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Buddhist Environmentalism:

How Buddhist Values and Practices offer Hope for Escaping the Climate Crisis

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The 2015 United Nations' Paris Climate Agreement signed by 191 parties and the 1997 The Kyoto Protocol currently agreed to by 192 international parties, state that the fate of humanity depends on its ability to recognize its self-destructive actions and act rapidly to reverse their effects (UNFCCC, 1). Throughout our time on earth, the same internal struggles and external battles have persisted and continue to repeat. It is only recently that these battles have begun impacting everyone and everything on earth in way that must be urgently addressed for survival. These events have always been detrimental to our internal struggles but are now excreting their harmfulness to every living sentient and non-sentient being on the planet and the earth itself. As the Paris Agreement entails, the only hope for human survival is to cease the destructive actions being done to the planet and its inhabitants. It is argued below that knowing and applying the core values of Buddhism can help create the radical collective shift necessary for the health of our planet.

The Climate Crisis

It is crucial to understand the current state of the earth's overall health to comprehend why this is worth worrying about. It is estimated that the human population has less than ten years left to reverse the effects of climate change, and it is important to recognize this may be a generous number (Letzter). Because it takes the earth time to adjust to all of the damage we are doing on its surface, it is possible that we are even closer to being out of time to change the effects than previously estimated. According to NASA, "even if we stopped emitting greenhouse gases today, global warming would continue to happen for at least several more decades, if not centuries." Even with this being true, it is critical that action be taken now if there is even a chance of the human race having a future.

Some of the biggest issues that people have across the globe include overconsumption, production of waste, deforestation, and contributing to the rate of extinction of countless species. Far too often, people cause further damages by living out of their means. They live out of their means not monetarily, although that too is a part of the issue, but through overconsumption. Living out of their means in this context involves a lifestyle of constantly consuming products, feeling dissatisfied with that product, then disposing of it and buying something in its place that is somehow supposed to be “better.” This cycle never ends because they are never satisfied with what they already possess and seek out pleasure or satisfaction outside of themselves. Those people, who unfortunately include most humans, will consume until earth’s end, unless they can realize where true satisfaction comes from.

Overconsumption occurs in all aspects of what makes up many wealthy countries today. The way that capitalist economies are set up depend on people feeling dissatisfied with what they possess. When a capitalist economy is “thriving,” the people are not. The people are unhappy, searching for something to make them feel complete. What they do not know, is that they will never find true satisfaction by collecting and accumulating trinkets and items that are, in reality, utterly meaningless.

Connection to Buddhist Ideals

While environmentalism was never explicitly discussed by the Buddha, the teachings and values, and overall understanding of life he presents depict a kind of living which is mutually beneficial for all creatures and the planet. Though the Buddha did not have a conception of the current climate crisis, his teachings would surely not lead one to believe that. Many Buddhist teachings, when applied to the planetary crisis today, seem to offer the ultimate solutions to reversing climate change and preventing the extinction of humans and all other creatures on earth.

Although the intent of those teachings was probably not expected to be a powerful tool in combating the climate crisis, with the application of critical thinking and self-analysis, the core principles of Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path, among other teachings, will prove to be extremely compelling arguments in favor of saving the planet.

A teaching that is central to Buddhist environmental ethics is known as ahimsa. Ahimsa is the practice of non-harming. So in this case, to be conscious of the consequences each action has and the impact that makes on the environment (Kaza). Food, for example, is a necessity that humans cannot escape and often causes much harm. Even vegan diets, which contain no animal products and are seemingly harmless, can have negative impacts on the environment. Eating every day requires a lot of food which has to come from somewhere. Having an apple from a supermarket is superficially an innocent act. However, that apple may have traveled hundreds of miles to get to the supermarket where the consumer must drive to pick it up. On its way to the supermarket, the travelling it required caused an exorbitant amount of carbon dioxide output, much more than the apple is worth. The carbon dioxide goes into the atmosphere causing even further damage to the planet. Now this example may seem meaningless to those who get their produce local, but there is not enough local produce in every part of the world to sustain feeding humans all year long.

The apple example may not be so immediately obvious, however. An example that is, is the concept of eating meat, the consumption of another animal's flesh. Not only do the animals suffer, but so does the earth because of humans gross meat-eating obsession. More than half of the grain produced in the United States is used to feed livestock which adds up to just under half of the amount of grain produced globally (Pimentel). That grain could be consumed directly by humans, which would feed far more people than if it were being processed through an animal

first. Animal agriculture is all around the most inefficient use of land and resources and is a fairly easy component of a healthy diet to exclude. These animals must be fed six kilograms of plant protein in order for them to be able to produce just one kilogram of protein on their bodies (Pimentel).

Then there is issue of killing these animals, and the conditions they are kept in before death. Pigs, chickens, and cows are kept in the lowest of living conditions before they are sent off to be murdered for the sole purpose of human indulgence. This completely goes against the idea of ahimsa, the practice of non-harming. Not only are the animals murdered for humans to consume, but they are abused and malnourished with no autonomy from birth until death. Stealing these animals lives from them takes away their opportunity to gain good karma, which is unfair for them and also gives those who consume their flesh bad karma, setting everyone in the equation back a step. In Buddhism, and in reincarnation, every creature may have lived before as a human. So, is the consumption of living creatures not equal to consuming human flesh?

