



Mindfully Facing Climate Change (4)

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This is the last 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.

Walking the Path

What is reckoned to be the truth of [the path] leading out of dukkha? That is, it is the noble eightfold path, namely right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The teaching of the fourth truth needs to be put into practice. This takes the form of an eightfold path that has progress to awakening as its overarching aim. In this installment, a natural focus in my exploration will be to apply the eightfold path to the challenges of climate change.

At the outset, however, I first attempt to relate the current environmental crisis to progress to awakening, based on a discourse that depicts a future time when the whole earth will be completely destroyed. In the final part of this installment, I turn to mindfulness of death as a

practical way to train oneself in the type of mental resilience required to face the catastrophic repercussions of climate change.

Awakening

In order to do full justice to the overall soteriological orientation of early Buddhism and provide the appropriate setting for linking climate change to the different practices that make up the eightfold path, I need to relate the eightfold path's overall orientation toward awakening to environmental concerns. Whereas in the previous installments I tried to apply early Buddhist teachings to climate change, in what follows I try to do the reverse, in the sense of showing that mindfully facing the consequences of climate change can offer a substantial contribution to progress toward awakening. In this way, from having explored the environmental relevance of early Buddhism, I now turn to the soteriological relevance of facing climate change.

For the purpose of establishing this perspective, I take up the Discourse on Seven Suns, which describes a scenario much worse than anything that could result from climate change: a complete obliteration of the whole earth. In this discourse, the vision of such total destruction serves as a means to drive home the truth of impermanence and thereby lead onwards to awakening.

Drought

A Chinese version of the Discourse on Seven Suns begins by announcing the exposition's main theme of impermanence, followed by describing the onset of a drought in the following way:

All formations are impermanent, of a nature not to last, quickly changing by nature, unreliable by nature. In this way, one should not delight in or attach to formations, one should [view] them as distressful, one should seek to abandon them, one should seek to be liberated from them. Why is that?

There will be a time when it will not rain. When it does not rain, all the trees, the hundreds of grains, and all medicinal shrubs will wither entirely, come to destruction and extinction, unable to continue existing.

This is why [I say that] all formations are impermanent, of a nature not to last, quickly changing by nature, unreliable by nature. In this way, one should not delight in or attach to formations, one should [view] them as distressful, one should seek to abandon them, one should seek to be liberated from them.

The impermanent nature of all formations is a recurrent theme throughout the discourse, which repeats the last paragraph invariably after each of the different stages depicting how increasing degrees of heat impact the earth. The Pāli parallel proceeds similarly but with a minor difference in formulation, as the listener is instead encouraged to become disenchanted, dispassionate, and liberated. Here the reference to dispassion and disenchantment would point to the same aim expressed in the above translated discourse in terms of not delighting in or attaching to formations. In both versions the final goal is to become liberated.

In this way, the description of the drought has a function comparable to the depiction of the disappearance of the earth in the Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint, taken up in the first installment. In that discourse, the

disappearance of the earth during a time of inundation similarly served to drive home the truth of impermanence.

Desiccation

The Discourse on Seven Suns continues by describing how a progressive increase of heat impacts living conditions on the earth. In the translation below, I have elided the repeated occurrences of the paragraph on impermanence, found after each depiction of increasing heat and its repercussions:

Again, there will be a time when a second sun will appear in the world. When the second sun appears, the flow of all the streams and rivulets will become exhausted, unable to continue existing ...

Again, there will be a time when a third sun appears in the world. When the third sun appears, all the great rivers will become exhausted, unable to continue existing ...

Again, there will be a time when a fourth sun appears in the world. When the fourth sun appears, the great springs from which the five rivers of Jambul Island emerge ... those great springs will all become exhausted, unable to continue existing ...

Again, there will be a time when a fifth sun appears in the world. When the fifth sun appears, the water of the great ocean will recede ... and [eventually] there will be a time when the water of the ocean will be completely exhausted, being not sufficient to submerge [even] one finger.

As the title of the discourse indicates, its presentation involves altogether seven suns. In order to appreciate this

description of the successive appearance of seven suns, it can again be helpful to take into account the symbolic function of numbers in the setting in which the discourse was given.

A symbolic use of the number seven can be seen, for example, in the Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness. The Pāli version and one of its two Chinese parallels depict different time periods within which the systematic cultivation of mindfulness can lead to complete freedom from greed and aversion. Such freedom corresponds to reaching the higher two levels of awakening, which result in becoming a non-returner or an arahant.

The actual description of these time periods begins with seven years and then counts down to six, five, four, three, two, and one year, after which it continues with seven months, six, five, four, three, two, and one month, followed by counting down even further.

The sequence of enumeration adopted here does not follow numerical logic. Instead, it proceeds from seven down to one in the case of both years and months. This is hardly meant to imply that it will be impossible to reach awakening after, say, eight months. Instead, the employment of seven serves to indicate a totality of time, and the ensuing countdown clarifies that such a complete time period, be it years or months, is not indispensable, as the same realizations can also take place earlier.

Applying this sense to the present context, the depiction of the arising of up to seven suns could perhaps be interpreted in a symbolic manner. On this assumption, the idea of an increase of heat until the earth becomes “totally” heated up might have found expression by depicting a series of seven suns rather than an increase in the size of a single sun. The shift from one to two suns could then be interpreted as suggestive of a doubling of the subjective experience of heat. In other words, the

difference between the average bodily temperature and outside temperature during summer in India has become doubled.

