



Mindfully Facing Climate Change (2)

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This is the second of four installments to accompany a freely available online course aimed at offering a practical approach to the challenges of climate change that is grounded in the teachings of early Buddhism.

An Ethics of the Mind

What is the truth of the arising of dukkha? That is, it is grasping conjoined with craving that leads to acting carelessly with a mind that keeps being lustfully attached. This is reckoned to be the truth of the arising of dukkha.

In this installment I explore the causes underlying the *dukkha* of environmental destruction and climate change.

Of central importance to the present installment is the Discourse on the World Ruler, which provides an ethical perspective on environmental decline. In early Buddhist thought, such ethical perspective has the mind as a central reference point. Hence, following up the implications of the Discourse on the World Ruler leads me to the topic of mindful contemplation of the mind and to exploring common responses to the challenge of

Bhikkhu Anālayo 2020: “Mindfully Facing Climate Change”,

Insight Journal, 46: 30-60.

climate change from the perspective of their relation to mental defilements.

The statement on the second truth, translated above, highlights the chief role that craving plays in the early Buddhist analysis of the conditions responsible for *dukkha*. This concords with a central thrust in Buddhist thought, which is a keen interest in what is taking place in the mind. Throughout, the emphasis is less on what is out there, but much rather on what takes places within, which is in turn evaluated from an ethical perspective.

Mindful Self-reliance

For exploring the causes leading to environmental decline, the Discourse on the World Ruler provides a helpful perspective with its depiction of a gradual deterioration of living conditions in ways that are similar to current predictions of the dire repercussions of climate change. Throughout the discourse, such deterioration is directly linked to a decline in morality.

The description itself is part of what appears to be a parable, whose purpose is to illustrate the importance of building self-reliance through the cultivation of mindfulness. A Chinese version of the Discourse on the World Ruler sets out this main theme, which the ensuing description serves to flesh out, in the following manner:

You should be a light unto yourselves, with the Dharma as your light, without any other light; you should be a refuge unto yourselves, with the Dharma as your refuge, without any other refuge.

How will monastics be a light unto themselves, with the Dharma as their light, without any other light; be a refuge unto themselves, with the Dharma as their refuge, without any other refuge?

Here monastics contemplate the body as a body internally, being diligent without laxity, with undistracted mindfulness, removing greed and sadness in the world. They contemplate the body as a body externally ... they contemplate the body as a body internally and externally, being diligent without laxity, with undistracted mindfulness, removing greed and sadness in the world. They contemplate feeling tones ... mental states ... dharmas also in this way.

This is how monastics are a light unto themselves, with the Dharma as their light, without any other light; they are a refuge unto themselves, with the Dharma as their refuge, without any other refuge.

The reference to being “a light” to oneself in the above passage reflects one of two possible understandings of the underlying Indic term, which has its Pāli counterpart in *attadīpa*. Alternatively, this term could also be understood to convey the sense of being “an island” to oneself.

The imagery of being a light or island to oneself recurs in other contexts, the majority of which relate the practice of mindfulness to being confronted with something distressing.

One such instance concerns the passing away of Sāriputta, the speaker of the discourse taken up in the last installment. Learning of his death had triggered considerable sorrow in Ānanda, the monastic who

served for many years as the personal attendant of the Buddha. According to a Chinese version of the relevant discourse, Ānanda described his own condition as follows:

Now my whole body is [as if it were] falling apart, the four directions [are as if they had] changed their order, the teachings I learned are [as if they were] blocked off.

The Pāli version similarly reports him stating that his body felt as if he had been drugged, he had become disoriented, and the teachings were no longer clear to him. To help him overcome this condition, the Buddha gave Ānanda a teaching culminating in the recommendation to be a light or island to oneself by cultivating the four establishments of mindfulness. Clearly, here mindfulness practice is the tool to emerge from grief and sorrow.

Another instance takes its occasion from the fact that, after Sāriputta's death, his close friend Mahāmoggallāna, another disciple of considerable importance in the monastic community, had also passed away. In a teaching delivered on this occasion, the Buddha acknowledged that the assembly of his disciples now appeared empty, due to the demise of these two chief disciples. Nevertheless, his recommendation was to avoid giving rise to sorrow on this account:

How could it be that what is of a nature to be born, of a nature to arise, of a nature to be constructed, of a nature to be conditioned, of a nature to change, will not be obliterated? The wish to make it not become destroyed is for something that is impossible.

This clarification then leads over to the recommendation to become a light or island to oneself through mindfulness practice.

A further occurrence relates to the Buddha's own potential passing away. He had been so seriously ill that Ānanda was worried that his teacher was about to pass away. A Chinese version of this episode reports his sentiments as follows:

When the Blessed One was ill, my mind was in fear and tied up with worry. I felt lost in bewilderment, no longer recognizing the directions.

Here, once again, the Buddha's reply leads up to the recommendation to become self-reliant, a light or island to oneself, by cultivating mindfulness. This advice culminates in the declaration that, by dint of such cultivation, one becomes a true disciple of the Buddha:

After my final Nirvana, those who are able to cultivate this teaching are truly my disciples and foremost in the training.

The Pāli parallels express a similar meaning by stating that those who become self-reliant through mindfulness will be foremost among those who are keen on training.

Based on the passages surveyed above, it can be anticipated that the key theme of the Discourse on the World Ruler will similarly be about the potential to face grief and sorrow with mindfulness, thereby learning to become self-reliant.

Although this is indeed the case, the Discourse on the World Ruler does not take its occasion from the death of a close one. Instead, it depicts a gradual moral and environmental decline that culminates in truly catastrophic conditions on the earth. Nevertheless, the same advice holds in this case: become self-reliant through mindfulness. It follows that the same advice also holds in relation to the main topic of this book, in that mindfulness is indeed the central tool for facing climate change.

Bad Governance

The Discourse on the World Ruler relates the onset of a gradual deterioration of the environment to bad governance. After the peaceful reign of several kings who maintained ancient customs, a king assumes power who instead follows his own whims:

This one king governed the country on his own; he did not continue the ancient law. His government was unstable, everyone was complaining, the country was declining, and the people were withering away.

Then one brahmin minister approached the king and said: “Great king, you should know that the country is now declining and the people are withering away. Things are not turning out as usual. Now the king has many good friends in the country who are wise and erudite, knowledgeable in things ancient and modern. They are equipped with knowledge of how earlier kings governed rightly by the Dharma. Why not command them to gather and ask what they know, so that they will give their personal replies?”

Then the king summoned his many ministers and asked them about the way earlier kings had governed. Then the wise ministers provided answers on these matters. The king heard what they said and implemented the old way of governing and protecting the world by means of the Dharma. However, he was unable to aid solitary elderly people as well as to provide for the lowly and destitute.

Another Chinese version of the present discourse offers further information on what had made this particular king govern according to his personal whims:

Yet, he was stained by sensual pleasures, attached to sensual pleasures, insatiably greedy for sensual pleasures, in bondage to sensual pleasures, affected by sensual pleasures, and dominated by sensual pleasures. He did not see their disadvantage and did not know a way out of them. So he ruled the country according to his own ideas. Because he ruled the country according to his own ideas, the country consequently declined and no longer prospered.

Although this detailed explanation is peculiar to the above discourse, all versions report that the king failed to look after the poor. Hence, the suggestion in the above passage that sensuality was responsible for his neglect and bad governance fits the context well. As the king of the country, he would have had ample opportunities for sensual gratification. The resultant indulgence could indeed have fostered a neglect of the destitute.

A similar pattern is evident in the current environmental crisis, due to a pervasive concern with national interests among leaders in affluent countries.

This often results in a failure to take properly into account the situation in less affluent countries, where living conditions keep worsening due to the effects of climate change resulting directly from excessive indulgence by the wealthier.

Ethical Decline

Not providing for the needy had its consequences, which the Discourse on the World Ruler describes as follows:

Then the people of the country in turn became quite impoverished. Consequently, they took from one another by force, and theft increased greatly. It being investigated, they seized one of them, took him to the king, and said: "This man is a thief. May the king deal with him."

The king asked him: "Is it true that you are a thief?" He replied: "It is true. I am poor and hungry, unable to maintain myself. Therefore, I have become a thief." Then the king supplied him with goods from his treasury and said: "With these goods support your parents and care for your relatives. From now on, do not become a thief again!"

