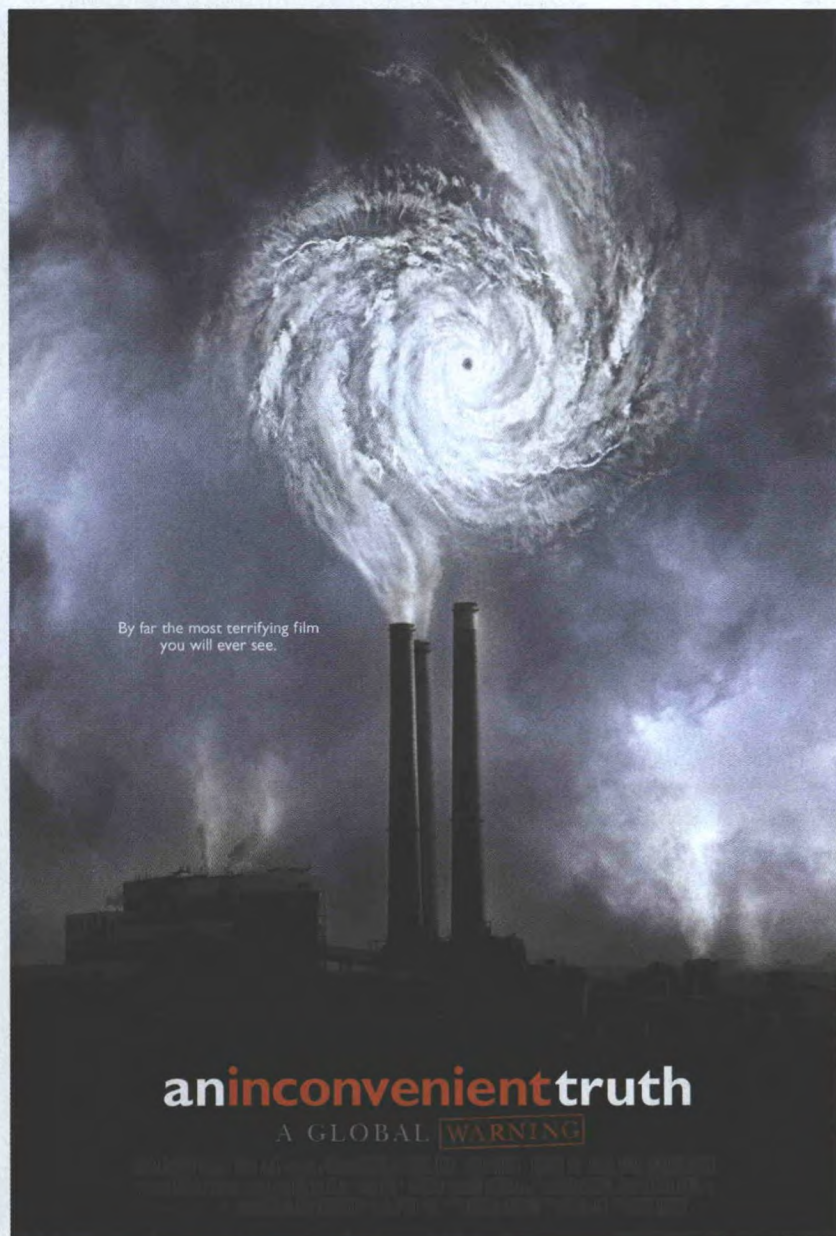


What Does Al Gore Know that Everyone Should Know?

BY SARA BLUMENTHAL



Al Gore's Powerpoint presentation has become a blockbuster of a movie.

The residents of Santa Cruz, California thought they were in the middle of a demonstration. A procession of nearly forty Tibetan Buddhist monks, nuns, and friends entered a local theater, taking it over with malas clicking, monastic robes filling the room like a red sea. Lama Zopa Rinpoche came to watch "An Inconvenient Truth," the new documentary on global warming starring former U.S. Vice President Al Gore.

For his third time in a movie theater, Lama Zopa Rinpoche picked a timely film to watch, and by the end, a decision had been made: the message contained in the film needed to be heard. Lama Zopa Rinpoche realized that *Al Gore knows something everyone should know*: We are in an environmental decline of global proportions. We can no longer sit on the sidelines of the environmental crisis. Action must be taken.