On this interpretation, the cumulative effect of the arising of ever more suns then eventually leads to a stage at which the heat has become seven times as much as what would have been experienced as normal in the ancient setting.

Whether or not this suggestion captures the original intention, as a result of the increase of heat eventually the five great rivers of India, here referred to as “*Jambul Island*,” dry up and all the water in the ocean disappears.

Conflagration

Despite the ocean water having all dried up, the increase of heat depicted in the Discourse on Seven Suns has still not come to its final climax:

Again, there will be a time when a sixth sun appears in the world. When the sixth sun appears, the whole great earth and Meru, the king of mountains, will completely emit smoke, a single mass of smoke. It is just like a potter’s kiln which, at the time of being ignited, will completely emit smoke, a single mass of smoke ...

When a seventh sun appears, the whole great earth, and Meru, the king of mountains, will be thoroughly burning, completely ablaze, a single mass of flame ...

When the seventh sun appears, Meru, king of mountains, together with this great earth, will burn down and be destroyed, with not even ash remaining. It is just like burning ghee that is fried until being completely exhausted and not even smoke or soot remains ...

For this reason, [I said that] all formations are impermanent, of a nature not to last, quickly changing by nature, unreliable by nature. In this way, one should not delight in or attach to formations, one should [view] them as distressful, one should seek to abandon them, one should seek to be liberated from them.

I have now told you that Meru, king of mountains, will collapse and be destroyed. Who is able to believe this? Only those who have seen the truth.

I have now told you that the water of the great ocean will be exhausted and vanish. Who is able to believe this? Only those who have seen the truth.

I have now told you that the whole great earth will be burnt up and extinguished. Who is able to believe this? Only those who have seen the truth.

The description is based on ancient Indian cosmology, which places Mount Meru at the center of the world, surrounded by four continents, which are in turn surrounded by the ocean. In the above description, the reference to Mount Meru as the “king of mountains,” in the sense of being the largest among them and forming the central pillar of the ancient Indian cosmos, conveys the sense of the totality of the destruction. Even such an incredibly large mountain, the pole of the whole world in an ontological and cosmological sense, will be completely obliterated.

The gradual destruction of the earth due to increasing solar heat has similarities with current scientific knowledge. In the far distant future, the time will come when the increasing solar flux will raise the mean temperature of the Earth to a level at which life is no longer sustainable and the ultimate fate of the Earth, if it

survived at all as a separate body, would be to become a molten remnant.

The point of noting this similarity is not to pretend that early Buddhist thought already anticipated current scientific knowledge. Other cosmological elements reflected in the above discourse and elsewhere in the early texts prevent drawing such a conclusion.

Nevertheless, the fact that this description concords with what we currently would expect to happen to the earth in the distant future helps to make the imagery presented in the Discourse on Seven Suns come alive, together with its chief soteriological message: all things are impermanent, so one should remove one's attachments, cultivate dispassion, and increasingly let go.

The early stages of the description in the Discourse on Seven Suns could be related more closely to the current situation. Whereas the eventual burning up of the whole earth is expected to take place in the distant future, a more imminent threat is the potential repercussions of methane release on global warming.

Large amounts of methane are stored in arctic permafrost areas and now appear to be escaping at an increasing rate due to global warming. The eventual consequences of such a release might turn out to be similar to the greatest known mass extinction of species in the history of this planet, which appears to have occurred about 250 million years ago, at the end of the Permian period. This event resulted in the extinction of approximately 90% of marine species and 70% of terrestrial vertebrate species.

According to an explanation advanced for this mass extinction, increased volcanic eruptions at that time led to an increase of carbon dioxide, resulting in global warming. The ensuing melting of permafrost led to the release of large quantities of methane, which accelerated global warming to

such a degree that it resulted in the obliteration of the majority of species.

Applied to the current situation and expressed in terms of the Discourse on Seven Suns, although the arising of the seventh sun would only take place in the distant future, the arising of the second sun could happen relatively soon. From the viewpoint of sustainability of human life on earth, the stages leading up to the arising of the second sun are in fact decisive, as that much suffices for effecting the extinction of human life on earth.

Facing the extinction of humanity and even of the whole earth relates to another noteworthy aspect of the above-translated version of the Discourse on Seven Suns, which is the mention of those who have seen the truth. According to the Pāli commentary, the corresponding expression in the Pāli discourse refers to those who have reached at least the first level of awakening, stream-entry.

The reference to those who have seen the truth conveys the impression that the presentation in this discourse is meant to be taken literally. The Discourse on Seven Suns therefore appears to be similar in kind to the Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint, in the sense of reporting something actually expected to happen rather than being a parable.

From the viewpoint of the Discourse on Seven Suns, only those who have reached at least stream-entry are able to take its message fully to heart. In an attempt at interpretation, perhaps having had a first experience of the cessation of the dependent arising of *dukkha* at stream-entry is what enables placing trust in the idea of the complete cessation of all dependently arisen life on earth.

Be that as it may, the vision of a total cessation of human civilization can serve as a training to inculcate the type of letting go that can lead to the breakthrough to the different levels of awakening.

