

## Ecology and the Human Heart: Taking Responsibility for our Environment

Shantideva Center – September 8, 2023

### Ecology and the Human Heart

*Our ancestors viewed the earth as rich and bountiful, which it is. Many people in the past also saw nature as inexhaustibly sustainable, which we now know is the case only if we care for it.*

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama  
“Universal Responsibility and the Environment”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Where we're at now...

Carbon dioxide: 422 parts per million

Since the onset of industrial times in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, human activities have raised atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> by 50% – meaning the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> is now 150% of its value in 1750.

Source: NASA Global Climate Change (<https://climate.nasa.gov/>)

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Where we're at now...

Global temperature: up 1.1°C since 1880

Source: NASA The year 2020 statistically tied with 2016 for the hottest year on record since recordkeeping began in 1880.

Source: NASA Global Climate Change (<https://climate.nasa.gov/>)

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Where we're at now...

Arctic sea ice extent: down 12.6% per decade

Arctic sea ice reaches its minimum extent each September. September Arctic sea ice is now shrinking at a rate of 13% per decade, compared to its average extent during the period of 1981 to 2010.

Source: NASA Global Climate Change (<https://climate.nasa.gov/>)

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Where we're at now...

Ice sheet: down 424 Gigatonnes per year

Data from NASA's GRACE and GRACE Follow-On satellites show that the land ice sheets in both Antarctica and Greenland have been losing mass since 2002.

Source: NASA Global Climate Change (<https://climate.nasa.gov/>)

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Where we're at now...

Sea level: up 4 inches since 1993

Sea level rise is caused primarily by two factors related to global warming: the added water from melting ice sheets and glaciers, and the expansion of seawater as it warms.

Source: NASA Global Climate Change (<https://climate.nasa.gov/>)

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Where we're at now...

Ocean warming: up 345 zettajoules since 1955

The last 10 years were the ocean's warmest decade since at least the 1800s. The year 2022 was the ocean's warmest recorded year and saw the highest global sea level.

Source: NASA Global Climate Change (<https://climate.nasa.gov/>)

## Ecology and the Human Heart

What role can Buddhism and specifically we, as Buddhist practitioners, play in confronting this unprecedented crisis?

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*Since negligence of the environment – which has resulted in lots of harm to the human community – came about by ignorance of the very special importance of the environment, I think it is very important first of all to instill this knowledge within human beings.*

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama  
“A Buddhist Concept of Nature”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*If we think about the Earth as just the environment around us, we experience ourselves and the Earth as separate entities. We may see the planet only in terms of what it can do for us. We need to recognize that the planet and the people on it are ultimately one and the same.*

*- Thich Nhat Hanh, Love Letter to the Earth*

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Essentially this is pointing to the concept of interdependence, which is one of the primary Buddhist teachings upon which we rely.

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In Buddhism, this deeper investigation into interdependence also finds that we affect the outer environment through the inner environment.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Thus we need to understand the deeper role that our minds play in creating the causes for what we are experiencing in our environment.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

### The Four Noble Truths

1. The Truth of *Duhkha*
2. The Truth of the Causes of *Duhkha*
3. The Truth of the Cessation of *Duhkha*
4. The Truth of the Path that Leads to the Cessation of *Duhkha*

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### *Duhkha* and its causes

- *Duhkha* arises from contaminated karma
- Contaminated karma arises from the delusions
- The root delusion is ignorance, specifically not seeing the true nature of reality especially in regard to the “I” or person



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### The path to cease *Duhkha* :

- Initially there is the need for morality to stop creating harmful actions
- Then we need to calm the delusions through concentration
- Finally, we must uproot ignorance through wisdom

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*The most distinctive Buddhist teaching is also the one that gives us the most insight into the collective crises confronting us: the relationship between suffering (in the broadest sense) and the delusive sense of a self that feels disconnected from others.*

- David R. Loy

“What Would the Buddha Do?”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*If a sense of separation is the problem, embracing interdependence must be at the heart of any solution. Interdependence is not merely an insight to be cultivated on our cushions.*

- David R. Loy

“What Would the Buddha Do?”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*A suffering world calls upon us to realize interdependence--to make it real--in the ways we actually live. If Buddhists do not want to do this or cannot find ways to do this, then Buddhism is not the spiritual path that the world needs today.*

- David R. Loy

“What Would the Buddha Do?”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Therefore, we need to have a deep understanding of the interdependence between the environment and the beings within it as is taught in Buddhism.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

But there is also a need to remember the interdependence that exists between one's own well-being and that of others, and this leads to the other essential element of compassion.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that with thirty years of good science we could address those problems.*

- Gus Speth, Environmental Lawyer

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with those we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.*

- Gus Speth, Environmental Lawyer

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If we are to set about achieving external balance, we have to do that through achieving internal balance, and perhaps this is where Buddhism can contribute a great deal towards resolving the crises we're facing.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*Therefore, in order to achieve more effective results and in order to succeed in the protection of the natural environment, ... it is also important to bring about internal balance within human beings themselves.*

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama  
"A Buddhist Concept of Nature"

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Essentially then, we rely upon two elements:

- 1) Wisdom – which sees clearly the interdependence of all things; that nothing exists independently
- 2) Compassion – which opens the heart to embrace the welfare of all beings within the view of interdependence

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While wisdom and compassion inform our response to climate change and other problems in our world, the challenges we face can seem insurmountable, so we may need additional tools to keep our hearts open and our intentions strong.

