chögyam Trungpa: "Enlightenment is like falling out of an airplane. The bad news is that there is no parachute. The good news is that there is no ground."

As we begin to wake up and realize that we are not separate from each other, nor from this wondrous earth, we realize that the ways we live together and relate to the earth need to be reconstructed too. That means not only social engagement as individuals helping other individuals, but finding ways to address the problematic economic and political structures that are deeply implicated in the eco-crisis and the social justice issues that confront us today. Ultimately the paths of personal transformation and social transformation are not really separate from each other. Engagement in the world is how our individual awakening blossoms, and contemplative practices such as meditation ground our activism, transforming it into a spiritual path.

The Buddhist response to our ecological predicament is *ecodharma*, a new term for a new development of the Buddhist tradition. It combines ecological concerns (*eco*) with the teachings of Buddhism and related spiritual traditions (*dharma*). What that actually means, and what difference it makes in how we live and practice, is still unfolding, so this book emphasizes the three components or aspects that stand out for me: practicing in the natural world, exploring the eco-implications of Buddhist teachings, and embodying that understanding in the eco-activism that is needed today.

The importance of meditating in nature is often undervalued because its implications are overlooked. Chapter 3, “What Are We Overlooking?” reflects on why religious founders so often experience their spiritual transformation by leaving human society and going into the wilderness. Following his baptism, Jesus went into the desert where he fasted for forty days and nights alone. Muhammad’s revelations occurred when he retreated into a cave, where he was visited by the archangel Gabriel. Perhaps the best example, however, is Gautama Buddha himself. After he left home, he lived in the forest, meditated in nature, and awakened under a tree next to a river. When Mara questioned his enlightenment, the Buddha didn’t say anything but simply touched the earth as witness to his realization. Afterward he mostly lived and taught in the natural world—and he also died outdoors, beneath trees.

Today, in contrast, most of us meditate inside buildings with screened windows, which insulate us from insects, the hot sun, and chilling winds. There are many advantages to this, of course, but is something significant also lost? When we slow down and rediscover our primordial connection with nature, it becomes more evident that the world is not a collection of separate things but a confluence of natural processes that include us. Although we often view nature in a utilitarian way, the natural world is an interdependent community of living beings that invites us into a different kind of relationship.

The implication is that withdrawing into the natural world, especially by oneself, can disrupt our usual ways of seeing and open us up to an alternative. The world as we normally experience it is a psychological and social construct structured by the ways we use language to grasp objects. Names are not just labels; they identify things according to their functions, so we usually perceive our surroundings as a collection of utensils to be used to achieve our goals (such as satisfying desires). In doing this, however, we are constantly overlooking something important about the world, as William Blake knew:

If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would  
appear to man as it is, infinite.

For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro'  
narrow chinks of his cavern.

Clinging to concepts, functions, and cravings is how we close ourselves up. In urban environments especially, almost everything we perceive is a utensil, including most people, whom we treat in a utilitarian way according to their function: the bus driver, shop clerk, and so on. In other words, we relate to almost everything and everyone as a *means* for obtaining or achieving something. Surrounded by so many other people busy doing the same thing, it is difficult to let go of this way of relating to the world, and experience it in a fresh way.

This has collective and institutional implications. Technologies extend our human faculties, including our abilities to instrumentalize the natural world. As the philosopher Michael Zimmerman writes,

“The same dualism that reduces things to objects for consciousness is at work in the humanism that reduces nature to raw material for mankind.” This raises increasingly important questions about the concept of property, a social construct that should be reconsidered and reconstructed in light of our present situation. If an instrumentalist view of the natural world is at the core of our ecological predicament, perhaps the “liberation movement” most needed today is to appreciate that the planet and its magnificent web of life are much more than just a resource for the benefit of one species.

Many Buddhist teachings have obvious ecological applications. A life preoccupied with consumerism is incompatible with the Buddhist path. The five basic precepts begin with a pledge not to kill or harm life—not just humans but all sentient beings. The most fundamental principle of ecology—the interdependence of living beings and systems—is a subset of the most fundamental principle of Buddhist philosophy, that nothing has “self-existence” because everything is dependent on other things. Chapter 4, “Is It the Same Problem?” focuses on something that is less obvious: the profound parallels between our perennial personal predicament, according to traditional Buddhist teachings, and our ecological predicament today. I remarked above that the eco-crisis is as much a spiritual challenge as a technological and economic one; unpacking the similarities between our individual and collective predicaments helps to flesh out that claim.