The same can in turn be applied to climate change, whose dire outcomes fall short of the total destruction envisaged in the Discourse on Seven Suns. In other words, learning to face with mindfulness the repercussions to be expected on earth due to climate change has a considerable potential in furthering progress to awakening. This potential relies on strengthening insight into impermanence and thereby bringing about dispassion and a thorough letting go.

Future Decline

The cultivation of insight into impermanence in this way is quite different from a fatalist attitude, just as equanimity differs from indifference. This can be explored in relation to another and related topic that occurs with more frequency in the discourses than the destruction of the earth, namely the eventual vanishing of the Buddha's teachings.

At the same time, however, passages in the early discourses concerned with such disappearance regularly offer indications on how this dire prospect can be prevented. In other words, the point is decidedly not to encourage a fatalist attitude.

The same holds equally in regard to human life. Recollection of death by way of learning to accept one's own mortality, a topic to which I return at the end of this installment, is one of the meditation practices recommended in the early discourses. Nevertheless, even those accomplished in this practice will continue to eat and attend to the needs of their bodies.

Similarly, the vision of the complete destruction of the earth at some point in the future is not meant to lead to apathy. Instead, its function is to deconstruct tacitly held and unreasonable assumptions in order to introduce a realistic appraisal of the situation. This assessment then

serves as a foundation for formulating an appropriate response to whatever situation presents itself now, before the complete destruction has transpired.

Just as it is meaningful to look after the health of the mortal body in order to be able to practice, so it is meaningful to look after the living conditions on earth for the same purpose. The point is only that such endeavors should come with an inner balance due to the absence of attachment, in the knowledge that eventually the body will fall apart, the Buddha's teachings will disappear, and the earth will be completely destroyed.

Dispassion

Comparable to insight into impermanence, which is not meant to result in fatalism, so arousing dispassion, a key element of the early Buddhist path to awakening, does not imply a stepping out of environmental responsibility. Growing dispassion features as a central aspect of how the factors of awakening, a set of mental qualities whose chief purpose is to lead to awakening, should be developed. For this purpose, mindfulness as the first awakening factor should be cultivated in the following manner:

One cultivates the awakening factor of mindfulness supported by seclusion, supported by dispassion, and supported by cessation, conducting to letting go.

The same applies to the other awakening factors, each of which requires the support of seclusion, dispassion, and cessation in order to lead to letting go. A similar pattern of insight-related themes occurs as the concluding set of instructions for mindfulness of breathing. In fact, the passage quoted above also relates to mindfulness of breathing, here in particular showing how this practice can

be combined with the arousing of the awakening factors in order to issue in liberation.

Different versions of the final set of instructions on mindfulness of breathing agree in setting out from the theme of impermanence, which is also the starting point in the Discourse on the Seven Suns. For the remaining instructions, the parallels present two different modalities. One of these proceeds from impermanence to eradication, dispassion, and cessation. A sequence that corresponds more closely to the pattern for cultivating the awakening factors can be found in a text on monastic discipline, the Sarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, where the instructions take the following form:

one should be mindful of breathing in and out single-mindedly, contemplating impermanence [by] contemplating change, contemplating dispassion, contemplating cessation, and contemplating letting go.

Pāli discourses adopt the same sequence. The pattern that emerges in this way could be employed to implement the main teaching given in the Discourse on Seven Suns. The breath is indeed a convenient tool for this purpose, as it exemplifies the dependency of the human body on external living conditions.

As mentioned in the first installment, to stay alive the body requires a continuous supply of oxygen through the process of breathing. This will no longer be available with the gradual destruction of the earth due to increasing solar heat, described in the Discourse on the Seven Suns. Hence the cultivation of impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and letting go, in the way described in the above passage for mindfulness of breathing, could be employed to put into practice the insight-related import of the Discourse on Seven Suns and thereby actualize its awakening potential.

View

For the cultivation of such meditation practice, the factors of the eightfold path present the required context. This involves a collaboration between establishing the proper perspective; undertaking communications, activities, and livelihood informed by that perspective; and engaging in meditative cultivation of the mind.

As already mentioned earlier, the early discourses describe the first path factor of right view in two different manners. One of these definitions can be understood to offer the significant indication that one needs to take responsibility for one's actions, which in view of human-caused environmental destruction acquires additional significance.

The other definition requires adopting the perspective of the four noble truths. This alternative presentation implies that right view, as the first factor of the path described under the heading of the fourth truth, corresponds to all four noble truths.

Far from involving a tautology, the point appears to be that some basic appreciation of the four truths is required to generate motivation to set out on the path. Such a preliminary understanding of the four truths as a guiding principle for the practice of the path differs from the level of insight into the four truths gained at stream-entry or with full awakening. As the first factor of the eightfold path, right view in the form of the four truths can serve a preliminary diagnostic function. It places the disconcerting recognition of the fact of *dukkha* within a framework that reveals its conditionality as well as the possibility of becoming free from it, together with the means required to achieve that goal.

According to the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of Dharma, each of the four truths calls for a different activity. First of all, *dukkha* should be “penetratively

understood,” which in the approach presented here would be in particular understanding the dependency of the human body on conducive living conditions on the earth. The arising of *dukkha* should be “abandoned.” In the presence context, this can be taken to highlight the need to abandon the three root defilements, whether they manifest internally or externally.