Other people in turn heard that the king was giving wealth to those who engage in theft. Thereupon they further engaged in stealing the property of others.

The problem of theft originated from the king's failure to provide for the poor, and hence from his lack of compassion. When faced with the results, the king tried to act in a compassionate manner. However, this was misguided compassion; it lacked wisdom, as the king

failed to realize that it involved rewarding immoral behavior.

When thievery continued to occur again and again, the king realized the consequences of his misguided compassion and decided to punish the thieves:

They again seized one of them, took him to the king, and said: “This man is a thief. May the king deal with him.”

The king asked again: “Is it true that you are a thief?” He replied: “It is true. I am poor and hungry, unable to maintain myself. Therefore, I have become a thief.”

Then the king thought: “At first, seeing that they were poor, I gave the thieves wealth so that they would stop. But other people have heard of it and in turn imitated each other even more, and robbery increases daily. This will not do. Let me now rather have that man pilloried. I will command that he [be paraded through] the streets and alleys and then taken out of the city to be executed in the wilds, as a warning to other people.”

Then the king ordered his attendants: “Have him bound, beat a drum to announce the command, and [parade] him through the streets and alleys. This done, take him out of the city and execute him in the wilds.”

The people in the country all came to know that someone who had become a thief had been taken and bound by the king, who commanded that he [be paraded] through the streets and alleys and executed

in the wilds. Then the people said to one another in turn: "If we are labelled as thieves, we will be like that, not different from him."

Then the people in the country, to protect themselves, consequently made themselves weapons to fight with, swords and bows with arrows. They repeatedly killed and injured each other when attacking to plunder.

From the time this king came [to the throne], poverty started. There being poverty, robbery started. There being robbery, fighting with weapons started. There being fighting with weapons, there was killing and harming. There being killing and harming, [people's] complexions became haggard and their lifespan shorter.

In agreement with its parallels, the above passage depicts an increasing decline in moral standards, where poverty leads via theft to mutual killing.

The other Chinese version again provides a detail that helps to appreciate the narrative flow. According to its report, the previously described thief had been caught by the owner. This indication fits the flow of the narration well, as when the king decided to punish thievery, people took up weapons to kill those they robbed. This would be a logical consequence of thieves earlier being arrested by the owners, because by killing the owner(s) one could avoid being arrested and then punished by the king.

The idea of a reduction of lifespan is a recurrent motif throughout the entire story, expressed in ways that reflect the nature of the tale as a parable. According to the overall progression, the initial life span is either eighty thousand or forty thousand years,

and this gradually diminishes until reaching an all-time low of ten years.

Of relevance for evaluating such details is the largely symbolic function of numbers in the early Buddhist discourses. In view of this symbolic function, perhaps the actual figures could be accorded less importance in order to discern the main principle behind the narrative. A decline in average life expectancy would be natural once burglary and killing set in. Without intending to pretend that this must have been the original intent of the description, such an interpretation would help to convey the basic message of the parable in a way more easily appreciated in modern times.

Ecological Decline

The moral decline also has ecological repercussions, which the Discourse on the World Ruler depicts in this way:

At that time one no longer hears in the world the names of ghee, rock honey, dark rock honey, or of any sweet delicacies. Rice seeds and rice seedlings turn into grass and weeds. Silk, silken cloth, brocade, cotton, white wool, what now in the world is called a garment, are at that time not seen at all. Fabrics woven from coarse hair will be the best kind of clothing.

At that time many thorny bushes grow on this earth, and there are many mosquitoes, gadflies, flies, fleas, snakes, vipers, wasps, centipedes, and poisonous worms. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, pearls, and what are called gems completely disappear into the earth. On

the surface of the earth there appear only clay stones, sand, and gravel.

At that time human beings never ever hear any more the names of the ten wholesome [actions]. The world will be just full of the ten unwholesome [actions]. When [even] the names of the good qualities are no longer present, how could those people get to cultivate wholesome conduct?