Since our usual sense of self is a construct, it does not correspond to anything substantial, which is why it is inherently anxious and insecure: because there’s nothing that could be secured. The self usually experiences this ungroundedness as a *lack*: the sense that there is something wrong with me, a basic discomfort often experienced on some level as *I’m not good enough*. Unfortunately, we often misunderstand our dis-ease and try to secure ourselves by identifying with things “outside” us that (we think) can provide the grounding we crave: money, material possessions, reputation, power, physical attractiveness, and so forth. Since none of them can actually ground

or secure one's sense of self, no matter how much money (and so on) we may accumulate, it never seems to be enough.

The Buddhist solution to this predicament is not to get rid of the self, because there is no such thing to get rid of. As mentioned above, the *sense* of self needs to be deconstructed (“forgotten” in meditation) and reconstructed (replacing the “three poisons” of greed, ill will, and delusion with generosity, loving-kindness, and the wisdom that recognizes our interdependence). That is how we can see through the illusion of separation. If I am not something inside (behind the eyes or between the ears), then the outside is not outside.

Curiously, this Buddhist account of our individual predicament corresponds precisely to our ecological situation today. We not only have individual senses of self, we also have group selves, and “separate self = *dukkha* suffering” also holds true for our largest collective sense of self: the duality between us as a species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, and the rest of the biosphere. Like the personal sense of self, human civilization is a construct that involves a collective sense of alienation from the natural world, which creates anxiety and confusion about what it means to be human. Our main response to that anxiety—the collective attempt to secure ourselves with economic growth and technological development (“progress”)—is actually making things worse, because it reinforces our disconnection from the earth. Just as there is no self to get rid of, we cannot “return to nature” because we’ve never been apart from it, but we can realize our nonduality with it and begin to live in ways that accord with that realization.

But what collective transformation might correspond to the personal awakening that Buddhism has always promoted? “The Buddha attained individual awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop the course of destruction.” (Thich Nhat Hanh) Isn’t the idea of such a social transformation just a fantasy, given economic and political realities—or is it already happening, under our noses?

In his book *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being, and Why No One Saw It Coming*, Paul Hawken documents what may be such a collective awakening. This “movement of movements” is a worldwide network of socially engaged organizations

that has arisen in response to the global crises that threaten us today. It is both the largest ever—at least two million organizations, maybe many more—and the fastest growing. According to Hawken, “It’s the first time in history that a movement of such scale and breadth has arisen from within every country, city, and culture in the world, with no leader, rulebook, or central headquarters. . . . It is vast and the issues broadly defined as social justice and the environment are not separate issues at all.”

Hawken sees this movement as the “immune response” of humanity, arising as if spontaneously to protect us and the planet from the forces that are despoiling our world. The organizations that compose it are “social antibodies attaching themselves to the pathologies of power.” As a Zen practitioner, Hawken sees Buddhism as a growing part of this movement: “Buddhism as an institution will become much more engaged in social issues, because I cannot see a future where conditions do not worsen for all of us. . . . *Dukkha*, suffering, has always been the crucible of transformation for those who practice.” Buddhism is not about avoiding suffering but being transformed by it—which means there may be lots of transformation in our future.

Nonetheless, immune systems sometimes fail, and “this movement most certainly could fail as well.” Diseases such as the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) kill their host by destroying the body’s immune system. That suggests less hopeful parallels, which brings us to the next chapter.

The title of chapter 5 is “What If It’s Too Late?” James Lovelock, who first proposed the Gaia hypothesis, warned in 2009 that humanity could end up reduced to small groups living near the poles. He also believes that attempts to tackle climate change will not be able to solve the problem but merely buy us some time. Writing a few years later, Fred Guterl in *The Fate of the Species* and Clive Hamilton in *Requiem for a Species* are even more pessimistic, arguing that human extinction is a very real danger, because, as the Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich bluntly puts it, “In pushing other species to extinction,

humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches.” Are such predictions fantasies to scare us into action? They are not—but what is a fantasy is the widespread belief that the kind of industrial growth economy still promoted by the government of every (over)developed nation can continue indefinitely without wrecking the biosphere. The immediate threat to the climate is not only carbon emissions but “tipping points,” such as the release of billions of tons of methane gas buried beneath permafrost that is now melting.

