



Walking the Path of Environmental Buddhism through Compassion and Emptiness

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I was born into a *Drokpa* (Tibetan nomad) family and spent the first years of my life in the wild eastern part of Tibet. We traveled with our animals from summer to winter grounds, setting up our yak-hair tents at each site. It was a simple existence and my daily joy consisted of exploring the nearby mountains with my pet goat. If I was lucky, I would see wild animals such as *nawa* (Tibetan argali, *Ovis ammon hodgsoni*) and *shaba* (white-lipped deer, *Przewalskiium albirostris*) at close range. Sometimes, I would watch herds of *kiang* (Tibetan wild ass, *Equus kiang*) running across the grasslands.

When I was 4 or 5 years old, there was a severe drought and the local spring in our camp began to dry up. Because I was considered an unusual child (although at that time, nobody knew I would later be recognized as the 17th Karmapa), our community requested my father ask me to plant a sapling at the source of the spring. I remember leading prayers with the aspiration that this tree would help provide water for all living beings nearby. Although I had no idea that what I was doing was an “environmental” act, or what *watershed* meant, my love for nature and dedication to protect the environment sprouted from this seed.

As I grew up and began studying Buddhist philosophy and teachings, I discovered great harmony between Buddhism and the environmental movement. The emphasis on biological diversity, including ecosystems—in particular, the understanding that animate and inanimate beings are parts of a whole—resonates closely with Buddhism’s emphasis on interdependence. The essence of Buddhism lies in the union of compassion and emptiness: the deeply felt dedication to alleviate the suffering of all living beings and the understanding that everything is devoid of self-nature. These two halves of a philosophical whole speak particularly to the goals of the environmental movement. Let me explain what I mean.

The most exalted example Buddhists use to explain compassion is motherhood. Consider all that your mother probably has done for you since the time you were conceived—carrying you for 9 months, experiencing the hardship of labor and birth, feeding and clothing you,

taking care of all your needs, and worrying about you long after you reach adulthood. Most mothers never stop caring unconditionally for their children. Regardless of whether one believes in reincarnation or not, one can suppose that all living beings are like mothers to us. The food that appears in front of us at dinner was grown, packaged, and prepared by people we probably do not know. The clothes we are wearing were produced by people we probably will never meet. Yet we are benefiting from their hopes, dreams, and labor. Plants, animals, and raw materials have all been used to provide us these things. This is the interdependence that characterizes life—no one thing exists by itself alone, or can survive alone. We are all part of one world ecology and the world is extremely compassionate to us.

Emptiness, in contrast, can be best explained by using the example of the self. What do we imagine when we think of the self? Exactly where does the self reside? Is it in the heart or the brain? In the incoming breath or the outgoing breath? In the movement of our limbs? In our interaction or relationship with others? The self differs greatly at ages 15 and 25. Because it is impermanent and intangible, the self is empty of any inherent self-nature. And, because this is so, our happiness, our sadness, our successes, and our failures are also empty by nature. This does not mean that we are nothing, but that we are constantly moving, absorbing, and shedding. Consequently, we need not experience great attachment to our experiences and can develop equanimity regarding all phenomena. To experience this freedom from the conviction of a self and the self-importance it creates means that we can dispense with the artificial distinction between self and other and can be part of all phenomena everywhere.

How does this relate to the environment? According to Buddhism, ignorance of the empty nature of self and the rejection of compassion is the root cause of egotism, anger, attachment, and greed. Ignorance is why human beings have degraded the environment and are driving so many species to extinction. Ignorance causes us to place an excessive worth upon the self and anything related to it; *my* family, *my* possessions, *my* country, and even

my race. Perceiving the diversity of the world through the limited lens of self means we can impose grave harm upon Earth without concern, because Earth has become “other.”

Buddhists believe ignorance is the reason human lives are no longer in balance with nature. It is an unfortunate fact that the temperature of the Tibetan Plateau is increasing faster than most other places on Earth due to climate change. I know there will be severe consequences for Tibet’s vast grasslands, and it saddens my heart that this may spell the end of the Tibetan nomadic lifestyle. Furthermore, I am told the entire world is at risk if the global average temperature rises more than 2 °C. Agriculture, in particular, will be devastated. In India alone, this could mean major losses of rice, wheat, and legumes, which are the staples of the Indian diet.

The effects of climate change on the Tibetan Plateau will not occur in isolation. Tibet is the birthplace for Asia’s great rivers: the Indus, Ganges, Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Yangtze, and Mekong. Tibet is sometimes called the Third Pole because it stores the most ice and water after the Arctic and Antarctic. If its water sources dry up or become contaminated, there will be fateful consequences for over a billion people. Because glacier melt is increasing as temperatures increase, both floods and water shortages will increase in the near future. Our shortsightedness blinds us to the relation between our activities and their longer-term consequences. The great push for economic development in the last 50 years has been possible due to rapid use of Earth’s fossil-fuel resources. However, the hidden costs have been accumulating and are borne mainly by those least able to protect themselves. Sooner or later, all of us will have to pay the price.