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Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone suggest that we use the tool of “Active Hope.”

What is Active Hope?

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*Passive hope is about waiting for external agencies to bring about what we desire. Active Hope is about becoming active participants in bringing about what we hope for.*

- Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p.3

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*Active Hope is a practice. Like tai chi or gardening, it is something we do rather than have. It is a process we can apply to any situation, and it involves three steps.*

- Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p.3

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*First, we take a clear view of reality; second, we identify what we hope for in terms of the direction we'd like things to move in or the values we'd like to see expressed; and third, we take steps to move ourselves or our situation in that direction.*

- Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p.3



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The context for understanding the role of Active Hope is set out in terms of what Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone call “Three Stories of Our Time.”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

### Three Stories of Our Time

1. Business as usual
2. The Great Unravelling
3. The Great Turning

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*We call this story The Great Turning. The central plot is finding and offering our gift of Active Hope.*

*- Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, Active Hope, p.5*

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*Involving the emergence of new and creative human responses, it is about the epochal transition from an industrial society committed to economic growth to a life-sustaining society committed to the healing and recovery of our world.*

*- Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, Active Hope, p.5*

## Ecology and the Human Heart

### The Three Dimensions of the Great Turning

*These are happening simultaneously and are mutually reinforcing:*

*(1) Holding Actions*

*(3) Shifts in  
Consciousness*

*(2) Life-sustaining systems  
and practices*

*- Joanna Macy & Chris Johnstone, Active Hope, p.32*

## Ecology and the Human Heart

Some additional suggestions for YOUR Great Turning...

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1. **Do your part.**
2. Share what you know.
3. Get involved.
4. Be the difference.

From Interfaith Power & Light

## Ecology and the Human Heart

### The Ecosattva Vows

I vow to myself and to each of you:

- To commit myself daily to the healing of our world and the welfare of all beings.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

### The Ecosattva Vows

I vow to myself and to each of you:

- To live on Earth more lightly and less violently in the food, products, and energy I consume.

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### Consume differently

1. What you buy
2. What you eat
3. How you get your power

From the film *Before the Flood*

## Ecology and the Human Heart

### The Ecosattva Vows

I vow to myself and to each of you:

- To draw strength and guidance from the living Earth, the ancestors, the future generations, and my brothers and sisters of all species.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

### The Ecosattva Vows

I vow to myself and to each of you:

- To support others in our work for the world and to ask for help when I need it.

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Vote for leaders who will fight climate change by

1. Ending fossil fuel subsidies
2. Investing in renewables
3. Leaving fossil fuels in the ground
4. Supporting a price on carbon

From the film *Before the Flood*

## Ecology and the Human Heart

The Ecosattva Vows

I vow to myself and to each of you:

- To pursue a daily practice that clarifies my mind, strengthens my heart, and supports me in observing these vows.

## Ecology and the Human Heart

1. Do your part.
- 2. Share what you know.**
3. Get involved.
4. Be the difference.

From Interfaith Power & Light

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## Ecology and the Human Heart

*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.*

- David R. Loy

“Can Buddhism Meet the Climate Crisis?”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*Engagement with the world's problems is therefore not a distraction from our personal spiritual practice but can become an essential part of it.*

- David R. Loy

“Can Buddhism Meet the Climate Crisis?”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

1. Do your part.
2. Share what you know.
3. Get involved.
- 4. Be the difference.**

From Interfaith Power & Light

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*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 world.*

- David R. Loy

“Can Buddhism Meet the Climate Crisis?”

## Ecology and the Human Heart

1. Do your part.
2. Share what you know.
3. Get involved.
4. Be the difference
5. **Bring joy to all you do. [Addition]**

From Interfaith Power & Light

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*One important practice is continuously making an effort to cultivate joy. Even in my own life, if I look at progress over short periods of time, there isn't always something to be joyful about.*

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama  
*Ecology, Ethics and Interdependence, p.213*

## Ecology and the Human Heart

*But if I look over a decade or two decades, then there is tremendous room for joy. This is true with the environmental movement, too. There are many areas where environmentalists have had tremendous success.*

- His Holiness the Dalai Lama  
*Ecology, Ethics and Interdependence, p.213*

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Thank you!