Mindfully Facing Climate Change (1)

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This is the first 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.

Human-caused climate change and environmental destruction are modern problems. These were unknown at the time of the Buddha; hence it can hardly be expected that the early discourses provide precise advice on how to handle these. Nevertheless, several early discourses provide helpful perspectives and can be relied on in facing the current challenge.

As a scaffolding for my presentation of relevant textual passages, I rely on the four noble truths. The first installment takes up the first truth, based on a discourse that expounds this topic in relation to the four elements, the first of which is earth. The second installment uses the lens of the second truth to examine the causes that have led to the current predicament, in particular the three unwholesome root defilements (greed, hatred, and delusion) and their relation to climate change denial and other unwholesome reactions.

The third installment relates to the third truth with a focus on the divine abodes (brahmavihāra) as wholesome mental states of temporary liberation that have considerable ethical potential. Out of these four divine abodes, compassion is particularly relevant to the environmental situation. In the fourth installment, I apply the eightfold path to the problem of climate change, based on attempting to show that facing this problem can offer a substantial contribution to the overarching goal of this eightfold path: progress to awakening.

In line with the basic thrust of the eightfold path, a central concern in my presentation in these four installments is to try to develop a practice-related approach to the climate crisis. A key element here is a form of meditation that attempts to put the main themes of the four installments of this booklet into practice.

At the end of each installment, I survey the relevant meditation practice, which combines mindfulness directed to the internal and external earth element with an examination of the condition of the mind, a cultivation of compassion, and contemplation of impermanence. The form of meditation that results from combining these four practices is meant to help build up resilience and wisdom for facing the dire consequences of climate change.

The overall approach I present here has no pretense of being the only right one. When in the course of my discussion I explain why certain ideas do not align with my understanding of the early Buddhist perspective, this is not meant to encourage their wholesale rejection. My point is only that these are not part of the approach chosen here, which after all is just one out of many ways of trying to respond to the current predicament. The challenge of climate change is of such magnitude that it calls for a range of different perspectives, which can and should complement each other under the common aim of minimizing harm and ensuring, to the best of our ability, the sustainability of life on this planet.

Relating to the Earth

The crux of the problem of climate change is how we, as human beings, relate to the environment. As a way of approaching this relationship from an early Buddhist perspective, in this installment I try to cover three main topics. These three involve offering an introduction to some key doctrines of Buddhism, surveying meditative approaches to the earth, and attempting to establish an ecological ethics in line with the teachings reflected in the early discourses.

I begin by briefly sketching some key doctrinal teachings of early Buddhism that are of relevance, in one way or another, for the remainder of this and the following installments. These are the four noble truths, the significance of dukkha, the purpose of analyzing subjective experience into five aggregates, the relationship of the human body to the earth, and the teaching on dependent arising.

Out of these doctrinal teachings, the dependency of the human body on the earth is of particular relevance to my overall exploration. I study this dependency based on the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint, which relates the internal earth element, found inside
one’s own body, to the external earth element outside.

The Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint also serves as a lead-in to the second topic, featuring as the first of three discourses, studied in this installment, that offer meditation-related perspectives on the earth element. The other two discourses connected to this topic depict how to contemplate the earth element as a mindfulness exercise and how to take the earth as an example for cultivating an attitude of equanimity.

The last of the three topics to be taken up in this installment explores how to ground ecological concerns in early Buddhist thought. This is far from straightforward and has been an ongoing topic of scholarly discussion. The challenge here is that the overall concern of early Buddhism is progress to liberation. In contrast, nature as such is not invested with a value in and of itself.

It follows that environmental concerns, as long as these are developed from within the context of early Buddhist thought, need to be established in a way that avoids relying on the idea that ecosystems have a value on their own and for this reason should be protected. In the course of trying to build a proper foundation for an environmental ethics concordant with early Buddhism, I need to survey critically selected positions taken by some Green Buddhists. As part of my overall attempt to do justice to the teachings of early Buddhism, I have adopted what is perhaps its most central doctrinal teaching as a scaffolding for this book as a whole: the four noble truths. Each of the ensuing installments begins with a quote, outlining one of these four truths. The quotes are from one of the Chinese parallels to the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of Dharma (Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta), traditionally regarded as the first teaching delivered by the Buddha after his awakening. In keeping with this approach, I now turn to the first truth.

