



THE WORLD WE HAVE

A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology

THICH NHAT HANH
Introduction by Alan Weisman

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Caring for the Environmentalist

A student asked me, "There are so many urgent problems, what should I do?" I said, "Take one thing and do it very deeply and carefully, and you will be doing everything at the same time."

Many people are aware of the Earth's suffering, and their hearts are filled with compassion. They know what needs to be done, and they engage in political, social, and environmental work to try to change things. But after a period of intense involvement, they often become discouraged because they lack the strength needed to sustain a life of action. Intellect alone is not enough to guide a life of compassionate action. To effectively influence the future of our world we need something more. Real strength can be found not in power, money, or weapons, but in deep, inner peace. When we have enough insight, we are not caught by many difficult situations anymore. We can get out of difficult situations very easily. When we change our daily lives—the way we think,

speak, and act—we change the world. It is important for us to live in such a way that in every moment we are deeply there with our true presence, always alive and nourishing the insight of interbeing. Without peace and happiness we cannot take care of ourselves, other species, or the planet. That's why the best way to care for the environment is to care for the environmentalist.

There are many Buddhist teachings that can help us understand our interconnectedness with our Mother Earth. One of the deepest is the Diamond Sutra, which is written in the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and one of his important disciples, Subhuti. The Diamond Sutra is the most ancient text on deep ecology. It begins with this question by Subhuti: "If daughters and sons of good families wish to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, what should they rely on and what should they do to master their thinking?"

This is the same as asking, "If I want to use my whole being to protect life, what methods and principles should I use?"

The Buddha answers, "We have to do our best to help every living being cross the ocean of suffering. But after all beings have arrived at the shore of liberation, no being at all has been carried to the other shore.

If you are still caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span, you are not an authentic bodhisattva."

Self, person, living being, and life span are four notions that prevent us from seeing reality.

Life is one; we don't need to slice it into pieces and call this or that piece a "self." What we call a self is made only of nonself elements. When we look at a flower, for example, we may think that it is different from things that are "non-flowers." But when we look more deeply, we see that everything in the cosmos is in that flower. Without all of the non-flower elements—sunshine, clouds, earth, gardener, minerals, heat, rivers, and consciousness—a flower cannot be. That is why the Buddha teaches that the self does not exist. We have to discard all distinctions between self and nonself. How can anyone work to protect the environment without this insight?

The second notion the Diamond Sutra advises us to throw away is the notion of a person, a human being. This is not too difficult. When we look into the human being, we see human ancestors, animal ancestors, plant ancestors, and mineral ancestors. We see that the human is made of non-human elements. We usually discriminate between humans and non-humans, thinking that we are more important than other spe-

cies. But since we humans are made of non-human elements, to protect ourselves we have to protect all of the non-human elements. There is no other way. If you think that God created humans in His own image and that He created all the other things for humans to use, then you are already discriminating and making people more important than other beings. When we see that humans have no self, we see that to take care of the environment (the non-human elements) is to take care of humanity. We have to respect and protect other species in order for us to have a chance. The best way to take good care of human beings so that they can be truly healthy and happy is to take care of other beings and the environment.

I know ecologists who are not happy in their families. They work hard to improve the environment, partly to escape their own unhappy family lives. If someone is not happy within herself, how can she help the environment? To protect the non-human elements is to protect humans, and to protect humans is to protect non-human elements.

The third notion we have to break through is the notion of a living being. We think that we living beings are different from inanimate objects, but according to the principle of interbeing, living beings are comprised of non-living being elements. When we

look into ourselves, we see minerals and all other non-living being elements. Why discriminate against what we call inanimate? To protect living beings, we must protect the stones, the soil, and the oceans. Before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, there were many beautiful stone benches in the parks. When the Japanese were rebuilding their city, they felt that these stones were dead. So they carried them away and buried them, and brought in live stones. Don't think these things are not alive. Atoms are always moving. Electrons move at nearly the speed of light. According to the teaching of Buddhism, atoms and stones are consciousness itself. That is why discrimination by living beings against non-living beings should be discarded.

