

Pure Aspiration, Bodhisattva Activity, and a Safe-Climate Future

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For most of human history, people all over the world had a simple lifestyle that made use of natural resources sustainably, and avoided significant damage to the Earth. In recent times, however, our lives and our relationship with the environment have become increasingly complex—and problematical because we now have tremendous power to harm the living world.

The lifestyle of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is making huge demands on the natural environment. We make unprecedented use of resources such as water, wood, and soil, without correctly understanding what the outcomes will be. In particular, we use fossil fuels recklessly, ignoring the fact that they cause ever higher carbon dioxide emissions, and therefore dangerous global warming as a result. We imagine we need all kinds of cleverly-advertised consumer products, without really evaluating whether they are truly important or useful to us. There seems to be no limit to human desire, but there is clearly a limit to how much Mother Earth can sustain our greed.

The Buddha and his original monastic community followed a way of life that was mindful, frugal, and without waste. It did not fall into the extremes of poverty or hoarding, and it manifested the key principle of the Middle Way. Our lifestyle today should be modeled on this principle—neither too hard nor overly indulgent. If something we desire is beneficial and does not harm the environment it could be considered necessary. If that is not the case, let us think twice about whether we want or need it at all. As Ashvagosa said in his Twenty Verses on the Bodhisattva Vow:

For others and also for yourself,
Do what is useful even if painful,
And what is both useful and pleasurable,
Not what gives pleasure but is of no use.

This active decision-making process represents a choice made out of awareness, rather than made blindly. Our actions match our spiritual aspirations.

Our aspiration as Dharma practitioners is to free all living beings from suffering. Wherever there is suffering, we wish to transform it into happiness and equanimity. We understand that our sense of self is misleading. In reality, the self is not independent from the rest of life around us, even the air we breathe. The principle of interdependence shows us that all life is connected, and that our individual actions have consequences in the larger world. This is the karmic relationship between cause and effect. It clearly applies also to global warming, which has been caused by humans extracting fossil fuel reserves laid down hundreds of millions of years ago and burning them to produce heat, mechanical, and

electrical energy. By doing this we have released fossil carbon gas into the atmosphere of our planet.

As Dharma practitioners we have a responsibility to reverse negative actions through skillful means. To ensure that there is a healthy future for all life on Earth, we should be in the forefront of efforts to reduce carbon emissions and replace fossil fuels with renewable sources of energy—wind, solar, (appropriate) water, and geothermal power. We should also take a lead in the protection of forests and rainforests. Their destruction contributes greatly to climate breakdown, while their preservation cools the Earth and ensures its biodiversity. Indeed, we should be part of a global effort to plant many more trees and forests.

I grew up in a remote area of Tibet following a centuries-old way of life. People used water, wood, and natural resources with great care and they generated little or no waste. Even as a child, I planted a tree to protect our local spring and asked my father to protect it when I left for my monastic seat at Tsurphu. We had little formal education, but we inherited a deep traditional concern for our environment. Even as children we regarded many mountains, rivers, and some wild animals as sacred, and treated them with respect accordingly. Now scientists tell us that if we do not make fundamental changes in the way we do business as a global society, we stand to lose over half the species on Earth by the middle of this century. Is this not unbearably sad? Can we not do better than stand idly by, when we know this process of mass extinction is taking place in our own lifetime?

Climate breakdown is already impacting all our lives, and without urgent corrective action it will only become more devastating. Here in the Himalayan region, our climate is warming three times faster than the global average rise in temperature. This is having dire consequences for our great glaciers, which are part of the third largest store of ice on Earth—the so-called “Third Pole.” Upon it depend the ecology and way of life of Tibet, together with the water supply and food of billions of people in China, India, and Pakistan.

We humans have already done such immense damage to the environment that it is almost beyond our power to heal it. The challenge is far more complex and extensive than Buddhists can tackle alone. However, we can take a lead, and to do so we must educate and inform ourselves. This is the time when our pure aspirations and our bodhisattva activity must come together. This is the time to ensure a safe-climate future for our planet. This aspiration comes from my heart.

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