

ON CONSUMPTION AS NECESSITY AND NEMESIS: BUDDHIST CONSIDERATIONS FOR A CLIMATE OF CHANGE

by Maya Joshi*

I can't breathe. Writing from India's capital city, Delhi, that has seen in the past month air that is 100-200% times more polluted than what the WHO guidelines deem safe for human consumption, where every new born consumes 7-40 cigarettes a day, where consumers are flocking to shops for face masks and air purifiers, one finally senses a palpable sense of dread. As those who can are fleeing the city, a new vocabulary is available for our horrified consumption-- "climate refugee", "AQI", "PM2.5," "PM10"....

This crisis is global. This winter, friends sitting in Bangkok have been posting daily about the alarming air quality. Even distant, pristine California, with its spate of wild fires, produced dangerous levels of air pollution. Meanwhile, extreme temperatures continue to alarm the world over. As some states in the Mid-western states of the United States were colder than Antarctica in February, 2019, Australia saw wildlife destroyed in extreme heat waves. Climate change is here. The earth as we know is poised at the edge of a dangerous precipice. The times are out of joint, as the Bard said. Nothing seems safe. Air. Water. Food. All consumables are contaminated, and the world is consuming them, and itself, to death.

It is, of course, a global problem. And a deep one. There is a world of climate change deniers, newly elected heads of state bent upon selling the earth's natural resources to the highest bidders, and

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irresponsible corporations putting profit above all public good. But there is also a global response to this irresponsible tango between the profit makers and those in power. These very forces are challenged by those who see the cycle of needless, destructive, and unsustainable production and consumption and call it by its right name. In enlightened corners everywhere, organisations, individuals, and even governments are saying “No”. Mindfully, they are trying to develop alternative and appropriate technologies, changing lifestyles, embracing public transport, sharing resources, going organic, recycling.

What might the Buddhist underpinnings of these interventions be? How might self-declared Buddhists turn more towards praxis and translate these Buddhist concepts — The Eightfold Path, The Four Noble Truths, Sunyata (Emptiness) and Pratityasamutpada (Dependent Origination)—into crucial and urgent action to help save the planet and its delicate balance? How might the Buddhist insight into human psychology help us here? What aspects of the diverse Buddhist heritage would we need to highlight and emphasize in order to meet this urgent, immediate crisis? Or, should we as Buddhists, recognizing suffering’s inevitability, even care?

The paper considers the above questions in the light of Buddhist philosophy, and a felt response to some efforts on the ground that the author has personally witnessed, as well as global thinking on ecology and sustainability, to generate a dialogue that bridges the gap between theory and practice, between hopelessness and hope.

1. WHEN BREATH BECOMES A BURDEN

Because the only alternative to responsible consumption in the 21st century is surrender to the meaning of consumption in its 19th century sense. The latter is the name of a fatal disease. A quick search for the meaning of the word consumption yields the following ironic and telling juxtaposition:

/kən'sʌm(p)ʃ(ə)n/

noun

the action of using up a resource.

“industrialized countries should reduce their energy consumption”

synonyms: using up, use, utilization, expending, expenditure; More

DATED

a wasting disease, especially pulmonary tuberculosis.

“his mother had died of consumption”

synonyms: tuberculosis, pulmonary tuberculosis, TB, wasting disease, emaciation;
archaic phthisis
“his mother had died of consumption”

2. TWO VOICES FOR MOTHER EARTH

Even as I write, a very young woman from Sweden, Greta Thunberg, has made headlines with her powerful and hard-hitting address to a group of very powerful adults, at the UN Climate Change COP24 Conference, chiding them on their collective inaction. It is a ringing indictment of a criminal neglect and wilful blindness, a robbery of the future. Her words, prophetic and powerful, are worth quoting:

“You only speak of green eternal economic growth because you are too scared of being unpopular. You only talk about moving forward with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess, even when the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like is. Even that burden you leave to us children. But I don’t care about being popular. I care about climate justice and the living planet. Our civilization is being sacrificed for the opportunity of a very small number of people to continue making enormous amounts of money. Our biosphere is being sacrificed so that rich people in countries like mine can live in luxury. It is the sufferings of the many which pay for the luxuries of the few. The year 2078, I will celebrate my 75th birthday. If I have children maybe they will spend that day with me. Maybe they will ask me about you. Maybe they will ask why you didn’t do anything while there still was time to act. You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes. Until you start focusing on what needs to be done rather

than what is politically possible, there is no hope. We cannot solve a crisis without treating it as a crisis. We need to keep the fossil fuels in the ground, and we need to focus on equity. And if solutions within the system are so impossible to find, maybe we should change the system itself. We have not come here to beg world leaders to care. You have ignored us in the past and you will ignore us again. We have run out of excuses and we are running out of time. We have come here to let you know that change is coming, whether you like it or not. The real power belongs to the people.”

Fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg—clear headed and plain-speaking—is not Buddhist. She comes from Sweden, a country with its own legacy of living close to nature, to ideals such as *lagom*, (‘not too much, not too little’, denoting balance, harmony, beauty and sufficiency. As with other Scandinavian cultures (Danish gives us the word *hygge*, denoting contentment), Sweden has a history of social justice, and welfare politics are part of its DNA. However, in her astounding speech, the Buddhist echoes from a land very far away from where Buddhism holds sway are inescapable. Might she be an example of what a good Buddhist education achieves, leading its recipients to engage in Right Speech and Right Effort, components of the Eight-fold Path that Buddhists boast of? Are not the ideals of balance and harmony central to Buddhism? Is she not, in this speech, an example of mindfulness, of compassion, and of wisdom, all values held dear by Buddhists everywhere, despite stark and sometimes divisive differences in doctrinal focus and social practices? We will return to that.

But what do Buddhists contribute to this discourse? A very inspiring example would be the contemporary Buddhist teacher engaged earnestly with earthly problems, Thich Nhat Hanh who turns to lyrical prose to inspire a eco-friendly perspective based on profound Buddhist principles. Mindful walking in the Zen meditative tradition provides a template for living in a sustainable way. I quote from a particularly poignant one, ‘Walking Tenderly on Mother Earth’:

“Dear Mother Earth,

Every time I step upon the Earth, I will train myself to see that

I am walking on you, my Mother. Every time I place my feet on the Earth I have a chance to be in touch with you and with all your wonders.

With every step I can touch the fact that you aren't just beneath me, dear Mother, but you are also within me. Each mindful and gentle step can nourish me, heal me, and bring me into contact with myself and with you in the present moment.

Walking in mindfulness I can express my love, respect, and care for you, our precious Earth. I will touch the truth that mind and body are not two separate entities. I will train myself to look deeply to see your true nature: you are my loving mother, a living being, a great being—an immense, beautiful, and precious wonder.

You are not only matter, you are also mind, you are also consciousness. Just as the beautiful pine or tender grain of corn possess an innate sense of knowing, so, too, do you. Within you, dear Mother Earth, there are the elements of Earth, water, air and fire; and there is also time, space, and consciousness. Our nature is your nature, which is also the nature of the cosmos.

I want to walk gently, with steps of love and with great respect. I shall walk with my own body and mind united in oneness. I know I can walk in such a way that every step is a pleasure, every step is nourishing, and every step is healing—not only for my body and mind, but also for you, dear Mother Earth.

You are the most beautiful planet in our entire solar system. I do not want to run away from you, dear Mother, nor to hurry. I know I can find happiness right here with you. I do not need to rush to find more conditions for happiness in the future. At every step I can take refuge in you. At every step I can enjoy your beauties, your delicate veil of atmosphere and the miracle of gravity. I can stop my thinking.

I can walk relaxingly and effortlessly. Walking in this spirit I can experience awakening. I can awaken to the fact that I am alive, and that life is a precious miracle. I can awaken to the fact that I am never alone and can never die. You are always there within me and around me at every step, nourishing me, embracing me, and carrying me far into the future.

Dear Mother, you wish that we live with more awareness and gratitude, and we can do this by generating the energies of mindfulness, peace, stability, and compassion in our daily lives. Therefore I make the promise today to return your love and fulfill this wish by investing every step I take on you with love and tenderness. I am walking not merely on matter, but on spirit.”

There are obvious differences in the two speech acts quoted above. Thunberg speaks with measured anger, even contempt, representing a generation losing their patience. She speaks truth to the very powerful. She is clearly “doing politics: public, confrontational, compelling. She commands attention. Unlike Greta Thunberg, Thich Nhat Hahn is speaking in a different register, of a quieter, personal practice. The addressee is the self, the practitioner, who must internalize the message of love of all earth, embody it in daily practice. His voice is gentle, poetic. It animates that which appears inanimate. It waxes eloquent in ways that seem transcendental. But he does not escape reality, despite the poetic and the mystical registers. For he also engages; he, to literalize the metaphor, WALKS THE TALK. There is a different power at work here. A directness of perception, a bare honesty marks it. He is, of course, speaking as teacher, speaking from within a tradition well recognized a Buddhist, taking inspiration from such fundamental Buddhist truisms as the fact that Siddhartha Gautama, upon attaining enlightenment, made his first significant gesture the touching of the earth, a gesture of gratitude, an acknowledgement of his groundedness. The Earth-Touching Pose (*bhumisparsha mudra*) of the newly enlightened Buddha thus carries tremendous symbolic significance.

3. ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND CONSUMERISM

Spiritualism is too often visualized in terms of a trope of ascent. The aspirant “rises” above the mundane, evolves in to a more ethereal dimension, and sheds earthly attachments. There is a hierarchical relationship established between earth and sky via these images and metaphors. However, the Buddha touched the ground, *upon* becoming Buddha. Significantly, he also sat on the ground, under a tree, while his quest lasted. Indeed trees hold tremendous significance in the life of the Buddha, from his mother

giving birth under a *sal* tree, to his attainment of Bodhi under the tree so named, to the first sermon at Sarnath. He did not fly into the sky in denial of the earth, or of his earthly being. Wisdom consisted precisely in acknowledging the ground, the basis of existence, in expressing gratitude for the state of body and mind that made it possible to pursue the wisdom path. Significantly, in Buddhist lore, those in the god (*deva*) realm are seen to be more removed from the quest for enlightenment than those born on earth, as humans. One can overemphasize this point, of course. There is enough in Buddhist lore and scripture to also suggest a hierarchy of being between human and animal to make us reconsider this proposition. But it is still significant to recall that The Jataka Tales, an essential component of Buddhist literature in India at least, underscore the crucial significance of the non-human world. All beings are precious, because as per the theory of rebirth, we have been and will be (unless we purify our karma enough in this life) born as animals. In the Jataka Tales, animals are not only sentient; they are profoundly moral beings. The non-human world thus acquires moral stature and psychological depth and richness in the Buddhist imagination.

This is not unique to Buddhists, of course. Another inspirational example from the contemporary times is the Native American wisdom and righteous effort evident at the spirited and sustained resistance at Standing Rock. As keepers of the earth, the First Peoples are unparalleled. Their very world-view enjoins an unalienated continuity of being with all nature, apparently animate and that which appears inanimate. They tread softly on the earth, since the earth is home, not a resource to be exploited, not real estate to be carved up and quartered. The world of non-human beings is extended family, and economy and respect in the way humans live off and with earth is givens. In this they are one with tribal communities in India who have, in their native wisdom, been fighting rapacious mining corporations and their cronies in governments to retain the sanctity of holy mountains and rivers. They do not speak the language of scientific ecology, but their folk wisdom has provided ecological movements the world over with a vocabulary and perspective that offers an alternative to self-destructive unchecked capitalism which thrives on a divide between

Man and Nature and reward greed and ambition, obliterating the existential facts of shared habitat, human impermanence and eventual death.

This non-anthropocentric focus, which Buddhist traditions also share to some extent, disseminates respect for the earth and all its beings. Human hubris— built into philosophical traditions that view humans as innately superior to all forms of life, either due to Reason or Divine Origin-- is thus curtailed in favour of a profound ecological wisdom. Contemporary ecological discourses, such as work by Amitav Ghosh, have pointed to the root of the current crisis at least partly in a philosophical commitment to anthropocentrism. Modern science has developed along those lines, technological hubris has fed off it, and a cavalier approach to other species has been justified, seriously disrupting a fragile ecosystem. This anthropocentrism has been compounded by capitalism and industrial modernity, both of which combine to give us slogans to the effect that “Greed is Good”. The human capacity to exploit nature, seen as inanimate resource, is seen as a proof of the species’ superiority, and the motor of History. Thus “growth” as an end in itself, measured in a short-sighted economic paradigm of increased GDP rather than qualitative markers or ethical concerns, has led to a cancerous proliferation of products, which then must be sold to gullible buyers, in the interest of which end, round-the-clock advertising generates false consciousness. It is significant to note that Buddhist Bhutan serves as a pioneering example of an alternative discourse on GDP; it has made a name for itself for the invention and implementation of the Gross National Happiness index rather than one defined by mindless “productivity.” It is not accidental that it boasts of 80% forest cover, fully organic agriculture, and strict controls on media and advertising. An enlightened and benevolent Buddhist monarchy (now segueing into democracy) sets an example that calls to mind the enlightened kingship of the Indian Buddhist Emperor Ashok.