At that time human beings are capable of being extremely bad and there is no filiality toward parents, no respect for teachers and elders, no loyalty, and no righteousness. Those who are rebellious and without principles are esteemed. It is just as nowadays those are esteemed who are [instead] capable of cultivating wholesome conduct, of filiality toward parents, of respecting teachers and elders, of being loyal, trustworthy, and righteous, of following principles and cultivating compassion.

At that time [human] beings recurrently engage in the ten bad [courses of action] and often fall into bad ways. On seeing one another, [human] beings constantly wish to kill one another. They are just like hunters on seeing a herd of deer.

Then on this earth there are many ravines, deep gorges with rushing rivers. The earth is a wasteland and people are scarce. People go about in fear. At that time fighting and plundering will manifest, grass and sticks taken in the hand will all become [like] halberds and spears. For seven days they will turn to mutual harming.

The above version stands alone in giving such a detailed description of the environmental decline. Although its parallels agree in depicting an absolute low point in living conditions and morality, they do not describe it in such depth. Thus the parallelism to the anticipated repercussions of current climate change emerges with such detail only in this particular version.

Other discourses help in understanding how in the ancient setting the repercussions of ethical decline were believed to affect the environment. One relevant passage occurs in a Pāli discourse with a parallel extant in Chinese. Similar to the Discourse on the World Ruler, this discourse also sets out from a condition of bad governance, whereupon wrong conduct gradually penetrates from the highest to the lowest ranks of society. Once everyone behaves in unrighteous ways, this affects the heavenly constellations and leads to storms:

Then storms manifest. Storms having manifested, the celestials become upset. The celestials having become upset, at that time wind and rain become untimely. At that time grains and seeds in the earth no longer grow.

The two parallels agree that, as a final result, people become short-lived. The reference to celestials (*devas*) in both versions reflects the ancient Indian belief that such beings are responsible for rain.

According to a Pāli discourse without parallels, one of the reasons for a lack of rainfall is when such celestials are not heedful; another reason is when humans are unrighteous.

Another discourse extant in both Pāli and Chinese confirms that unrighteous behavior by the people leads to a lack of rain.

The Ten Courses of Action

The description of moral decline in the Discourse on the World Ruler takes the ten courses of action as its point of reference. Three of these pertain to bodily deeds, four to verbal activities, and three are situated in the mental realm.

The three unwholesome bodily deeds comprise killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Refraining from these corresponds to the path factor of right action in the noble eightfold path, a topic to which I will return in the fourth installment. The need to abstain from killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct also finds expression in the first three of five precepts incumbent on a Buddhist disciple.

The four verbal deeds among the ten courses of action are false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, and gossiping. The whole group of four verbal activities corresponds to detailed expositions of wrong speech as opposed to right speech, another factor of the eightfold path. The first of these four is also one of the five precepts.

The remaining three of the ten courses of action belong to the mental realm, comprising greedy desires (or covetousness), ill will, and wrong view. The first of these three stands for the desire to own what belongs to others, the second for wishing that others be harmed or even killed.

Both greedy desires and ill will have a prominent role to play in the Discourse on the World Ruler, where the moral decline sets in when theft

occurs. Although stimulated by poverty, stealing is an obvious instance of desiring to own what belongs to others. Ill will in turn becomes gradually more conspicuous until eventually a low point in morality is reached, where human beings are so full of hatred that they just start killing each other.

The last item in the list of ten courses of action is wrong view, which requires further examination. The early discourses describe right view in two different manners. One of these two speaks of the four noble truths. The other definition of right view concerns eschewing various expressions of mistaken view, such as dismissing the fruitfulness of giving in charity or rejecting a sense of obligation toward one's parents, as well as the denial of a world beyond and of the potential of spiritual practice.

Of particular relevance for environmental concerns is another item mentioned in such definitions, which describes an aspect of wrong view in the following form:

There are no good and bad deeds, there is no result of good and bad deeds.

In its original setting, this statement refers in particular to the Buddhist doctrine of karma. At the same time, the basic principle described in this formulation can be applied to climate change, in the sense of pointing to the need to take responsibility for one's actions.

This is not meant to encourage a sense of guilt. Here it is also of relevance that the early Buddhist doctrine of karma revolves around intention. It is the intention behind a particular deed that counts. Hence, unintentional harm caused to the environment needs to

be clearly distinguished from the same done intentionally.