The last notion is that of life span. We think that we have been alive since a certain point in time and that prior to that moment, our life did not exist. This distinction between life and non-life is not correct. Life is made of death, and death is made of life. We have to accept death; it makes life possible. The cells in our bodies are dying every day, but we never think to organize a funeral for them. The death of one cell allows the birth of another. Life and death are two aspects of the same reality. We must learn to die peacefully so that others may live. This deep meditation

brings forth non-fear, non-anger, and non-despair, the strengths we need for our work. With non-fear, even when we see that a problem is huge, we won't burn out. We'll know how to make small, steady steps.

If those who work to protect the environment look deeply into these four notions, they will know how to be and how to act. They'll have enough energy and insight to be a bodhisattva on the path of action.

There's a lot of suffering in the world, and it's important for us to stay in touch with this suffering in order to be compassionate. But to remain strong, we also need to embrace the positive elements. When we see a group of people living mindfully, smiling and behaving in a loving manner, we gain confidence in our future. When we practice mindful breathing, smiling, resting, walking, and working, we become a positive element in society, and we will inspire confidence in everyone around us. This is the way to avoid allowing despair to overwhelm us. It is also the way to help the younger generation so they don't lose hope. It's very important that we live our daily lives in such a way as to demonstrate that a future is possible.

To bring about real change in our global ecological situation our efforts must be collective and harmonious, based on love and respect for ourselves and each other, our ancestors, and future generations. If anger

at injustice is what we use as the source of our energy, we may do something harmful, something we will later regret. According to Buddhism, compassion is the only source of energy that is useful and safe. With compassion your energy is born from insight; it's not blind energy. Just feeling compassion is not enough; we have to learn to express it. That is why love must always go together with understanding. Understanding and insight show us how to act.

The term "engaged Buddhism" was created to restore the true meaning of Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism is simply Buddhism applied in our daily lives. If it's not engaged, it can't be called Buddhism. Buddhist practice takes place not only in monasteries, meditation halls, and Buddhist institutes, but in whatever situation we find ourselves. Engaged Buddhism means the activities of daily life combined with the practice of mindfulness.

There is a real need to bring Buddhism into the life of society, especially when you find yourself in a situation of war or social injustice. During the Vietnam War it became very clear that we should make Buddhism engaged, so that compassion and understanding could become part of people's daily lives. When your village is bombed and destroyed and when your neighbors become refugees, you can't continue

to simply practice sitting meditation in the meditation hall. Even if your temple hasn't been bombed and your meditation hall is intact, you can still hear the cries of wounded children and you can see the pain of adults whose homes have been destroyed. How can you continue to sit there in the early morning, in the evening, and at noontime? That is why you have to find ways to bring your practice into daily life and go out to help people. You can do all you can to relieve their suffering. Yet you also know that if you abandon your practice of sitting, of walking in mindfulness, that you will not be able to continue for a long time.

It's important that while volunteering or taking part in environmental activism, we find ways to continue with our practice of mindful breathing, mindful walking, and mindful speaking. Let us not give in to anger or despair when reflecting on the current state of the world or when confronted with those who engage in the wasteful use of resources. Instead we can make our own lives an example of simple living. Deep listening and loving speech can help support the transformation of individuals and society and nurture the collective awakening that will save our civilization and our planet.

If we want to be successful in the practice of loving speech, we need to know how to manage and

deal with our emotions when they surface. Every time anger, frustration, or sadness surfaces, we have to have the capacity to deal with it. This doesn't mean we fight with it, suppress it, or chase it away. Our anger and disappointment is part of us, and we should not fight against it or suppress it. When we oppress ourselves, we commit violence against ourselves. If we know how to return to our mindful breathing, we bring about our true presence and generate the energy of being in touch. With that energy we can recognize and embrace our sadness, anger, or disappointment with loving kindness.

Social work and relief work done without mindfulness practice cannot be described as engaged Buddhism. People who do this work can lose themselves in despair, anger, or disappointment. If you're really practicing engaged Buddhism, then you know how to preserve yourself as a practitioner while you do things to help the people in the world. Truly engaged Buddhism is first of all practicing mindfulness in all that we do.

The practice of mindfulness helps us to be aware of what is going on. Once we are able to see deeply into the suffering and recognize its roots, we will be motivated to act and to practice. The energy we need is not fear or anger, but the energy of understanding

and compassion. There is no need to blame or condemn. Those who are destroying themselves, societies, and the planet aren't doing it intentionally. Their pain and loneliness are overwhelming and they want to escape. They need to be helped, not punished. Only understanding and compassion on a collective level can liberate us.