**The Four Noble Truths**

The first of the four truths takes the following form:

> What is reckoned to be the truth of dukkha? That is, birth is dukkha, old age is dukkha, disease is dukkha, death is dukkha, grief and vexation are dukkha, worry, sadness, and afflictions that cannot be measured [are dukkha]; association with what is disliked is dukkha, dissociation from what is liked is dukkha, not getting what is wished for is also dukkha; stated in brief, the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha. This is reckoned to be the truth of dukkha.

The early Buddhist teaching of four truths appears to be modeled on an ancient Indian scheme of medical diagnosis. This scheme covers a diagnosis of the disease, an identification of what is responsible for the disease, a determination of the potential for recovering health, and a prescription of the required cure. Based on this precedent, the teaching on these four noble truths can be understood to involve recognition of the following:

1) **diagnosis**: the stressful repercussions of whatever difficulty one is facing,

2) **etiology**: how one is contributing to that distress through craving and attachment,

3) **prognosis**: the potential for reducing distress by cultivating a different attitude,

4) **treatment plan**: the path of practice to be undertaken to achieve a change of attitude and a reduction of distress.

The diagnosis of the first truth, in the passage translated above, lists various instances of “dukkha.” Before exploring this diagnosis further, a few words are required about the import of this term.

**Dukkha**

The term dukkha has been regularly translated as “suffering.” This translation, however, fails to capture adequately the different dimensions of this term in its early Buddhist usage.

One of these dimensions is the experience of what is painful, where dukkha stands for one of the three feeling tones (vedanā), the other two feeling tones being pleasant and neutral. In the case of experiencing pain, this does not invariably have to result in suffering. Through training in mindfulness, it becomes possible to face the challenge of pain with a balanced mind. Hence dukkha as one of the three feeling tones can refer to “pain” or at least what is “unpleasant,” but this does not invariably have to result in “suffering.”
Another dimension of the same term concerns all conditioned phenomena, which can without exception be qualified as dukkha. This usage thereby covers all three feeling tones: pleasant, painful, and neutral.

Pleasant experiences could hardly be reckoned “suffering.” Of course, pleasant experiences eventually change and their disappearance can be quite frustrating. But painful experiences also change, and in that case the change will probably be experienced as welcome. Therefore, the fact of change can also not unequivocally be considered as productive of suffering.

This goes to show that “suffering” is not a quality shared by all conditioned phenomena. Instead, it is a reaction of an untrained mind. For this reason, applying the term “suffering” as a qualification to all conditioned phenomena fails to make sense. As a qualification of conditioned phenomena in general, a translation as “unsatisfactory” would be more to the point.

In order to avoid misleading connotations, in the remainder of my presentation I will continue to employ the Pāli term dukkha, in the hope that with the above brief exploration I have given sufficient background for appreciating its significance.

**The Five Aggregates**

The translation given above from a Chinese version of the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of Dharma agrees with its Pāli parallel in reckoning the five aggregates of clinging as dukkha. The scheme of five aggregates involves an analysis of subjective experience into the following aspects:

1. bodily form,
2. feeling tone,
3. perception,
4. volitional formations,
5. consciousness.

These five can be understood to point to the material, affective, cognitive, conative, and sentient dimensions of subjective experience. The purpose of this analytical scheme is to highlight five modalities of clinging to a sense of self. The body comes to be clung to as “where” I am, feeling tones as “how” I am, perceptions as “what” I cognize, formations as “why” I act in a certain way, and consciousness as “whereby” I experience.

According to the summary statement of the first truth, all of these five dimensions of subjective experience are dukkha. Such assessment reflects the early Buddhist soteriological orientation mentioned at the outset of this installment. In fact, the formulation of the first truth starts off with birth as a manifestation of dukkha. Human birth offers a valuable opportunity insofar as it provides suitable conditions for progress on the path to liberation, but it is not seen as valuable in and of itself. The final aim of the path to liberation is precisely to transcend any type of birth.

With the final goal of the early Buddhist path attained, arahants are considered to be completely free from clinging to any of the five aggregates and therewith from future birth. Even encountering old age, disease, and death no longer leads to “grief and vexation” or to “worry, sadness, and afflictions” in them.