At the same time, however, once one is aware of the impact of one's actions, the understanding that "there is a result of good and bad deeds" would provide a clear directive for adjusting one's behavior so as to minimize one's carbon footprint. It would follow that, from an early Buddhist perspective, just ignoring the effects of one's actions on the environment conflicts with one of the principles enshrined in canonical definitions of right view.

Ethical Recovery

The need to take responsibility emerges also in the Discourse on the World Ruler, which reports a change of conduct by some human beings that do not participate in the mutual killings:

Then those who are wise escape far away into [the mountains and] forests and rely on hiding in caves. During those seven days they harbor fear in their hearts. They speak [to one another], uttering wholesome words of mettā: "Do not harm me; I will not harm you."

By eating grass and the seeds of trees they stay alive. When the seven days are over, they come out of the mountains and forests. Then, on getting to see one another, those who have survived are delighted and congratulate [one another] saying: "You are not dead? You are not dead?"

It is just like parents who have a single son, from whom they have been separated for a long time. On

seeing one another, they are delighted without limit. Those people are each delighted like this in their hearts and repeatedly congratulate one another. After that they enquire about their family [and learn] that many of their family members and relatives are dead, so they cry and weep with one another for another seven days. When those seven days are over, they congratulate one another for another seven days, full of joy and delight.

Reflecting on their own [situation], they say: “We accumulated much badness, therefore we encountered this disaster. Our relatives are dead and our family members have disappeared. We should now together cultivate a little what is wholesome. What kind of wholesomeness would it be proper to cultivate? We will not kill sentient beings.” At that time [human] beings harbor mettā in their hearts, they do not harm one another. Thereupon the appearance and lifespan of these sentient beings increases.

The above passage mentions *mettā*, often translated as “loving kindness,” although perhaps better captured with translations like “benevolence” or “goodwill.” Such *mettā* finds expression in the words: “do not harm me; I will not harm you.” This conveys the sense of a relationship of friendship and protection, cultivated by those who remained established in non-harming.

The nuance of friendship and protection is a regular meaning *mettā* carries in the early discourses. A verse in the Discourse on *Mettā* illustrates this with the example of a mother and her only child, which she would be willing to protect even with her own life. Note that this description is not about a mother’s love; in fact, the appropriate Pāli term for such love would be *pema*

or *piya* rather than *mettā*. Instead, the verse expresses the sense of the protection a mother would be willing to give to her own offspring.

Ecological Recovery

The Discourse on the World Ruler continues by depicting how a gradual increase in morality leads to an increase in lifespan. The same also has a beneficial effect on the environment, which gradually recovers. The discourse describes the eventual recovery of prosperous living conditions on the earth in the following manner:

Then this great earth will be open and level, without ravines, wastelands, or thorny bushes, and there will also be no mosquitoes, gadflies, snakes, vipers, or poisonous worms. Clay stones, sand, and gravel will become [like] lapis lazuli. People will flourish, the five grains will be common and cheap, and there will be abundant happiness without end. Eighty thousand great cities will manifest, with neighboring villages a cock's crow away from one another.

After a period of utter moral and ecological degradation, during which those who wished to survive had to flee and hide in the wilderness, the peak of recovery expresses itself in a densely populated earth. Clearly, in this text human civilization as such is not seen as the problem. The key question is not human dominion over nature but much rather the ethical quality that informs such dominion.

According to the Discourse on the World Ruler, the earlier deterioration was the outcome of immoral conduct. Conversely, the prosperous living conditions

on earth achieved in this way are the result of moral conduct.

Applied to climate change, this suggests that human beings are capable of changing their ways in the face of social and environmental degradation and bring about an improvement of the ecological situation.

The emphasis on moral conduct in this context puts the spotlight squarely on the motivations for unwholesome action. Another discourse explicitly points out where unwholesome conduct originates. The Chinese version of this discourse presents the matter as follows:

Whence do unwholesome [types of] conduct arise? I declare the place from which they arise. One should know that they arise from the mind. What kind of mind? If the mind is with sensual desire, with ill will, or with delusion, one should know that unwholesome [types of] conduct arise from this kind of mind.