4. BUDDHIST PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES REVISITED

Buddhism as a project of education into the true nature of reality can play a real role in turning awareness towards the delusions that consumer society thrives on. The doctrine of *Pratityasamutpada*

(Dependent Origination) systematically unpacks the connections between wrong views, wrong aspirations, wrong livelihood and wrong effort. Ignorance of the true workings of the money machine, which sucks vitality and eats into the lifeblood of humans, is one way one can think of *avidya*. For this, it is vital that the Buddhist technique of mindfulness not get appropriated by the very productivity-machine that thrives on promoting mindless consumption. In other words, Buddhist teachers must exercise restraint and caution in making sure that techniques such as mindfulness or *vipassana* do not become tools for corporate executives to take a break, a mindfulness holiday, only to return refreshed to their often destructive roles in an exploitative system with renewed vigor. Right Livelihood must be a keystone of the larger concern with churning out mindful denizens of the planet.

The other very significant Buddhist ideal/concept that needs to be mobilized is the idea of the *sangha*. For individual effort, though valuable in cultivating right mental attitudes and curbing Desire and Delusion, is not enough when facing the challenge of climate change. The scale of the tragedy is so large, that concerted effort is needed across all boundaries to form supportive communities that work together, given each other emotional/spiritual encouragement and material support. The traditional notion of the *sangha* thus needs to be expanded to include not just those who have been ordained or initiated into a particular sect or school of the large and varied Buddhist tradition, but to all humanity with like-minded aspirations.

One of the ways the *sangha* thus reconceptualised can contribute is via the injunction that the Buddha gave to his disciples: to go forth and preach. So while the *sangha* works internally to strengthen itself, to sustain itself against very powerful forces, it also works outwardly in spreading the urgent wisdom, which alone can save the house from burning.

One question that obviously arises here is: is Buddhism unique in offering such resources for combating the menace of climate change or offering a perspective on sustainable development? Does offer a special or exclusive entry point? I think there is no reason to think it does or to insist on such exclusivity. It should suffice to note

that it offers a world-view that encourages a clear-eyed method of analyzing phenomena in terms of cause and effect. It offers little solace in terms of metaphysics, though theistic elements as well as ritualistic traditions do often seem to downplay the hardheaded philosophical core that many take to be the greatest contributions of the tradition. Wisdom (*prajna*) urges one towards seeing things as they are, seeing through false promises of happiness in blind consumption to see that unchecked consumptions is indeed consumptive disease, teachings on compassion (*karuna*) – for self and others—mandate that we not sink into indifference or hopelessness and instead work ceaselessly using skillful means (*upaya kausalya*) and perfection of energy/diligence (*viryaparamita*) for changing the world as we see it.

Thus a double effort is called for: the psychological and psychical work, the practice of mindfulness which requires a constant check on one's thoughts, speech, and action to see how one might be contributing to ecological violence. This would include a rigorous check on one's language use, one's consumption patterns, as well as the more ineffable and gentler practice of "loving the earth" a la Thich Nhat Hanh, practices which let the message seep into the body and mind in a myriad little ways such as a daily walk, a breathing exercise, or a sweep of the floor. However, the profoundest need to it cultivate what Thich Nhat Hahn calls Interbeing, a felt sense of the interconnectedness of all life.

Individual effort and little communities can only go that far. As Amitav Ghosh points out appositely in his unsparing survey of the challenges that climate change poses, a state of the planet he calls 'the great derangement': "Climate change is often described as a 'wicked problem'. One of its wickedest aspects is that it may require us to abandon some of our most treasured ideas about political virtue: for example, 'be the change you want to see'. What we need is to find a way out of the individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped."

The need to speak and act collectively on behalf of the planet and its more vulnerable life forms (and humans are included in that list!) requires a different kind of Buddhism, a more engaged kind. The *sangha* as concept is crucial here. This sangha must expand its

range of vision forging alliances. As Bhikkhu Buddharakkhita from Uganda reminds us, the African concept of *Ubuntu* (I am because you are; you are because I am) is close to the Buddhist notion of Dependent Origination. This must be adopted to a capacious, even cosmic perspective, but always with one eye on the immediacy of each breath, the specificity of each step.

5. BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

Buddhists would need to come out of their silos and face the crisis head-on. It would need going beyond labels, sects, and rivalries. Ultimately, it would need going beyond anything ideologically moribund. The planet recognizes no doctrines, and nature disregards national boundaries, and rewards no claimed superiority. Instead, it asks for a collective human humility in the face of an unprecedented crisis as well as confidence that together we can overcome. Buddhists can take a lead in this by relying on a superb set of cognitive, psychological, and institutional tools developed thousands of years ago but needed more than ever now

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