At the same time, from the arahant’s viewpoint all conditioned phenomena are still dukkha in the sense of being incapable of providing true and lasting satisfaction. From an early Buddhist perspective, dukkha is an inherent quality of nature, however broadly this latter term is defined.

**The Elephant’s Footprint**

For a further assessment of the first truth, I turn to a discourse that has as its speaker a chief disciple of the Buddha by the name of Sāriputta. This is the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint, which begins by highlighting the comprehensive role of the four truths. The presentation in this discourse is of particular relevance to my overall concerns, as it establishes a relationship between the first of the five aggregates, the human body, and the earth.
The highlight on the four truths in a Chinese version of this discourse takes the following form:

*Friends,* it is just like animal footprints, of which the foremost is an elephant’s footprint. Why is that? It is because the elephant’s footprint is the largest.

*Friends,* it is like this with countless wholesome states; all these states are completely contained in the four noble truths, they fit into the four noble truths, and the four noble truths are reckoned foremost among all states.

What are the four? They are reckoned to be the noble truth of dukkha, of the arising of dukkha, of the cessation of dukkha, and the noble truth of the path to the cessation of dukkha.

*Friends,* what is the noble truth of dukkha? That is, birth is dukkha, old age is dukkha, disease is dukkha, death is dukkha, association with what is disliked is dukkha, separation from what is loved is dukkha, not getting what is wanted is dukkha; in short, the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha.

The image of the elephant’s footprint occurs also in other discourses. In several such instances it serves to highlight the importance of diligence (*appamāda*). Alternatively, the same imagery can illustrate the importance of either the perception of impermanence or else of the faculty of wisdom. This last usage would fit the present context well, as it must be the wisdom potential of the four noble truths that earned it a position of eminence comparable to the footprint of an elephant.

**The Four Elements**

The exposition in the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint lists the five aggregates individually in order to explain the statement that “the five aggregates of clinging are dukkha” and then takes up just the first aggregate of bodily form. After explaining that bodily form is made up of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, the analysis proceeds by taking up just the first element of earth, representative of the quality of solidity. In this way, the exposition gradually leads from the teaching of the four noble truths to a close inspection of the nature of the earth element. This takes the following form:

*What is the earth element? Friends, the earth element is reckoned to be of two types: there is the internal earth element and there is the external earth element.*

*Friends,* what is the internal earth element? It is reckoned to be what is internal, being found inside the body, what is contained internally and is solid, established in the nature of solidity, being internally clung to. And what is that?

*It is reckoned to be head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, rough and smooth epidermis, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, heart, kidneys, liver, lungs, spleen, intestines, stomach, feces, and whatever else similarly exists in this way inside the body, is contained internally [and is solid], established in the nature of solidity, being internally clung to. Friends, this is reckoned to be the internal earth element.*

The identification of the solid parts of the body as earth element can be interpreted by recourse to another passage, found in a Pāli discourse and its Chinese parallel. The passage in question describes a skilled meditator who is able to see the wood of a tree as a manifestation of the earth element, or of the water element, or of the fire element, or else of the wind element, as each of these four elements is found in the wood.

Applying the same perspective to the passage translated above, the other three elements must also be found in the bodily parts listed. On reflection, this is indeed the case. Each of these bodily parts has some degree of cohesion or liquidity, corresponding to the water element, each has some warmth, reflecting the fire element, and within each part of the body some motion takes place, indicative of the presence of the wind element.

It follows that these bodily parts are listed as manifestations of the earth element in order to highlight that this element is predominant; the above passage would not imply that they are only earth and nothing else. These bodily parts are predominantly solid and thereby suitably illustrate the nature of the internal earth element.

In the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint, this is the first step to be implemented, before turning to the external earth element in the form of what is outside of the body and similarly
The Earth

The Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint turns to the external earth element by describing how it can be affected by flooding:

Friends, there are times of deluge, and at such times the external earth element disappears [under water]. Friends, this external earth element, which is very great, very clean, and very non-repulsive, is [still] of an impermanent nature, of a nature to cease, of a nature to decline, and of a nature to change; how much more so is this transient body, which is clung to with craving.