A few contemporary teachers have begun to address these existential concerns. Joanna Macy’s “Work That Reconnects” emphasizes that our grief for what is happening to the earth is not the final collapse of our aspirations for it, but necessary for those who aspire to follow the path of spiritual engagement. Her 2012 book, *Active Hope*, integrates grief into a transformative spiral that starts with *coming from gratitude*, which enables us to *honor our pain for the world*, leading to *seeing with new eyes*, and only then *going forth* to engage in what she calls “The Great Turning.” We must feel more deeply in order to be transformed more deeply.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s response to the possibility of our own extinction encourages us to “touch eternity with our breath,” for in that eternity there is no birth and no death. This is a basic Buddhist teaching that becomes even more important when considering not just our own individual mortality but that of our species. Many religions address fear of death by postulating a soul that does not perish with the body. The Buddhist denial of a soul or self (*anatta*) does not allow for that kind of immortality. Instead, you and I cannot die insofar as we were never born. As the Diamond Sutra states, when countless beings have been led to nirvana, actually no beings at all have been led to nirvana. Dogen, the great thirteenth-century Japanese Zen teacher, expresses this paradox best: “Just understand that birth and death is itself nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death.”

Although such teachings traditionally focused on our individual

situation, they have important implications for how we collectively relate to the ecological crisis. It is not only that you and I are unborn, for everything is unborn, including every species that has ever evolved, and all the ecosystems of the biosphere. From this perspective, nothing is lost when species including ourselves become extinct, and nothing is gained if our species survives and thrives.

And yet that perspective is not the only perspective. We are reminded of the Heart Sutra's pithy formulation: form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. Yes, from the *shunyata* (emptiness) side, there is no better or worse, but that does not negate the fact that *emptiness is form*. What we call emptiness—the unlimited potential that can take any form, according to conditions—has taken form as this awesome, incredibly beautiful web of life, which includes us, and which should be cherished and protected. As the Heart Sutra also says, there is “no old age and death, and no end to old age and death.” The spiritual path is living that paradox.

Chapter 6, “What Shall We Do?” considers what that actually means for how we respond to the ecological crisis. The short answer is that Buddhist teachings do not tell us *what* to do, but they tell us a lot about *how* to do it. Of course we would like more specific advice, but that's unrealistic, given the very different historical and cultural conditions within which Buddhism developed. The collective dukkha caused by an eco-crisis was never addressed because that particular issue never came up.

That does not mean “anything goes” from a Buddhist perspective. Our ends, no matter how noble, do not justify any means, because Buddhism challenges the distinction between them. Its main contributions to our social and ecological engagement are the guidelines for skillful action that the Theravada and Mahayana traditions offer. Although those guidelines have usually been understood in individual terms, the wisdom they embody is readily applicable to the more collective types of engaged practice and social transformation

needed today. The five precepts of Theravada Buddhism (and Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged version of them) and the four "spiritual abodes" (*brahmaviharas*) are most relevant. The Mahayana tradition highlights the bodhisattva path, including the six "perfections" (generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom). Perhaps the most important of all, Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the practice of acting without attachment to the results. Taken together, these guidelines orient us as we undertake the *ecosattva path*.

Social engagement remains a challenge for many Buddhists, for the traditional teachings have focused on one's own peace of mind. On the other side, those committed to social action often experience fatigue, anger, depression, and burnout. The engaged bodhisattva/ecosattva path provides what each side needs, because it involves a double practice, inner (e.g., meditation) and outer (activism). Combining the two enables intense engagement with less frustration. Such activism also helps meditators avoid the trap of becoming preoccupied with their own mental condition and progress toward enlightenment. Insofar as a sense of separate self is the basic problem, compassionate commitment to the well-being of others, including other species, is an important part of the solution. Engagement with the world's problems is therefore not a distraction from our personal spiritual practice but can become an essential part of it.

The insight and equanimity cultivated by eco-bodhisattvas support what is most distinctive about Buddhist activism: acting without attachment to the results of action, something that is easily misunderstood to imply a casual attitude. Instead, our task is to do the very best we can, not knowing what the consequences will be—in fact, not knowing if our efforts will make any difference whatsoever. We don't know if what we do is important, but we do know that it's important for us to do it. Have we already passed ecological tipping points and civilization as we know it is doomed? We don't know, and that's okay. Of course we hope our efforts will bear fruit, but ultimately they are our openhearted gift to the earth.

It seems to me that, if contemporary Buddhists cannot or do not

want to do this, then Buddhism is not what the world needs right now—but this book tries to show how much Buddhism can help us understand and respond to the greatest challenge that humanity has ever faced. And it also explores what that might mean for Buddhism today.