The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra, a Buddhist text containing a section on food ethics, presents quite a strong opposition on meat eating, going so far as to say that those who eat meat exude a foul odor that sends fear into the hearts of other animals who will think, "They are death-dealers, they will even kill me" (Suzuki, 247). This is a grave consequence for Buddhists, who like the signatories of the Paris Accord, vow to protect all sentient beings and save them from suffering. The text describes that one who consumes the flesh of another animal will suffer various additional consequences. One of these is being reborn as a meat-eating animal and continuing to be subject to the cycles of death and rebirth rather than reaching nirvana. In today's world of over 7.8 billion people, the scientific claim that meat eating has a major negative environmental

impact on the planet, bears out the assertions in *The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* that hurting the animal is not only hurting the meat eater and the animal, but it is hurting the earth and all of its interrelated inhabitants now and in times to come. Again, according to Buddhism, there is no action without consequence.

Clearly, this is an ongoing ethical issue that still has no resolution given that only 8% of the world's population abstains from eating meat (Jacimovic). This means that nearly 90% of the world's population has yet to come to the realization of the grotesque and immoral acts they are committing, but also they have yet to realize the impact their decision to eat meat has on the environment.

It is possible and actually very likely that some of the population has realized the impact that their meat-eating diet has on the environment and their karmic consequences, but for some reason they have not changed their actions. This is probably because they still have not yet fully grasped how everything in the world is interconnected. Buddhism puts a great deal of emphasis on the idea of interconnectedness.

Animal agriculture is responsible for nearly a 20% of the global carbon dioxide output, which is more than all of the exhaust produced by transportation- which is easily recognizable as a huge source of air pollution (Steinfeld). Meat eating is not only harmful to the animals whose lives it takes, but it also impacts the health and future of the earth, contributing greatly to the climate crisis.

Following the theme of ahimsa and the aim to not cause harm, humans have exploited earth's plentiful resources to the brink of full destruction. Virtually every ecosystem on earth's surfaces has been impacted by human action, and human inaction. Forests only cover 30% of the

worlds land area, so the preservation of these forests is critical. However, there has been very little preservation in recent years. Nearly 50% of the trees on earth have been cut down, and 17% of the Amazonian rainforest destroyed as of 2019. Between 1990 and 2016, the earth lost 502,000 square miles of forestry. This is not just trees that are being destroyed, but homes and habitats for forest creatures and places which preserve biodiversity (Nunez).

Causation

A central concern of Buddhist philosophy is what consequences actions will have later on in life or in another life. This is framed in what is seen as the natural law of karma. Buddhism tries to bring awareness to this cause-and-effect relationship to mitigate negative thoughts and break negative habits. Negative actions result in negative consequences which makes it more difficult to break the cycle of death and rebirth. This can be applied to environmentalism by recognizing that all of the events which humans participate in on earth affect everything that is to happen down the line.

Additionally, the Buddhist principle of *pratītyasamutpāda*, also known as dependent origination, states that the existence of everything is caused by something, nothing happens by chance. This is used in Buddhism to discuss the cause of suffering and find the root of it, which then helps one to end that suffering. To understand this concept, one must first understand the four noble truths. The first noble truth is that life is suffering. Even if life is good at some points, it is still suffering because living in this physical reality will never be truly satisfying, there will always be feelings of uncertainty and dissatisfaction. The second, is that the cause of suffering is attachment to things, and the disconnect with the collective. For example, being attached to money is a clear cause of suffering for many people in the world. It causes stress, greed, and it is used to fill the void that people feel when they are not satisfied in their own lives. This

dissatisfaction comes from a fundamental ignorance that is the belief that each human is separate in this world. Humans, and the planet, are all interconnected. Again, this is a huge theme throughout Buddhism. To end this suffering, all attachments must be let go. Attachments to everything is the way to end suffering, hence why Buddhist monks and nuns do not have ownership of anything. Lastly, the fourth noble truth, is that there is a path to follow called the eightfold path which lays out life recommendations for those who are trying to reach enlightenment, free themselves from suffering and wake up to the reality of the world (McLeod).

So then how does this relate to environmentalism? It is firstly about becoming aware of how all actions have consequences. It is recognizing the effects of one's actions and then working to stop the harm and suffering they cause to one's own self and to the natural world around them. Recognizing the outcome of even the smallest actions can help the environment for the better.

For example, acknowledging that the apple at the grocery store is shipped from halfway across the country and being understanding of the impact that has on the environment may encourage a better decision. This could mean buying apples locally so they do not come with the same environmental impact as the one at the supermarket. This could also be recognizing the consequences that taking long showers have on the environment and the amount of clean water that is wasted. It does not necessarily have to be big life changes that people make, because small changes matter too. It is about recognizing the impact that actions have and living in a way that does the least harm.