The cessation of *dukkha* should be “realized.” The Discourse on Seven Suns shows that progress to the realization of awakening is possible, based on cultivating a vision of the ultimate disappearance of the whole earth. By way of contribution to the eventual realization of full awakening, a direct contrast to the three root defilements can be found in the cultivation of the divine abodes as temporary liberations whose ‘realization’ is possible well before full awakening has been reached.

The path should be “cultivated.” The details of such cultivation will emerge during the next pages. Suffice it for now to note the main point: the need to put it all into practice.

Intention

Right intention can take the following form:

*Thoughts of dispassion, thoughts of non-ill will,
thoughts of non-harming: this is reckoned right
intention.*

The Pāli formulation of the first of these three modalities of right intention speaks more specifically of “renunciation.” This wording seems particularly appropriate to the challenge of climate change, the mitigation of which does require the willingness to renounce certain types of comfort in order to reduce one’s carbon footprint.

The other two modalities of right intention concern the absence of harm and the absence of ill-will, which can provide a guideline for any type of activism. The intention to avoid harming could become a strong motivation to take fully into account the consequences of one's environmental habits on other humans and animals, in particular those less able to insulate themselves from the repercussions of global warming.

At the same time, it is also important that a response to the current crisis, however pressing it appears, stays within the framework set by non-harm and non-ill will. These two types of intention are in turn closely related to the cultivation of *mettā* and compassion, discussed in the previous installment. In fact, one who has fully cultivated these divine abodes will no longer be dominated by the wish to harm or by ill will, or even righteous anger. When viewed from this perspective, the meditative practice of *mettā* and compassion can make a rather substantial contribution in support of right intention, which in turn provides the orientation for the ensuing path factors.

Speech

Right speech delineates four types of conversation better avoided:

Abstention from false speech, from divisive speech, from harsh speech, and from frivolous speech: this is reckoned right speech.

The canonical definition of right speech, which corresponds to the four courses of verbal action discussed earlier, sets the parameters for any communication. Effectively communicating the complex topic of climate change, in particular, can be quite a challenge. From an

early Buddhist perspective, first and foremost one should stick to the truth. This can take the form of countering misleading statistics, falsification of data, and corporate-sponsored research to spread falsehood without succumbing to intentional exaggeration and reliance on unsubstantiated information when trying to inform others.

Another aspect of relevance to ecological destruction would be to express the truth of one's inner conviction. Of considerable importance here could be participation in elections, which relates to the next path factor of right action, making sure that the opportunity to vote for whoever best represents one's opinion on the need to protect the environment is not missed out. In the USA, for example, nearly half of those in principle eligible to participate in elections do not vote. No wonder when eventually governments come into power that do not adequately reflect the opinion of the majority of the people.

In addition to voting, there a range of other opportunities can be used to draw attention to the truth of climate change and the need to take action.

Moving on to the next aspect of right speech, when drawing attention to climate change, communications that create divisions are better avoided. In the original context, the import appears to be some form of backbiting that sets people against each other. But in a more general sense it could perhaps also be taken as discouraging the dualistic creation of clear-cut factions, such as contrasting those bad ones, held entirely responsible for the climate crisis, to the good ones who are opposing ecological destruction. This is not to say that differences do not exist, but only to suggest that communication can be undertaken in such a way as to avoid excessive emphasis on dualistic contrasts where the communicator is, of course, always on the good side.

Harsh speech is speech that hurts and therefore is directly opposed to the right intention for non-harm. Even

face to face with those most directly responsible for climate change denial and destruction of the environment, it should still be possible to communicate from a point of balance that desires the absence of harm for everyone.

In the original setting, frivolous speech stands for conversations about irrelevant matters not related to the path of practice. Applied to the case of climate change, it could perhaps be taken as an encouragement to make the present ecological challenge a recurrent topic of conversation, to communicate relevant information and, perhaps even more importantly, to communicate a balanced attitude in facing the crisis. This could also entail aiming communications at producing concrete results, which in a debating situation would require listening and understanding the opposing side, taking their concerns into account, rather than just wanting to demolish the opponent's argument.

When spreading information about the current crisis, it is particularly important to beware of "catastrophe fatigue." The problem is that fear-related messages can lead to counter-productive behaviors. Fear is not a stable place to organize sustained activism, but it can be a very effective platform from which to launch a campaign of populist xenophobia or authoritarian technocracy under the sign of scarcity. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss the potential of the apocalyptic imagination to offer ways engaging with climate change and the questions of meaning and value that it raises for us.

Such reconsideration is indeed the purpose of the teaching provided in the Discourse on Seven Suns. What emerges in this way is the need to be circumspect in the deployment of catastrophe rhetoric and, perhaps even more importantly, to provide tools that enable the audience to actualize the positive potential of disaster imagery.

Action

The definition of right action corresponds to the first three of the five precepts usually taken by lay followers of the Buddha and to the three courses of bodily action discussed earlier:

Abstention from killing, from taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct: this is reckoned right action.

Another passage shows a broad scope of application for such abstention, at the same time also providing a rationale for its undertaking. For the case of killing, this passage proceeds as follows:

“If someone wishes to kill me, that is not enjoyable to me. What is not enjoyable to me is also like that for another. [So], how could I kill another?” Having had this reflection, one undertakes not to kill sentient beings and does not enjoy when sentient beings are killed.

The Pāli version explains that such a reflection motivates one to abstain from killing, to encourage others to abstain in the same way, and to speak in praise of such abstention. Both versions apply the same basic principle to the other two aspects of right action, abstention from theft and from sexual misconduct.

This sets a convenient frame for environmental activism, in the various forms in which this can manifest. It provides a clear-cut directive to act in the way one would wish others would act toward oneself. The basic rationale motivating such abstention can be applied in particular to the problem of climate justice, where the repercussions of climate change afflict most severely developing countries, who have contributed the least to

causing them. It encourages placing oneself mentally into the situation of others and taking action based on that.

The passage also clarifies that abstention from killing, for example, can extend from not intentionally terminating the life of a sentient being oneself to avoiding even indirectly supporting the taking of life. An obvious application of that would be vegetarianism.

Our reliance on meat is a major cause of climate change, deforestation, and pollution, in fact the methane gases emitted by livestock contribute more to climate change than does carbon dioxide.

In addition to the harm caused to the environment in general and of course to the animals themselves, who are often raised in ghastly conditions and then cruelly slaughtered, eating meat also harms the consumer. Studies have shown that hormones used in beef production can affect human reproductive development, causing early puberty and male infertility. The heavy use of antibiotics in conventional meat and dairy operations undercuts the effectiveness of these valuable drugs in treating human infection.

For implementing such reduction of harm, a recommendation would be to start by adopting a meat-free diet one day of the week, for instance, and from that gradually increase the shift away from meat-consumption. Eventually it might also become possible to reduce reliance on other dairy products.

Livelihood

The articulation of right livelihood takes as its point of departure the situation of a monastic, evident in the following formulation:

If there is no seeking [requisites] with a dissatisfied mind, no having recourse to various inappropriate types

of spells, no making a living by wrong forms of livelihood; if one seeks robes and blankets with what is in accordance with the Dharma, by means of the Dharma, seeks beverages and food, beds and couches, medicine and any [other] requisites of life with what is in accordance with the Dharma, by means of the Dharma: this is reckoned right livelihood.

The Pāli parallel to this passage is less detailed but conveys a similar sense. Proceeding from the livelihood of a mendicant monastic to that of a lay person, another Pāli discourse can be consulted, of which no parallel appears to be extant. The discourse lists five trades that a lay disciple of the Buddha should not engage in. These are trading in weapons, in sentient beings, in meat, in intoxicants, and in poisons. The commentary adds that this refers not only to undertaking such trade oneself but also to getting others to undertake it.

A central principle behind most occupations mentioned in this list appears to be the infliction of harm. Based on the conception of livelihood that emerges in this way, an application to the current crisis could revolve around minimizing harm to other sentient beings and the environment, be this caused directly by one's actions or indirectly. On this interpretation, any step taken in this direction could be considered an implementation of this particular dimension of the eightfold path.

Effort

Right effort covers altogether four dimensions:

One arouses desire, application, endeavor, and takes hold of the mind for abandoning already-arisen bad and unwholesome states ... one arouses desire, application, endeavor, and takes hold [of the mind] for the non-

arising of not-yet-arisen bad and unwholesome states ... one arouses desire, application, endeavor, and takes hold [of the mind] for bringing about the arising of not-yet-arisen wholesome states ... and one arouses desire, application, endeavor, and takes hold [of the mind] for the increase and cultivation of already-arisen wholesome states.

A significant indication offered by this description is that effort should first of all be directed inwards. This holds even for the current crisis whose speed and magnitude certainly call for quick action. Yet, from the viewpoint of the framework provided by the eightfold path, one needs to ensure that the condition of the mind is free from “bad and unwholesome states.” Only once this is at least temporarily achieved has the time come to act on the external level.

Needless to say, the practice of right effort in this way continues during any activity undertaken on the external level. Based on envisioning the entire situation in terms of the three root defilements, as suggested earlier, such activity has as its central orientation the countering of their impact. Guided by this orientation, one’s own internal condition will naturally be kept in view, so as to prevent the rearing of the three root defilements within.

Mindfulness

The cultivation of mindfulness as an integral dimension of the path to awakening takes the form of four establishments:

There are four establishments of mindfulness. What are the four? They are reckoned to be the establishment of mindfulness by contemplating the body [in regard to] the body ... feeling tones ... the mind ... and the

*establishment of mindfulness by contemplating dharmas
[in regard to] dharmas.*

Such cultivation of the four establishments of mindfulness can become a regular meditation practice, in order to build up the mental resilience required for confronting the crisis. Based on such formal cultivation, mindfulness can unfold its potential throughout any activity. This takes place by way of monitoring, in line with its role in relation to any of the other path factors, as discussed earlier.

In this way, mindfulness can become a central tool for facing the horror of climate catastrophe with inner balance and, based on that, taking the steps needed to transform what might well be the most serious challenge human beings have ever faced in their history. With mindfulness, this challenge could be transformed into an opportunity, an opportunity to increase global awareness and move to a level of interaction among human beings that values the common welfare over individual profit in order to maintain the living conditions required for the survival of human civilization.

From the viewpoint of cultivating mindfulness, even small steps taken in daily life are significant. They are significant not because on their own they will change the whole world. They are significant because they contribute to a network of causes and conditions that can change the whole world. Be it living more simply, shifting to a vegetarian or vegan diet, recycling, or forgoing unnecessary travel by car or plane, these deeds become meaningful not because the world will change if one individual acts in this way. They are meaningful because they embody awareness of the global crisis and express it on the individual level as a form of training in mindfulness and ethical responsibility.