"What Al Gore really wishes is for every sentient being, regardless of religion or nationality, including creatures of the land and sea, all to be free of the impure substances, pollution, and the atomic bomb that are harmful to all of us and the environment," Lama Zopa Rinpoche said. "This includes beings such as nagas and worldly gods who are also involved in the elements, and who are harmed and even destroyed due to these man-made pollutions, harmful chemicals, and other things that are damaging the earth and air.

"People in business who think only of personal profit without consideration for others and the

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environment are causing great danger to all of us – the country we live in and this whole world,” Lama Zopa continues.

“Al Gore is making us aware of so many things that harm us and our environment. Your happiness depends on others, and others’ happiness depends on you. We all have to live in this world, so we need to be harmonious and happy in a healthy way. No matter who you are or where you are, we all have a responsibility to protect this world.”

Al Gore’s Mission

In a recent cover article in *Vanity Fair*¹, Gore wrote: “The Chinese expression for ‘crisis’ consists of two characters: the first is a symbol for ‘danger’; the second is a symbol for ‘opportunity.’ The rapid accumulation of global-warming pollution in the Earth’s atmosphere is now confronting human civilization with a crisis like no other we have ever encountered. This climate crisis is, indeed, extremely dangerous, but it also presents unprecedented opportunities.”

The critical timeliness of those opportunities emboldened Gore to make a documentary film that was lauded by the powerful launching point of independent movies, the Sundance Film Festival. Described as “a necessary film” by *The New York Times*, “An Inconvenient Truth” takes as its subject not only global warming, but Al Gore himself, a decades-long advocate for environmental responsibility.

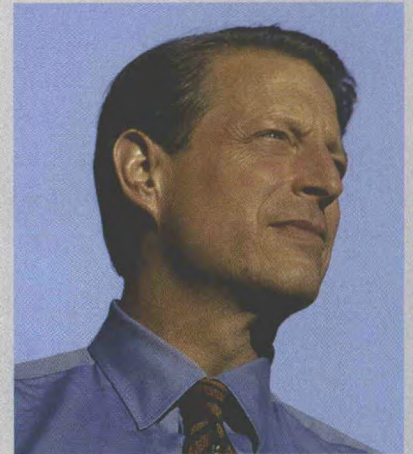
Gore was an environmentalist before he became a politician, authoring the book *Earth in the Balance*, and studying at the feet of some of the earliest “canaries in the coal mine,” scientists who were researching global warming when it was considered at best a fringe theory and far from a pressing issue for the twentieth-century. Now the issue of global warming is finally beginning to receive the attention it deserves, only recently starting to shrug off the layers of myth, misconception, and political maneuvering that have dogged it for the last twenty years. Gore is exhorting us to understand that this is not a political issue; or rather, it cannot afford to be politicized. As he says, it is one of the biggest moral challenges facing our global civilization.

Buddhism’s Environmental Roots

The Buddha himself was an early advocate for the environment, setting down specific rules for water conservation in the *Vinaya Pitaka*.² Donald K. Swearer, Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College says, “The compatibility between the Buddhist worldview of interdependence and an ‘environmentally friendly’ way of living in the world, the values of compassion and nonviolence, and the example of the Buddha’s life-style and the early sangha are cited as important contributions to the dialogue on ways to live in an increasingly threatened world.”³

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been advocating publicly for the environment for several decades. In 1988, in a speech entitled “Humanity and Ecology,”⁴ he said:

“Peace and the survival of life on earth as we know it are threatened by human activities that lack a commitment to humanitarian values. Destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed, and lack of respect for the earth’s living things ... Just as we should cultivate gentle and peaceful relations with our fellow human beings, we should also extend that same kind of



Al Gore



Leading expert on mountain glaciers, Dr. Lonnie Thompson of Ohio State University, in 2000 at the top of Kilimanjaro with the last remains of one of its great glaciers.

¹ Al Gore, “The Future is Green,” *Vanity Fair*, May 2006

² Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, “Early Buddhist Views on Nature,” *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner. Parallax Press: 1990.

³ Donald K. Swearer, “The Hermeneutics of Buddhist Ecology in Contemporary Thailand: Buddhadasa and Dhammapitaka,” *Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams. Harvard University Press: 1997.

⁴ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “Humanity and Ecology,” The Office of His Holiness the Dalai Lama: 1988.

Climate Crisis

attitude toward the natural environment. Morally speaking, we should be concerned for our whole environment ... This, however, is not just a question of morality or ethics, but a question of our own survival ... We must now help people to understand the need for environmental protection. We must teach people to understand the need for environmental protection. We must teach people that conservation directly aids our survival."