The gap between the rich and poor is greater than it has ever been; proponents of economic growth seem to have forgotten the poor to benefit the wealthy. Furthermore, biological diversity is greatest and environmental degradation highest in many poorer parts of the world. Can the economic development model protect or replenish our precious natural resources? Can we borrow natural resources and return them for future generations? If not, we are robbing Earth of its riches and calling our actions economic development.

The current world economy appears to be a fertile tree of immense riches. We admire its many branches and its shiny green leaves and believe it is the best tree in the world. But we are looking only at its upper half because the bottom half is underground. If we were to look underneath the surface, we might find that the tree’s roots are dying of mistreatment and neglect. It may only be a matter of time before this condition affects the upper half of the tree. Treating the branches and leaves is only a short-term solution; until we ensure the roots are healthy, we cannot guarantee a healthy tree. Therefore I greatly appreciate the concept of sustainable development, defined by the World Commission on Environment and De-

velopment (1987) as “meeting the needs of our present generation without compromising the ability for future generations to meet their own needs.” After all, if the concept of reincarnation proves to be true, we *are* the future generation.

I find great joy and pleasure in the human spirit. The power of an idea is profound. Consider the concept of human rights: a simple idea that has overcome incredible odds—totalitarian governments, war, and poverty—to become a universal ideal. And yet, human rights was simply a fledgling idea 100 years ago. I believe a similar revolution in our thinking needs to take place in terms of environmental protection, including conservation of biological diversity. There should be rights for wildlife, ecosystems, and even environmental services such as intact water cycles.

I gratefully support global treaties for the protection of wildlife and ecosystems, agreements on common standards of environmental safety, as well as ongoing efforts to minimize man-made changes in Earth’s climate. At the heart of each of these initiatives is the sincere motivation of a few individuals who have dedicated their lives to these causes. These individuals give me the most hope because if we want to create change in the world, the process must begin within ourselves. It is unrealistic to seek the transformation of the rest of the world and expect anyone to listen without living and being the example first.

If there were such a role as a Buddhist saint of ecology, I would nominate the great Indian scholar Shantideva, who in the 8th century wrote in his *Bodhicaryavatara* (*Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* [1979]):

May all beings everywhere
Plagued by sufferings of body and mind,
Obtain an ocean of happiness and joy
By virtue of my merits.

In this verse, Shantideva chooses to dedicate his life to alleviate the suffering of others because of his insight into the interdependent nature of life. If we accept that we are not isolated individuals but instead one whole made up of all life on Earth, we cannot remain indifferent to the suffering and ills that occur here. With this understanding, generating compassion for all living beings and turning that motivation into action is the most ecologically aware thing we can do.

During the last 100 years, over 95% of the world’s wild tigers (*Panthera tigris*) have vanished. As human needs have continued to expand, we have taken more and more from nature and left less and less for other animals. However, the magnificent tiger has almost completely disappeared due to consumer demand for its skin and body parts. We are driving a species to extinction simply because we believe wearing its skin makes us look wealthy or that consuming tiger parts will make us

healthier. Doing such a thing is essentially non-Buddhist and uncompassionate—not only for the tiger, but also for ourselves, because this act is bound to have negative karmic consequences for us.

Compassion for the “other,” whether people, animal species, trees, or other plants, and for Earth itself, is the only thing that will ultimately save us human beings. Most people are primarily concerned about their work, wealth, health, or family. On a daily basis, they probably feel they have more urgent things to worry about than their environmental footprint. Of course, paying attention to this issue would mean having to make inconvenient choices and changes in their lives. I am not so different. Although I had considered giving up eating meat for many years, I became a complete vegetarian only a few years ago. Somebody presented a short documentary that showed how animals suffer before and during the act of killing. Watching it, I could feel the fear felt by the animals. Like a thunderclap, I became aware that these living beings were suffering so greatly simply to satisfy my habitual preferences. Eating meat became intolerable for me at that moment, and so I stopped.

The question that remains is when will the intolerable moment occur for all of us? Will we allow the sea to rise and cover the Pacific islands and the Himalayas to be reduced to bare rock? Will we let amazing wildlife species become extinct and simply fade to a story that is told in future generations? Should thriving forests be turned into farmlands to meet our unending demands? Should we live with ever-growing mountains of garbage because we are unable to manage the effects of consumerism?

For society to successfully address the environmental challenges of the 21st century, we have to connect these challenges to the individual choices people face on a daily basis. We cannot simply address the political and scientific aspects of problems such as climate change, intensive extraction of natural resources, deforestation, and wildlife trade. We must also address the social and cultural aspects of these problems by awakening human values and creating a movement for compassion, so that our very motivation in becoming environmentalists is to benefit other living beings.

To do this, the first and most important task is to empower everybody to protect the environment. I come from a region of Tibet that is considered backward by people who live in Lhasa, let alone in the West. My family lived in conditions that many would think very harsh and undeveloped. And yet my father, who never attended school, knew from his own father that if you want to protect a spring, you should plant trees. I think we will find that indigenous people, who live closest to nature, are often our greatest allies in trying to protect it. If we are to save Earth, each one of us must play our part. We must break through barriers and build bridges. After all, who are we trying to save Earth for if not for *all* of us?

Second, it is crucial that we find ways to minimize our energy intake or at the least, find safe alternatives to coal, oil, and gas. One of the easiest things to do would be to make solar energy and other safe alternative energy technology cheaper. My main monastery in Tibet, Tsurphu, is fortunate because it is located near natural geothermal springs that we use for energy. Now that I am in India, we are attempting to make all our Karma Kagyu monasteries here self-sufficient in terms of energy use. It would be wonderful to be able to say with certainty that we Buddhist monks and nuns are not contributing to the world's environmental problems. Maybe, someday, all countries will also measure themselves by this standard.

Third, I invite all scholars and practitioners to help protect the Tibetan Plateau, which provides the water for much of mainland Asia. Because water in this region does not have a price tag yet, we take this most precious resource and its fount for granted. Already, the *Yarlung Tsangpo* (Brahmaputra) is under grave threat from dams and the *Sengye Tsangpo* (Indus) no longer reaches the sea. As the Third Pole, Tibet is highly vulnerable to climate change and what happens there matters greatly to the rest of mainland Asia.

Fourth, we should collectively reassess what we mean by success, whether it is economic growth, development, or personal affluence. The current model for economic growth is simply unattainable for the vast majority of the world, who struggle to live from day to day. If we were to give equal worth to values such as sharing, compassion, and peace, as we do to wealth and social status, each one of us would strive for a success that naturally includes a community. We must explore wholesome and practical alternatives to common understanding of what development and success means, which all of us can equally aspire toward.

Finally, I believe that the very future of life on Earth depends on those of us who are privileged to live more simply. To live simply is to be compassionate to yourself and to the world. A life full of material goods and barren of compassion is quite unsustainable from an ecological and karmic point of view. Of course, advertisements are always telling us that the path to happiness lies in purchasing the goods they sell. How is it that the advertising convinces us even when we are skeptical of its message? Our attachment to our own happiness, possessions, family, and self creates a lack of perspective that makes us susceptible. However, if we can be mindful of the emptiness of self, we can create a space for choice rather than habitual consumerism. We don't have to live a life that is sold to us—we can make the brave choice to live simply.

At the root of all religions are the same basic principles. Live simply. Act with compassion. Be kind to one another. Nowhere does any religion say that we should destroy the very thing that gives us life. So, I feel quite confident saying that from a religious point of view, we

must conserve all life and protect Earth. For my own part, I take inspiration from Lord Buddha's teachings, at the heart of which is the instruction that we work to benefit all living things and cease to harm them, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama who has said that the key to human survival is universal responsibility.

Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (1979) continues to be closely studied by Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhists today. The *Bodhicaryavatara* lays out the path to Buddhahood through the cultivation of compassion and the insight into emptiness in the form of enlightened verses and gives inspiration to all who wish to renounce their own desires and ambitions in order to benefit all living beings.

As the 17th Karmapa, I am confident that such Buddha activity can be directly translated into environmental protection. With this vision, we now have over 40 Kagyu monasteries and nunneries across the Himalayas implementing environmental projects to address issues such as forest degradation, water shortages, wildlife trade, climate change, and pollution, with guidance provided by nongovernmental organizations, including the World Wildlife Fund. We know that this is but a small drop in the ocean and the challenges we face are more complex and extensive than we can tackle alone. However, if each one of us were to contribute a single drop of clean water toward protecting the environment, imagine how pure this vast ocean could eventually be.

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About the Author

The Karmapa is the head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, is a luminary figure followed by millions of Buddhists around the world. He is regarded the 17th incarnation in a lineage that dates back 900 years. He is currently 26 years old. Born in Tibet, he escaped to India at the age of 14 and has lived there since January 2000. A dedicated environmentalist, His Holiness leads an association of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries that are working toward environmental solutions for their own communities in the Himalayas (www.khoryug.com).

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