Of course, the more who act in this way, the greater the effects will be. This ties in with the internal and

external dimensions of mindfulness, where the internal builds the foundation for the external. It is precisely through embodying what needs to be done on the personal level that the outside world can be positively affected.

By training oneself to face the crisis with mindful balance, one will be able to exemplify mindfulness in an authentic way and share this attitude with others, inspiring them to cultivate the same. Equipped with this attitude, any ecological activism to confront the crisis has the greatest potential for success.

Concentration

Different definitions of right concentration can be found in the early discourses, which either list the four absorptions or else stipulate unification of the mind cultivated in conjunction with the other seven path factors. Closer comparative study shows the latter definition to be quite probably the earlier one of the two. This can take the following form:

Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, and right mindfulness; if based on arousing these seven factors, on being supported [by them] and equipped [with them], the mind progresses well and attains unification, then this is reckoned noble right concentration with its arousing, with its supports, and with its equipment.

In the meditative approach presented here, such unification of the mind would find its implementation in the cultivation of compassion as a boundless radiation, discussed in the previous installment.

The Middle Path

In the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of Dharma, the teaching of the eightfold path serves to exemplify a middle-path approach. The principle underlying this middle path is as follows:

Five monastics, you should know that there are two extreme undertakings that those who are on the path should not practice: the first is attachment to sensual pleasures, which is a lowly act, undertaken by the ordinary person; the second is to torture oneself and [make] oneself suffer, which is an ignoble condition and not connected to what is beneficial.

Five monastics, abandon these two extremes and take up the middle path, which accomplishes understanding, accomplishes wisdom, and accomplishes [inner] certainty and the attainment of mastery, and which leads to wisdom, leads to awakening, and leads to Nirvana, namely the eight-[fold] right path, from right view to right concentration.

The “five monastics,” mentioned here, had been companions of the Buddha when he was still in search of awakening and was undertaking ascetic practices. After having pursued these for some time, he realized that they were not conducive to liberation. When he abandoned asceticism, these five companions left him, in the belief that he had thereby abandoned the path to awakening. This was not the case, however, as he had only changed his approach.

At the present juncture of events, after having reached awakening, the Buddha had come to meet these five former companions in order to share his discovery with them. Due to their belief that he had given up the path

to awakening, they were naturally disinclined to believe his claim. For this reason, he had to clarify at the outset the nature of the path that had led him to realization.

The notion of a middle path between self-torment and indulgence can conveniently be related to facing climate change. In other words, the situation clearly demands action to be taken on the personal level in line with the intention for renunciation. Certain comforts and indulgences need to be abandoned in order to alleviate the burden on the environment and truthfully embody the commitment to maintaining living conditions on the earth. At the same time, however, this should not lead to self-torture by going to extremes. Here mindfulness has an important role to fulfill by monitoring and providing the required feedback, noting whenever a lack of balance has occurred and calling for adjustment.

Another aspect of interest, related to the Buddha's meeting with his five former companions, is that along the way he had chanced across another religious practitioner. This practitioner was thus the first person to encounter the Buddha after he had reached awakening. According to the report of this meeting, the Buddha announced his plans in the following manner:

I am going to ... beat the sublime drum of the deathless and to turn the unsurpassable wheel of the Dharma.

The reference to turning the wheel of the Dharma concerns the impending delivery of his first teaching to his five former companions. The notion of beating the drum of the deathless reflects the successful completion of the Buddha's quest. According to the same discourse, this quest had been as follows:

Formerly, when I had not yet awakened to supreme, right, and complete awakening, I also had this

reflection: “I am actually subject to disease myself and I naïvely search for what is subject to disease; I am actually subject to old age, subject to death, subject to worry and sadness, and subject to defilement myself and I naïvely search for what is subject to defilement.

What if I now rather search for the supreme peace of Nirvana, which is free from disease, search for the supreme peace of Nirvana, which is free from old age, free from death, free from worry and sadness, and free from defilement?”

The notion of the deathless can serve to summarize the Buddha’s pre-awakening quest for liberation, described in the present extract. Here the deathless does not refer to the achievement of a state of eternal life. Instead, it signifies a liberating insight which results in the complete conquest of any fear of death.

According to early Buddhist thought, with full awakening gained, the Buddha had reached a condition of the mind that was completely composed even when faced with his own passing away. The same holds for those of his disciples who had also become completely liberated from defilements. Their conquest of death neither avoids the passing away of their physical bodies nor leads to gaining a state of immortality in a heavenly realm. Instead, it involves a supreme condition of freedom of the mind, such that even the terror of mortality has completely lost its sting.

Mindfulness of Death

A meditation practice of direct relevance to this notion of the deathless as a freedom from the terror of mortality is mindfulness of death. This can take the following form:

*One gives attention to the perception of death,
collecting mindfulness to the fore, with a mind that is
unshaken, being mindful of the exhalation and the
inhalation for the time it takes for them to go out and
return.*

Although the instruction is fairly simple, putting it into practice can be challenging. This is in considerable part because our modern society has become so accustomed to avoiding the fact of death.