Every small action that people make which negatively impacts the environment, also negatively impacts every living thing on the planet. Throwing away one plastic straw may not seem like it would decide the fate of the world. But what if that one plastic straw found its way

into the oceans and killed one of the few remaining sea turtles left on the planet? The depletion of this species would create a radical change in the ocean's ecosystem and could throw off how all of the ecosystems function, potentially leading to the upsetting of the earth's health as a whole eventually triggering the absolute end of life for all humanity. This may sound dramatic and highly unlikely, and one straw probably would not end the world, but when all eight billion people on earth have "just one straw," that is a lot of straws. What this means is that collectively, humans have a great impact on the environment but it is their disconnect from nature and from the collective whole that puts the earth at a disadvantage.

One example of how people are practicing this lifestyle to its fullest extent is in the Sangha community. This community, which consists of all Buddhist monks and nuns was created to be the ideal grouping of people who are dedicated to practicing the way of life that is taught by the dharma, the teachings of the Buddha (Harvey). These people have learned the Buddha's teachings and dedicated their lives to practicing upholding those teachings. Their way of life, following all of the Buddhist principles, is an excellent way to lower human's negative impact on the environment. The people in the Sangha community do not own anything- they practice poverty. They do not buy food; they usually beg for food from the community they live in.

This is not to say that all of humanity should spontaneously decide to live in poverty and to start begging for food, but if that were to happen, it would actually greatly reduce the overall carbon output. Not even if all people decided to be Buddhist monks or nuns, practicing being a monastic necessarily, but losing ownership of, and attachment to material items and sharing necessities among others would help reduce overconsumption and waste tremendously. This is a

concept that seems so foreign to the Western world. In the West, people like to have their own things which they keep to themselves in a very private and unpractical way.

Mimicking the way Buddhist monks and nuns live would turn this selfish way of life completely in the opposite direction. People could even mimic the structure of monasteries, forming communes which avoid needless waste from everyone owning separate things. This would not only be beneficial to the people who start to realize how the Buddha's teachings can bring them to an end to their personal suffering but would also benefit the environment. The more people who reject the capitalist society, freeing themselves from the constant push to purchase and produce waste, the better it will be for the earth.

Most people in the world follow some form of religion, and most religions have a theory of an inconceivable higher power or truth existing somewhere else in the universe. In Buddhism, this concept is called the two truths and they describe the two different realities that exist. The first, conventional reality, refers to an individualistic idea or conception of the world. This is entirely subjective and differs from person to person. On the other hand, is ultimate reality. Ultimate reality is a little more difficult to grasp because no human can understand ultimate reality until they reach nirvana and are released from the cycle of death and rebirth. The conventional reality is just a steppingstone to get to the ultimate reality. In order to reach ultimate reality an individual must know the four truths and follow the eightfold path.

The eightfold path describes the way to enlightenment which includes doing no harm. Reaching this ultimate reality is not possible if the person who is trying to reach it, is not abiding by the rules of the eightfold path. Harming the world through environmental damages would go against what the eightfold path is expressing. Because death is not the end of life, people should

always be striving to do better for themselves and those around them in order to continue in the progression of the journey toward nirvana.

This path, and outline of moral standards will lead its followers to liberation and the end of their suffering. The steps of the eightfold path are as follows: having the right understanding, the right thought, the right speech, the right actions, the right livelihood, the right effort, the right mindfulness, and the right concentration. The goal here is to achieve all of these simultaneously, which will help who follows it develop and grow their compassion for the world and others (Rahula). If these ethical guidelines were widely implemented by people today, there would be a huge shift in the way all people interact with other people and with the environment. People would stop making so many decisions that harm others, the future, and the planet.

The vast majority of people in the world today are disconnected from nature and others around them. This is the root of suffering that is negatively affecting the people and the planet. This is beautifully articulated by a quote in the book *A Buddhist Response to The Climate Crisis*:

Haunted by vague dread, we become evermore obsessed with competition for profit, power, things, and sex. Many psychologists believe that people in advanced industrial societies are physically numbed as a result of being cut off from nature and are unable to feel the beauty of the world or respond to its distress. The pervasive influence of advertising promises to fill this void, and we spend our time pursuing commodified substitutes that never satisfy. But you can never get enough of what you don't really want (Stanley et. al).

This quote does a brilliant job of encompassing the struggle at its core that people today experience with themselves and their interactions in the world.

Conclusion

As the scientists who inform the Paris Climate Agreement and The Kyoto Protocol indicate, we must have a globally collective awakening to the reality of the climate crisis and effect radical change for future humans to have a chance at living a comfortable, and meaningful life. This requires a recognition of the crisis inside of us as human beings in terms of the way we view ourselves and the world around us. This can be done by practicing the lifestyle described in the Eightfold Path, recognizing the impact of our own consequences, and realizing the interconnectedness of all beings on earth, all of which are central Buddhist values. What is true and must be immediately realized, is that human and planetary survival are intrinsically intertwined; if the planet dies, so do we.

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