The Pāli version takes the same position. In this way, the three root defilements of greed (or sensual desire or sensual craving), hatred (or ill will or anger), and delusion are the motivators for unwholesome conduct. Hence, they are also the chief culprits for the ecological decline described in the Discourse on the World Ruler.

Contemplation of the Mind

Recognition of the presence or absence of mental conditions influenced by the three root defilements in one's own mind is a central thrust of the third establishment of mindfulness. The first part of the relevant instructions in a Chinese parallel to the

Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness
(*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*) proceeds in this way:

Having a mind with craving for sensual pleasures, monastics are in turn aware of it and know of themselves that they have a mind with craving for sensual pleasures. Having a mind without craving for sensual pleasures, they are also aware of it and know of themselves that they have a mind without craving for sensual pleasures.

Having a mind with anger, they are in turn aware of it and know of themselves that they have a mind with anger. Having a mind without anger, they are also aware of it and know of themselves that they have a mind without anger.

Having a mind with delusion, they are in turn aware of it and know of themselves that they have a mind with delusion. Having a mind without delusion, they are also aware of it and know of themselves that they have a mind without delusion.

The task of mindfulness here is clear recognition of the presence and the absence of these three unwholesome mental conditions. The three covered in the above extract do not exhaust the range of mental states explored in the Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness and its parallels, which also cover a liberated or a concentrated condition of the mind, etc. For the present context, however, these first three are particularly relevant.

The attitude behind such mindfulness practice, be it directed toward oneself or others, finds illustration in

a simile of a mirror. A Sanskrit version of this illustration proceeds in this way:

It is like a clear-sighted person who has taken hold of a round mirror that is very clear and were to examine the image of one's own face.

A Chinese parallel just mentions looking into clear water to see oneself. The Pāli version has both options, either a mirror or a bowl with clear water. Whichever tool is used, the task is to recognize clearly whether a state like anger, for example, arises.

Internal and External Mindfulness

The illustration of looking into clear water or a mirror applies not only to one's own mind. In fact, in its original setting the simile illustrates recognition of the mind state of another.

Already in the previous installment the need to proceed from what is internal to what is external became evident in relation to the earth element. The same pattern holds for the mind, in that there is progression from the internal to the external. Such a progression finds explicit description in another passage, which proceeds as follows:

One contemplates the body internally with untiring energy and collected mindfulness that is not lost, removing greed and sadness in the world, and one contemplates the body externally with untiring energy and collected mindfulness that is not lost, removing greed and sadness in the world. Contemplation of feeling tones, the mind, and dharmas is also like that,

with untiring energy and collected mindfulness that is not lost, removing greed and sadness in the world.

Having contemplated the body internally, one arouses knowledge of the bodies of others. Having contemplated feeling tones internally, one arouses knowledge of the feeling tones of others. Having contemplated the mind internally, one arouses knowledge of the minds of others. Having contemplated dharmas internally, one arouses knowledge of the dharmas of others.

From this perspective, mindful observation of one's own mind as "internal" contemplation forms the starting point for then trying to discern the mental condition of others. Contemplation of the mind undertaken in this way could be applied to environmental activity as a way of monitoring one's own mental condition and that of others in order to ensure that any activism will be undertaken in a way that offers the best chance of success.

In this way, the overall suggestion would be to view the current dilemma from the perspective of internal and external mental states and their ethical quality. Those responsible for preventing the necessary actions being taken and for spreading misinformation about climate change are under the influence of defilements. Rather than getting upset with individuals, the whole situation can be evaluated under the overarching concern of countering the detrimental influence of defilements, within and without.

In line with the general pattern of proceeding from the internal to the external, the starting point would be first of all discerning even subtle traces of the three root defilements in one's own mind. This can take

place by matching greed, hatred, and delusion with three possible responses to the current crisis, namely denial, anger, and resignation. In what follows I explore these three responses, in the understanding that the relationships proposed here to the three root defilements are merely my own suggestion and not something found in this way in early Buddhist thought.

Denial

When facing information about ecological destruction and climate change with their potential repercussions, it is natural to want to avoid and ignore it. One wishes to continue to enjoy the pleasures of this world without having to be too concerned about the consequences. In this way denial, which can be considered an expression of the root defilement of greed, prevents reacting appropriately to what is taking place.

The forces of greed are strong enough to make denial an intentional strategy by some leading politicians and high-level business executives who would be affected by actions taken to counter the crisis.

A common mode of such denial is to pretend that the information we have is not sufficiently well-established to be taken seriously. Yet, for human beings to respond it is in principle enough to know that a threat is probable; there is no need to be completely certain. This is part of how human perception works, which involves “perceptual prediction.”

On suddenly encountering a dangerous animal, one will react on the spot. In such a situation one cannot afford to wait until all the information about the animal has been gathered and one is completely sure that it intends to attack, since by then it may be too late. Similarly, faced by the potential outcomes of the

current climatic crisis, it is time to act now, before it is too late.

The tendency to want to ignore can exert a strong influence that is hardly noticed, unless mindfulness is established. From this viewpoint, the ecological crisis can become an opportunity for regular scrutiny of the mind in order to detect the potential influence of the root defilement of greed, however subtly it might manifest, in fostering denial.

Anger

Another type of reaction to the ecological crisis is anger. Given that some are actively working to prevent appropriate changes from taking place, it might seem natural to get angry with them. Yet, this is not a solution. For one, to some degree most human beings contribute to the problem. Let the one who has never driven a car, taken a flight, eaten food imported from abroad, worn clothing manufactured in a distant country, etc., throw the first stone.

Pointing out that nearly everyone is part of the problem is not meant to inculcate a sense of guilt. The question is not to turn one's carbon footprint into some sort of original sin and then feel a need to atone for that. The task is only to take responsibility and act in a conscientious manner, without shifting all the blame onto others.

From an early Buddhist perspective, even righteous anger is a defilement of the mind, a topic I will explore again in the next installment. There is definitely a place for stern and strong action, but this should always come with inner balance rather than aversion. Inner balance is crucial for any possible environmental activity to achieve maximum benefit.

From the viewpoint of mindfulness practice, getting angry is succumbing to one of the root defilements and thereby to what has contributed to and sustains this very crisis. Anger is a problem and not a solution. A solution can only be found when the mind is not clouded by defilements and therefore able to know and see things accurately.

Although anger puts things into sharp relief and thereby can create a superficial impression of clarity, it actually distorts perceptual appraisal of the situation and prevents a balanced and correct discernment. A mind in the grip of anger is unable to see accurately what is for one's own benefit and for the benefit of others. Anger encourages a tunnel vision that ignores aspects of the situation that do not accord with its evaluative thrust.

Such a condition of the mind needs to be recognized with mindfulness; it calls for refraining from taking action until the mind has cooled down, as only then does it become possible to see things in their proper perspective. In this way, the current crisis is best handled with a mind that is not in a condition of anger.

Instead of anger, compassion is the appropriate motivating force for taking action. Its cultivation can provide all the energy needed to become active to correct wrongs, rather than just letting injustices persist.

In order to counter anger or other negative mental conditions, it can at times be helpful to work against a black-and-white perception of the situation by reminding oneself that in the course of evolution greenhouse gas been responsible for enabling life on the planet, as without its effect the earth would be too cold for life. Furthermore, human use of fossil fuels

has in the past facilitated some beneficial developments.

Of course, now the time has come to change, as the continued overuse of fossil fuels has turned what was a protective function of greenhouse gas into something highly dangerous. Due to the influence of defilements, narrow mindedness, and selfishness, some have not yet realized that it is high time to adjust. No need to hate them for that. Instead, out of a compassionate sense of responsibility for life on this planet, the needful should be done to promote the necessary change. This can involve stern and strong actions but at the same time remain rooted in a mental attitude of compassion and equanimity.

Resignation

The third reaction to the environmental crisis to be discussed here is resignation. This could be related to the root defilement of delusion. Needless to say, delusion of course also underlies the previously surveyed reactions of denial and anger. Relating the present type of reaction to delusion is therefore only meant in the sense that such resignation is not evidently influenced by either greed or aversion, and at the same time involves some degree of lack of clarity and proper perspective.

Resignation can easily manifest in a sense of feeling overwhelmed and helpless. As a single individual, it just seems hopeless to try to effect any change. What is the point of even trying?

Yet, society is made up of individuals and does not exist apart from them. The question is not whether a single individual can bring about all required change alone. The question is rather whether every single

individual can contribute to the required change. This is indeed the case.

This understanding can be employed to counter the assumption of mono-causality, be it consciously or unconsciously, in the sense that just a single cause is held to be responsible for a particular situation or problem. Such an assumption can easily lead to searching for a single culprit that can serve as the scapegoat for one's negativities. It can also result in overestimating one's own personal responsibility and as a result falling prey to sentiments of helplessness in view of the magnitude of the problem. Viewing oneself and others instead as co-participants in a large network of conditions can serve to counterbalance such tendencies.

Another relevant teaching is right view. As mentioned above, one aspect of right view is the recognition that good and bad actions produce results. In relation to environmental destruction, this points to taking responsibility for one's actions.

Summary

Early Buddhist thought posits a close relationship between moral conduct and environmental conditions, to the extent of attributing a serious decline in living conditions, in some respects similar to the anticipated results of climate change, to a lack of ethical restraint.

Ethical conduct in turn reflects the condition of the mind. Of central importance here are the three root defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion. A focus on countering the impact of these three root defilements can serve as an expression of an environmental concern and lead to corresponding action. On the internal level, these can manifest in the form of denial, anger, and

resignation. Cultivating mindfulness to face and overcome these conditions can serve as a training ground for confronting their external manifestations, in particular when these have repercussions on the environment.

Informed by the early Buddhist teachings on conditionality and right view, reliance on mindfulness facilitates stepping out of unhelpful attitudes in order to make one's individual contribution, to the best of one's abilities, toward protecting living conditions on this earth.

Meditation

Building on some experience with contemplation of the earth element, explored in the previous installment, the first moment of just settling in by becoming aware of the presence of the body in the sitting posture can also serve as a moment to turn awareness to the present condition of the mind. This just requires checking in to see where the mind is at present and taking a moment to sense fully its texture and condition, in particular its distinct quality when mindfulness is present.

The awareness of the mind established in this way can then become a companion during the body scan or when observing the breath. This can take the form of meta-awareness while undertaking these practices. The difference compared to the practice done earlier is similar to the difference between just reading these lines and reading them while being aware of the fact that one is reading.

Learning to keep an eye on the mind in this way will considerably strengthen one's ability to avoid getting caught up in daydreams or fantasies.

Nevertheless, sooner or later some distraction or the other is bound to happen.

Whenever the mind gets off track and this is noticed, it is of utmost importance to let go right away of any frustration or negativity. It is simply the nature of the mind to wander; there is nothing surprising in this. Instead of getting upset, noting that some daydream or fantasy has taken the mind for a ride can be recognized with an inner smile in the knowledge that this is just the way of the mind.

Recognizing the occurrence of a distraction can serve as a welcome opportunity for exploring contemplation of the mind in more detail. This can take the form of discerning, first of all, the predominant feeling tone, the affective quality of what just happened in the mind. If this has been pleasant, chances are that the mental wandering was related to greed. If it has been unpleasant, chances are that it was related to anger and aversion. If there were neutral feeling tones, this can be a signal for a deluded state of mind.

Needless to say, greed and anger are also manifestations of delusion. But in the present context the label “delusion” can conveniently be employed for those distractions that do not fit either of the other two categories well. This is when the mind is just ambling around with no purpose, without being in an obvious state of either greed or anger.

The identification of the nature of the mental wandering that just occurred can come together with recognition of the condition of the mind right now, when mindfulness is present. Compared to its earlier distracted condition, the mind has become so much more open, aware, alive, and receptive. Taking time to savor the different actual condition of the mind makes it obvious

why a mind relatively free from the influence of the three root defilements is indeed preferable.

Turning to the present condition of the mind can also reveal the actual feeling tone present when mindfulness is established. Close inspection uncovers the presence of a very subtle type of pleasant feeling tone: the joy of being in the here and now. Keeping attuned to this wholesome type of joy will further strengthen the mind's ability to stay on track. This in a way reflects the potential of mindfulness to lead beyond grief and sadness, mentioned earlier.