The different defense mechanisms employed to ignore mortality, both one's own and that of others', have been studied in detail in clinical psychology. A range of publications are available on what at times comes under the header of "Terror Management Theory." This is the *theory* that explains how human beings *manage* their existential *terror*.

Human beings share with animals the instinct for self-preservation. In the case of humans, this instinct combines with the awareness that death is unavoidable. The combination of the instinctive drive for self-preservation and the knowledge of the inevitability of death creates the potential for paralyzing terror. As soon as death comes within the range of attention, human beings tend to react with various defense mechanisms. The most common one is trying to distract oneself.

Should distraction not suffice, denial ensues. This can take two forms. In one form of denial, death is pushed far away into the distant future. The acknowledgement that one is indeed going to die is accompanied by the reassuring assumption that this will only happen after a very long time. At that far away time in the distant future, one will come back to this issue, but not now. After all, there are more important things to do at present. No need to be too concerned about death at this time, as it is still so far away.

The other form of denial pretends that somehow, in a way not further specified, one is exempt from mortality. Other people are indeed mortal, this can hardly be denied, but somehow, in some way, oneself is not really subject to the same. Death is out there, but not in here.

These two modalities of denial could be summarized as “not now” and “not me.” They can be countered by repeatedly directing mindfulness to the recognition that one’s own death can happen at any time. Mortality is actually the birthday present every human being receives right on coming into existence. Although this should be obvious, it takes much courage and effort to face what most individuals shy away from: Death is certain.

As a consequence of being made aware of their mortality, people can cling strongly to their views and sense of identity as a way of fending off the sense of being threatened. Just being briefly reminded of the fact of death can make individuals react in ways that are more narrow-minded, biased, and fundamentalist, as strategies for avoiding the realization of their own mortality.

Recollection of death serves to counter these tendencies and to clarify priorities in life. In the face of mortality, how should life be lived in such a way that there will be no regrets at the time of death?

Although at first sight this might seem paradoxical, through regular recollection of death one becomes much more alive. One becomes more alive to the opportunities of the present moment, to the importance of making the best use of it instead of squandering it in meaningless activities.

In this way, mindfulness of death can have a remarkable impact on one’s priorities and relationships; it can positively change one’s whole life. By allowing death to become part of one’s life, a process of becoming complete and whole can take place.

Such mental cultivation is of additional relevance to facing the current climate emergency. It may well be the same defense mechanisms used to ward off recognition of mortality that contribute to denying or ignoring climate change. The same tendency manifests in clinging strongly to views and identities in order to fend off the feeling of being threatened.

Two strategies of psychological distancing in the face of climate change correspond closely to the two modalities of denying mortality by way of “not me” and “not now.”

In this way, mindfulness of death can make a rather substantial contribution to the challenge of facing climate change. Countering the two strategies of denial in the form of “not me” and “not now” is as relevant to climate change as it is to mortality. The dire effects of climate disaster can strike anywhere in the world, at any time.

Summary

The vision of a complete destruction of the whole earth has a soteriological potential in early Buddhist thought, by way of driving home the truth of impermanence and leading to letting go. The same truth applies to oneself; hence, mindfully facing one’s own mortality is the internal counterpart to mindfully facing climate catastrophe on the external level. In this way, through mindfulness practice the challenge of climate change can become a path to awakening. This can take the form of a middle path aloof from the two extremes of apathy and agitation, and aloof from indulgence and self-tormenting.

The actual implementation of this middle path has the four noble truths as its guiding principles, ethical living as its support, and mindfulness as its constant companion, monitoring what is taking place. Intentions of renunciation, non-harm, and non-ill will keep the mind on

track as it invests effort into confronting the three root defilements on the internal and external levels. In relation to verbal activity, the truth of climate change and its repercussions need to be communicated with balance, a balance that also informs environmental activism and one's personal lifestyle adjusted in such a manner as to minimize one's carbon footprint.

In this way, every step taken along this path can serve to diminish pollution both without and within.

This concludes my exploration of mindfully facing climate change in four installments, meant to show how the cultivation of mindfulness can facilitate approaching the disastrous environmental repercussions caused by the influence of the three root defilements without succumbing to them oneself. The crisis itself can be seen as the result of these three mental defilements, in particular rampant greed and the deluded tendency to ignore its repercussions. Although anger may at first sight seem less prominent, with the imminent deterioration in living conditions it can safely be expected to become more conspicuous.

The cultivation of mindfulness to face climate change rests on the compassionate intention for the absence of harm. It monitors and finetunes the contribution made by compassion, ensuring that one neither succumbs to its near enemy of grief nor switches off due to being unable to face it any longer. Viewed from this perspective, facing climate change becomes a mindfulness practice all the way through. Not only that, but its final goal is precisely a raising of the level of mindfulness on a global scale.

The potential of mindfulness in this respect can nowadays be tapped more easily due to its worldwide spread, as a result of having been adopted in a variety of areas in contemporary society and modern culture. Training in mindfulness has become available throughout

the world and is accessible to people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

This is the other side of the coin of the present situation. With all its catastrophic dimensions, it is at the same time also an outstanding opportunity. It is an opportunity to step out of detrimental patterns ingrained in human civilization as it is at present and move to a level of interaction among human beings that gives precedence to the common welfare over the individual benefit. The challenge posed by the crisis, if handled with mindfulness and compassion on a broad scale, can become an occasion to learn to work together to maintain the living conditions required for the survival of human civilization. Keeping in mind the positive view of this potential will be a crucial asset in facing any adversities.

