



## Conversation without end

Elaine Brook, with other like-minded people, has started an interesting website [www.buddhistecologylink.org](http://www.buddhistecologylink.org) where lively debate about the environment fairly sizzles off the screen. Here's just a taste ...

**A:** So, as a Buddhist, have you given up flying because of the effect it is having on climate change and the harm to living beings?

**B:** Oh, of course not – we can't possibly go back to living in a primitive way! I could not imagine life without flying. I hope somebody will find a way to ameliorate the bad effects, but I don't feel it's my responsibility.

**C (addressing A):** Why would you expect Buddhists to be any better on carbon-reduction than any other religion? There are people from all religions carrying on with daily activities that contribute to climate change, that they could reduce but don't. Why should Buddhists be any different?

**A:** Many Buddhists I met in the East were very careful about not harming other beings – so I suppose it left a kind of expectation. The main thing about most religions is a belief in their particular God, so you'd expect them to be a bit hit and miss about a particular focus on anything beyond that, even though there is a common theme about love and compassion, etc. *But* – the heart of Buddhism is about developing awareness of interconnectedness and compassion, and understanding and subduing one's own mind. Put those things together, and you can't avoid seeing the need to avoid harming other beings as much as possible. So yes, of course, human nature wants to have all its consumer goodies *and* feel lovely and spiritual as well; but if the teaching and practice is doing its job, then that bit of human nature will be transformed. And if it isn't transformed, then surely the teaching and practice isn't doing its job – and if that's the case, then surely anyone who cares about the Dharma will want to find out why, and sort out whatever gap has been left in the process.

I feel it is doing sincere students in the West a disservice to be encouraged to think that just because they are meditating and thinking beautiful thoughts they don't have to actually change what they do day to day.

**Enter Mark Gerrard:** Regarding the 'debate' [on personal responsibility], to me this is a bit of a no-brainer. Taking personal responsibility for all your actions is the foundation of being a Buddhist, so to me it seems like B and C haven't understood the teachings on everything being interdependent. And B's argument is a copout – the question was addressed to Buddhists, not all religious practitioners.

I've been associated with Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, Australia since 1980, living and studying there, building a house and raising a family there, many years spent on the executive committee, etc., but a couple of years ago I realized how limited meditating and studying was with respect to the bigger picture of helping as many others as possible. Now I know some people can help most by meditating and/or studying, but I can only talk from my own point of view.

There are of course many ways, at different levels, to help beings, but it's pointless to teach somebody to meditate if they don't have enough food to eat, or have so many stresses in their life because of their environment. Climate change and the coming peaking of oil will have huge implications for how people live, and if you don't have some awareness of these factors and their consequences you're going to be in trouble, like the majority of the population.

A couple of years ago I felt the best way for me to actualize helping others was to start a sustainability group. We work with other like-minded groups in the area and are looking to establish a transition community (see [www.transitionculture.org](http://www.transitionculture.org), run by a Buddhist in the UK) to a more sustainable society. So far we've organized a solar hot water drive (about 80 purchasers), have established a community garden, run film events to raise the awareness of others in the community, and have a website [www.sustainablemaleny.org](http://www.sustainablemaleny.org). When the situation gets really critical, we hope to have at least partial solutions in place, and to be able to limit the



panic that may result from the loss of services in the wider community.

I've visited a number of Dharma centers and retreat centers, and sometimes wonder how they will handle what's coming in the years ahead. I see very little sign of residents growing their own food or becoming a little more self-sufficient with their water, energy or transport needs. When petrol gets to \$5 a liter in Australia, there won't be a lot of tourists visiting places like Chenrezig Institute. And it will become too difficult to live in a center and work outside.

There are many problems coming that many Dharma people don't seem to be thinking about. The attitude of just wanting to meditate or study might be OK in the Himalayas, but if you want to live in a Western society then, in my opinion, you need to have a wider base of skills at the ready if you truly want to help others. And isn't that what it's all about? Keep up the good work,

**Enter Mark Hanneman (Thupten Jampa):** Person A is correct in their view, as are the two others. It's always useful to remember that our perspective is based on our experience, and cannot be exactly the same as anyone else's.

In the case of this discussion, Person A makes a valid point, although perhaps too aggressively. If there is no understanding of the other person's level of knowledge and motive there can be no valid judgment of their actions. Person A could perhaps explain the benefits and disadvantages of flying, and leave it up to each individual to make their own decision. Practicing empathy and equanimity will always produce positive results, whereas evangelism, even on such a small scale, serves only to isolate us from others.

When considering how to modify our actions, we should always consider the net result; i.e., flying may produce some negative effects, but the results of not flying may produce even more. Each situation should be judged individually. We should always strive to minimize our negative impacts on those we share the planet with, and to maximize our love and compassion towards them. ☸

*Elaine Brook is coordinator of FPMT's Shen Phen Thubten Choeling Study Group for Socially and Ecologically-Engaged Buddhists in Hereford, England [www.gaiacooperative.org/](http://www.gaiacooperative.org/) For more debate and information, go also to [www.buddhistecologylink.org](http://www.buddhistecologylink.org), a site which the founders admit needs some dedicated design skills, so a web-creative volunteer with a passion for the environment is welcome to contact Elaine Brook at [elaine@gaiacooperative.org](mailto:elaine@gaiacooperative.org)*

## Universal Responsibility

*by His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

It seems to me that whilst most people are willing to accept the need for unity within their own group, and, within this, the need to consider others' welfare, the tendency is to neglect the rest of humanity. In doing so, we ignore not only the interdependent nature of reality, but the reality of our situation.

If it were possible for one group, or one race, or one nation to gain complete satisfaction or fulfillment by remaining totally independent and self-sufficient within the confines of their own society, then perhaps it could be argued that discrimination against outsiders is justifiable. But this is not the case. In fact the modern world is such that the interests of a particular community can no longer be considered to lie within the confines of its own boundaries. The cultivation of contentment is crucial to maintaining peaceful coexistence. Discontent breeds acquisitiveness and can never be satisfied.

...In particular, lack of contentment is the source of damage to our natural surroundings, and, thereby, of harm to others. Which others? In particular the poor and the weak. Although the rich may be able to move house to avoid, for example, high levels of pollution, within their own community the poor have no choice. Similarly, the people of the poorer nations which do not have the resources to cope with the effects of the richer nations' excesses also suffer.

The coming generations will suffer too. And eventually we ourselves will suffer. How? We have to live in the world we are helping to create. If we choose not to modify our behavior out of respect for others' equal rights to happiness and not to suffer, it will not be long before we begin to notice the negative consequences. Imagine the pollution from an extra two billion cars, for example. It would affect us all.

Contentment is not merely an ethical matter. If we do not wish to add to our own experience of suffering, it is a matter of necessity.

(From *Ancient Wisdom, Modern World*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama)