

Eco-Ethics:

Engaging in the Practice of Compassion

BY ELAINE BROOK



The Shen Phen Thubten Choeling premises with photovoltaic and solar panels for water heating.



Elaine Brook (right) with physicist Fritjof Capra, adviser on ecological issues.

Now that environmental issues, and climate change in particular, have become headlines in the mainstream media, the question that arises for us all is how to address issues of universal responsibility. For Buddhists, the question is not only “Is this something that is relevant to our practice?” but also, “If we are following a practice focused on interdependence and compassion, should we be taking a lead, setting an example, or simply waiting for politicians or market forces to push us into action?”

Issues of universal responsibility such as the environment necessitate changes in everyday actions, both individually, and within organizations: this is a field of practice that could be called **eco-ethics**.

For the past twenty-five years, I have spoken about environmental concerns and how I believe these concerns dovetail in particular with the mission of Buddhist organizations and our individual Buddhist practice. I have encountered enthusiastic support, as well as disagreement and disinterest.

Among the counterarguments to my belief has been the position that environmental issues are the province of politics, not the Dharma; that the Dharma is focused on transforming our thoughts and feelings, not taking action; and that the sufferings of environmental degradation are a result of karma, and thus, not our responsibility to solve. Some have expressed that they feel prayers to be reborn in a better world are a more appropriate response to environmental concerns than taking action. I have also been challenged by those who argued that if they hadn't directly caused harm – for example, by not directly operating a sweatshop – then they could enjoy the results – in this case, inexpensive clothing – without incurring the negative karma.

Many Buddhists today feel that the core principle of **compassion** should be more than thoughts, feelings, prayers, meditations, and being kind to the people we meet: It is an ethic that needs to be extended to our ordinary, everyday habits – how we use energy, transport, food, clothing, and so on.

The Dharma is vast and there are numerous points to consider. But beyond the best intentions of our understanding, we also must consider the forces of society and culture in which we have been raised. Consumerism reigns supreme in the West and we have been conditioned to be in denial of its costs.

An early movement, “Corporate Social Responsibility,” began with a raising of awareness of these issues among organizations in the West. Initially, it seemed the commitment lacked backbone: it was the report on the cubicle shelf that nobody ever read, or the item at the end of the agenda that never got discussed. Twenty years later, many organizations and businesses are taking the initiative to heart in various ways, and Buddhist organizations can follow this example.

Remembering compassion every day and trying to respond ethically to situations is a big effort and we can't expect to be one-hundred percent perfect

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immediately, in the same way that we can't expect to be one-hundred percent perfect in overcoming our anger immediately. (I am definitely not one-hundred percent perfect in either!)

Buddhism offers us a tremendous tool to support us in making the necessary changes. When we meditate, we allow our hearts to open, to realize the principles of interdependence and compassion. When we buy and consume in line with the selfish mindset of our industrial-growth society, we close our hearts so that we don't see the suffering we are colluding with and causing. There is a mental continuum that accompanies our everyday actions, which needs to become congruent with our feelings in meditation; otherwise, we begin to suffer from a kind of spiritual indigestion.

Denial usually leads to a mental process of 'splitting,' where the genuine wish to avoid harm to others is separated off when we engage in everyday actions which will contribute to harm. If Dharma teaching and practice is meant to enable us to be fully aware of our own mind, and still it doesn't enable us to see this 'splitting' process when it happens, then we need to look deeply at the way we are applying the practice.

Having spent many years living and working in Buddhist cultures in the Himalaya, I realized that how we apply our Buddhist practice is not a question of doctrine, but of interpretation, and above all, context. There is a major difference in scale between the cultures in which the Buddhist teachings were first disseminated and most contemporary cultures. Even the great "cities" in those early times were relatively small and compact, and had strong links with the surrounding area which supplied their food and water. Most people had little academic education, but had a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of soil, air, and water, and all the living beings that are part of them. They also had a deeply interconnected social system of reciprocity and cooperation in order to farm, travel, learn, communicate, and look after each other's health. They didn't need to be taught these things by Buddhist teachers because they were already steeped in them from birth.

What our increasingly urbanized and intellectually-educated societies have lost is that deeply-felt interconnectedness with all other living beings. In the West in particular, we have paid a price for a culture of individual rights and privileges. It is interesting to hear that Tibetans don't seem to have a word (or a concept) for "alienation."

It may well be that more emphasis on **interdependence** may bring more balance to our individualistic society. When we directly recognize other beings as an "extension" of ourselves, we have no choice but to reach out to help alleviate their physical suffering, just as we would automatically remove our own hand from the fire. The objection is often

brought that engaging in social and environmental action is a denial of the nature of suffering in samsara and confuses temporal with ultimate happiness. To the contrary, we can still be holding the view that only enlightenment or nirvana brings ultimate happiness – but we would not use that as a reason to leave our own hand in the fire!

Watching the plants and animals live and co-exist in my own garden is a constant reminder that dependent-arising is not just a principle which applies to mental states, but manifests in every part and process around us. Just by being alive, we interact in every moment of every day in a complex web of relationships. What we call "environment" is not something separate we live *in*, but a collective term for all the beings, including ourselves, that co-create it as an ongoing dynamic process. Respecting this process as if it were a living being as well as our life-support system was well understood by indigenous communities everywhere, and is now being relearned in industrialised urban culture as Gaia Theory.

My two favorite quotes from His Holiness the Dalai Lama are:

"Buddhism can be explained in terms of two points; first, a deep understanding of the interdependence of all things and events and second, the practice of non-harming, of helping others, that is based on the understanding of the first."

"Meditation is something that needs to be done twenty-four hours of the day."

These few short sentences open a door to a way of life based on constant mindfulness of the interpenetrating chains of events which ripple outwards from our every action and non-action. Not only every interaction with living beings, but also every cup of water, mouthful of food, and unit of energy is connected to a web of relationships with other beings, and may bring harm or help to them. In his book, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, His Holiness encourages us to try to direct our every action in ways that will bring the most help and least harm to other beings, looking at the consequences in humanitarian or environmental terms.

It is useful to engage in measuring one's own "Carbon Footprint" which is a way of calculating the amount of land needed to supply our needs and absorb our pollution – there are a number of these on the Web. If everyone in the world lived like people in the UK we would need three planets! If everyone lived like Americans, we'd need five planets. So working on ways to get ourselves back to "one-planet living" by reducing our material demands is a way of keeping the second precept, not to steal – because anything over "one

planet" rightfully belongs to other beings. In fact, things have now become so extreme that we need to do this in order to keep the precept of not killing, because other beings are actually losing their lives as a result of our over-consumption. This is a wonderful opportunity to engage in the practice of compassion! There is no need at all to regard it as any kind of hardship. It has been a fascinating adventure developing Shen Phen Thubten Choeling Centre in Herefordshire, England as a living example of one-planet living.

One interesting exercise is to use the bleep of the electronic checkout while we are shopping as a reminder of our practice of compassion. Every time the machine registers the bar code, it is not only adding up the customer's bill, but also sending a message to the head office to order a replacement for what has just been purchased. So the mind begins to focus on the money we are investing, bit by bit, in the various industries that produce the things we buy. How much are we investing in animal testing, factory farms,

insecticide sprays, child labor, sweatshops, oppressive regimes, and so on? Do we use an ordinary bank account or pension that invests in these things, or even arms sales?

This practice is not intended to lead to the nihilism of feeling that we cannot consume anything at all, but more of an invitation to break free from the post-modern religion of consumerism and the so-called rights of consumers to have everything they want as quickly and cheaply as possible. Not everyone will come up with the same choices, but hopefully everyone will choose to make a change. This is an opportunity to live simply, to feel in balance with the mindfulness that seeks to minimize harm to other beings by consciously choosing actions toward that end. ☸

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Climate Crisis: Reducing Your Ecological Footprint

Here are 100 ways to start dealing with the climate crisis. We don't have the space to print them all, but these are a few samples. The full list is on the Mandala website at: www.mandalamagazine.org/climate_crisis/

To engage in the practice of compassion: first, rejoice that you have so many different ways to be compassionate to choose from, as well as the opportunity to maybe one day do them all. Then, implement the practice, followed by a dedication to all the sentient beings whose suffering has been reduced by the action.

- Waste Online estimates that the average U.K. citizen uses about 290 non-biodegradable plastic bags a year, which means more than 17 billion bags are being used annually. Invest in stronger, re-usable bags, and avoid plastic bags whenever possible.

- Make sure your wood comes from a sustainable source. Forests act as carbon "sinks," and ancient forests support precious biodiversity. Wood from commercial, sustainable forests is replaced as it is cut.

- Buy local food as much as possible. To help reduce CO₂ emissions (released from trucks, aeroplanes, and cargo ships), it's best to buy food that's in season, organic, and grown locally. It is also cheaper and more environmentally friendly to buy in bulk.

- With increased demand for cheap coffee, many Latin American growers have moved toward full-sun plantations, clearing the habitat of numerous native birds and increasing the

use of pesticides and fertilizers. By drinking shade-grown coffee, you can help bird habitats and reduce the need for farming chemicals. Shade-grown coffee beans can be purchased at many grocery stores. Starbucks offers shade-grown coffee as well.

- Many of the clothes in the shops we patronize are made by workers in developing countries who work fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, in very bad conditions for very little money. If we buy these clothes, we invest/support expansion of this cruel industry. Look for clothes that are "fair trade" and guarantee that the workers are properly paid and not badly treated.

- Each ton of recycled paper can save 17 trees, 1,438 liters of oil, three cubic yards of landfill space, 4,000 kilowatts of energy, and 26,500 liters of water. GLASS: The energy saved by recycling just one bottle could power a computer for 25 minutes. ALUMINIUM: It takes 95 percent less energy to recycle an aluminium can than to make a new one.

- Our lighting, heating, driving, air travel, and imported goods produce carbon pollution, global warming, and extreme weather events. We can switch off lights, wear a sweater and turn heating down, and reduce our driving and flying.

- Most animal products, cheese, and eggs come from factory farms where animals endure terrible conditions. Most vegetables are sprayed with chemicals to kill insects and 'pests': in effect killing billions of small sentient beings. We can choose animal products that are not from factory farms, such as products labeled 'Freedom food,' 'RSPCA,' 'organic,' 'Bio' etc., as well as vegetables that are not sprayed.