Professor Joanna Macy, a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology, who has been leading workshops on peace, justice, and a safe environment around the world for the last thirty years, has a theory that our **wrong view of the self** is at the heart of the crisis we are currently facing.⁵ She says:

"The crisis that threatens our planet, whether seen from its military, ecological, or social aspect, derives from a dysfunctional and pathological notion of the self ... It is a delusion that the self is so separate and fragile that we must delineate and defend its boundaries, that it is so small and so needy that we must endlessly acquire and endlessly consume, and that it is so aloof that as individuals, corporations, nation-states, or species, we can be immune to what

we do to other beings ... What the Buddha woke up to under the Bodhi tree was the *paticca samuppada*, the co-arising of phenomena, in which you cannot isolate a separate, continuous self ..." Macy continues:

"... Virtue is not required for the greening of the self or the emergence of the ecological self. The shift in identification at this point in history is required precisely because moral exhortation doesn't work, and because sermons seldom hinder us from following our self-interest as we conceive it. The obvious choice, then, is to extend our notions of self-interest. For example, it would not occur to me to plead with you, 'Oh, don't saw off your leg. That would be an act of violence.' It wouldn't occur to me because your leg is part of your body. Well, so are the trees in the Amazon rain basin. They are our external lungs. And we are beginning to realize that the world is our body."

This understanding of self (or, rather, selflessness) is precisely what Buddhism has been teaching for thousands of years.

⁵ Joanna Macy, "The Greening of the Self," *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed. Allan Hunt Badiner. Parallax Press: 1990.

What is Global Warming?

"A planetary emergency" is how Gore describes the situation we currently face. The 2005 American storm season was the worst ever recorded, and environmental catastrophes around the world have heralded the truth of a new climatic reality: more storms, stronger storms, too much water, not enough water – in short, the "normal" environmental hazards are no longer normal. Everything has been "supersized."

So, what exactly is global warming? Have you ever asked yourself how the planet is warmed? Solar heat is naturally and conveniently trapped in the atmosphere by gases such as carbon dioxide. The science of global warming boils down to this: our temperatures are rising because we have dramatically and disastrously increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. What leads to increased carbon dioxide? Fossil fuels such as coal, gas, and oil, and the clearing away of thousands of acres of forest are principally to blame.

Scientists have been recording increases in temperature around the world for the last several decades. As a direct result of these higher temperatures, we are seeing glacier melting, the loss of animal and plant habitat, an increased number of storms and droughts and an increase in their severity, among other concerns.

Some of the consequences we will see if actions are not taken and temperatures continue to increase include⁶:

- Deaths from global warming will double in twenty-five years to 300,000 people annually
- Global sea levels could rise by more than twenty feet with the loss of shelf ice in Greenland and Antarctica, devastating coastal areas worldwide
- Heat waves will be more frequent and more intense
- Droughts and wildfires will occur more often
- The Arctic Ocean may be ice-free in summer by the year 2050
- More than a million species worldwide could be driven to extinction by the year 2050.