Working together to ensure sustainability of life on earth indubitably requires stepping out of the narrow confines of self-centeredness, based on rigidly held racial, political, religious, and social identities. At this stage, it is no longer possible to privilege the individual over the communal, the regional over the national, and the national over the international. Instead, human beings all over the world must come to appreciate what they all have in common, the potential to become what so far they have not yet really become: *homo sapiens sapiens*, truly “wise” human beings.

Meditation

Out of the full scheme of instructions on mindfulness of breathing, for the present context the recommendation is to rely on its last four steps, which combine awareness of inhalations and exhalations with contemplation of impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and letting go.

Awareness of the process of breathing, established after the body scan for experiencing the internal earth

element, can now be invested with an emphasis on directly experiencing its impermanent nature. In terms of one's mental attitude, this involves a shift from the compassion cultivated earlier to equanimity now becoming predominant, with the understanding that the breath is nothing but change. Just as the breath, so everything else is also impermanent.

Those who like to work with more detail could bring in the five aggregates, discussed in the first installment. The body within which the breath is experienced corresponds to the first aggregate of bodily form. The sensations caused by the breath belong to the second aggregate of feeling tones. The discerning of inhalations and exhalations relies on the third aggregate of perception. The intention to stay with the breath and return to it whenever the mind has become distracted is the fourth aggregate of volitional formations. The knowing of all these aspects of the present moment's experience of the breath is consciousness.

Contemplation can take up each of these five aggregates one after the other, with an emphasis on their impermanent nature. Eventually, they can be combined in a comprehensive appreciation of the changing nature of all aspects of subjective experience.

Once insight into impermanence has been well established, in whichever way this has been done, it can lead over to cultivating dispassion. This takes place by letting the implications of the changing nature of all phenomena transform one's affective attitude toward them and diminish one's clinging.

The more dispassion grows, the easier it will become to be at ease with the ending of things, with their cessation. Depending on the present situation and one's overall preferences, the contemplation of cessation can be done either briefly or else in more depth.

Exploring the step of cessation can take place by taking up the thought of one's own death, the recognition that eventually this body will be bereft of life and the breath will stop. The thought of one's own death can be brought up either as a brief reminder, or else it can be contemplated in some detail, according to what feels appropriate at that time. For a more comprehensive reflection, the same practice can be extended to the whole earth, with the awareness that at some time in the future it will be completely destroyed. All traces of human civilization will come to an end. Nothing will remain forever.

The thought of one's own death can similarly be related to the alternation between inhalations and exhalations. With every inhalation, there can be an emphasis on the fact that, in principle, this could be the last breath. With every exhalation, one relaxes and lets go.

Correlating these two aspects of recognizing mortality and letting go to the inhalations and exhalations respectively enables adjusting the practice as needed. When the mind tries to dismiss the fact of death, more emphasis could be given to the inhalations. This is not by way of changing the inhalations in any way, but only in the sense of giving more emphasis to the corresponding reflection or perception. Breathing remains natural throughout. When the truth of mortality becomes too agitating, more emphasis can be given to relaxing and letting go with the exhalations.

After having been related to the exhalations, letting go can then become a continuous theme of the meditation. As the last of the four insight themes, letting go completes the trajectory from impermanence to dispassion and cessation. Such letting go can be aimed in particular at any manifestation, however subtle it may be, of the three root defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion. Cultivating increasing degrees of inner freedom from the three root

defilements enables facing their external manifestations with maximal effectiveness. In this way, deepening meditative insight on the internal level builds the required foundation for countering the environmental destruction in the world outside to the best of one's ability.

The meditation practice described in this and previous installments is meant to offer a relation to each of the four establishments of mindfulness and at the same time incorporate both insight and tranquility.

The contemplation of the internal earth element takes up one of the four elements, described in the Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness under the header of contemplation of the body. The same practice also incorporates mindfulness of the process of breathing, experienced as another dimension of the relationship between this body and the earth.

Contemplation of the mind in the way described above corresponds to the first three mental states listed in the Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness. The meditation presented here covers also contemplation of feeling tones, by way of attending to the affective quality of the mind when a distraction had been present as well as through noting the pleasant feeling tone of a mind that is undistracted.

Taking off from the pleasant feeling tone of being in the present moment, the meditation moves on to cultivation of compassion as a boundless radiation, thereby ensuring that the formal development of meditative tranquility complements the emphasis on insight in the remainder of the meditative approach presented here.

In order to implement the fourth establishment of mindfulness, contemplation of dharmas, the instructions for the last tetrad of mindfulness of breathing provide a helpful template. The basic progression involves contemplating impermanence, dispassion, cessation, and

letting go. The third of these four themes, cessation, provides an opportunity to implement recollection of death, in terms of one's own mortality as well as the ultimate death of the earth.

The meditation as a whole attempts to combine progress to awakening with the cultivation of qualities and insights directly related to climate change. It intends to make the relationship of the body to the earth a matter of direct personal experience. It also tries to provide tools to counter the influence of the three root defilements and to inculcate compassion as the crucial attitude of non-harm underlying environmental concerns. Learning to face death and the potential ending of human civilization with equanimity is perhaps the most crucial contribution to developing the mental resilience needed for facing the dire consequences of climate change.