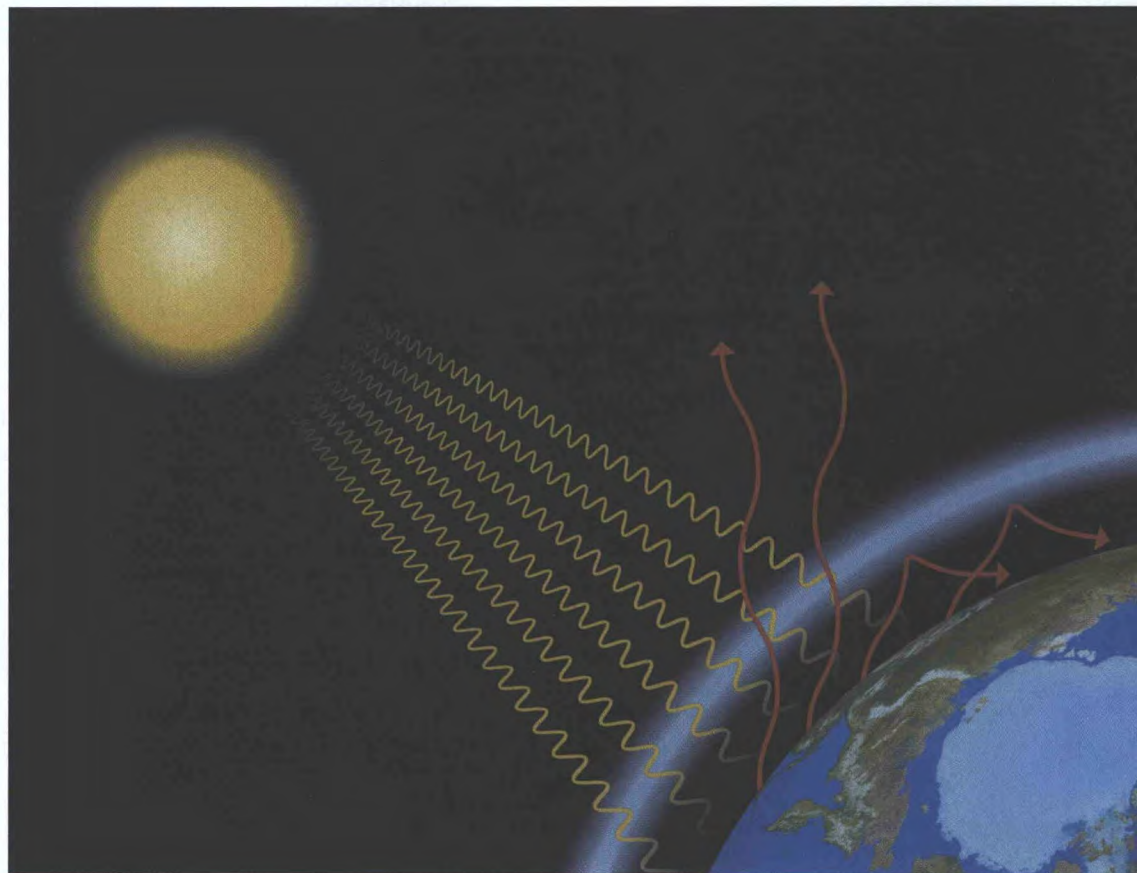
The Tibetan plateau, which supplies up to half of the drinking water for forty percent of the world's people, is melting, along with nearly all of the mountain glaciers in the world.⁷

The website www.climatecrisis.org describes the global warming crisis this way: "If the vast majority of the world's scientists are right, **we have just ten years to avert a major catastrophe** that could send our entire planet into a tail-spin of epic destruction involving extreme weather, floods, droughts, epidemics and killer heat waves beyond anything we have ever experienced."

⁶ Website www.climatecrisis.org, an affiliate of the movie "An Inconvenient Truth."

⁷ Gore, *ibid*

The problem we now face is that this thin layer of atmosphere is being thickened by huge quantities of human-caused carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. And as it thickens, it traps a lot of the infrared radiation that would otherwise escape the atmosphere and continue out to the universe. As a result, the temperature of the Earth's atmosphere – and oceans – is getting dangerously warmer. That's what the climate crisis is all about.



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The Solution

How does morality come into play? What ethical responsibilities have been shunted, and how can ethical determination save us from environmental disaster? What philosophical teachings can shape how we view the environment and act within it? This is not a Buddhist question, but it is a question that Buddhists should take particularly to heart: it is a question of examining what our ideals of wisdom and compassion distill to in the practicalities of everyday living. We must ask our teachers and ourselves: how can our Buddhist practice, or we as Buddhists, help the cause of the environment?

Chökyi Nyima Rinpoche, the renowned Rimé teacher and abbot of Ka-Nying Shedrub Ling Monastery in Kathmandu, Nepal, answered the question this way when *Mandala* recently posed it to him: "Be less greedy!" he said with an uncharacteristic frown. "Don't think only about temporary gain. Take the long view of what is good for future generations."

The environment is a crucible poised for our practice. While the disaster scenarios imply that we don't have a choice, in reality, we have a multitude of choices facing us every day – what form of transportation to use, how much to recycle, whether or not to turn off the lights when we leave a room – and many of us will choose to remain fixed in comfortable habits. In the circumference of our personal worlds, these choices appear benign, and the illusion of our independence finds a comfortable home in our selfish minds. Though we may fail to realize that we exist in an intimate sphere of interdependence, the evidence is in: whether we have the will to change or not, the delicate balance of our world's environment is disintegrating. But, there are solutions.

As the film "An Inconvenient Truth" ends, a message appears in bold on the quieted screen: "When you pray, move your feet." 🌀

"When you pray, move your feet."