Yet, one reckoned an unlearned foolish worldling has this thought: “This is me; this is mine; I belong to it.” A learned noble disciple, [however], does not have this thought: “This is me; this is mine; I belong to it.” How could one have such a thought?

The overall thrust of the passage is to drive home the impermanent nature of one’s own body and hence the meaninglessess of clinging to it as an embodiment of “me” or “mine.” In order to make this point, the passage establishes the similarity in nature between the body and the external earth. Given that even the external earth is impermanent, the body must also be impermanent.

The depiction of the disappearance of the earth reflects an ancient Indian cosmological belief that the world goes through cyclical periods of destruction, as a result of which human beings will disappear from the earth. Such destruction could be due to water, as in the present case, or else because of fire or wind. I will take up a description of such destruction based on fire in the last installment of my study.

After having related the internal to the external earth element, the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint continues by showing how insight cultivated in this way fortifies one when experiencing abuse. The same insight can inspire the cultivation of equanimity to such an extent that one will even be able to face a physical attack with inner balance. The discourse applies the same procedure to the other three elements of water, fire, and wind.

The overall exposition in the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint combines two themes of relevance to meditative culture of the mind, namely insight into the absence of a self and the growth of equanimity. I will return to the part of the discourse related to equanimity in a later installment.

The above description of the disappearance of the external earth is at the same time about the disappearance of human life from the earth. Once the whole earth is inundated, the foundation for the survival of human beings would indeed have disappeared. The Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint thereby implicitly drives home the fact that the existence of the body depends on the existence of the earth.

The relationship established in this way offers a starting point for developing an ecological concern that aligns with early Buddhist thought. The presentation in the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint implies that the external and internal earth element share the same impermanent nature. It also implies that the impermanent nature of the earth affects the body, which must perish if the earth comes to destruction. Clearly, the continuity of the body depends on the continuity of the earth.

Such dependency is quite evident in the need to nourish the body. Besides food as a manifestation of the earth element, the body also requires regular intake of the water element in the form of beverages, maintenance of a certain temperature range, corresponding to the fire element, and a continuous supply of oxygen through the process of breathing, a manifestation of the wind element.

The body’s need for nourishment forms part of a canonical description in the following form:

The material body, which [consists] of the four elements and the six sense-faculties, which has been given birth to and been raised by father and mother, grows up from milk and meals.

The Pāli counterpart does not refer to the six sense-faculties or to the parents. Instead of milk and meals, it just speaks of feeding on solid food. Alongside such minor differences, both descriptions agree that the body consists of the four elements and needs to be fed.
The conditionality that emerges in this way would be sufficient reason for a concern with protecting living conditions on earth. Protecting the natural world indeed safeguards the basis for sustaining the human body, which in turn is needed for a human being to be able to cultivate mindfulness, and such cultivation is required for progress on the path to awakening.

A Pāli discourse without parallels lists scarcity of food as one of several potential dangers that could occur in future times, highlighting that such scarcity will lead to migration of people and result in a situation where it becomes rather difficult to practice the Buddha’s teaching. The main purpose of this description is to instill a sense of urgency (saṃvega) so that one practices with wholehearted dedication as long as food is still readily available. At the same time, the passage also points to a practitioner’s dependency on suitable living conditions.

The body’s dependency on nutriment also comes up in an exposition concerning the four establishments of mindfulness (satipaṭṭhāna). The discourse in question depicts the arising and ceasing of the object taken by the first establishment of mindfulness, the body, in this way:

\[ \text{The arising of nutriment is the arising of the body; the cessation of nutriment is the vanishing of the body.} \]

This indication in a way invites mindful inspection of the fact that the body to be contemplated in formal meditation on the four establishments of mindfulness depends on nutriment. Without nutriment, the body ceases, and therewith the object of the first establishment of mindfulness disappears.

**Contemplation of the Elements**

One of the exercises for cultivating the first of the four establishments of mindfulness is directly relevant to a meditative approach to the earth element. This approach can serve to reveal the meaninglessness of clinging to the body as an embodiment of “me” or “mine,” also thematized in the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint. The relevant passage takes the following form in a Chinese parallel to the Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness (Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta):

\[ \text{A monastic contemplates this body by distinguishing the elements in this body as being the four elements. This is just like a capable cow butcher or the apprentice of a cow butcher who divides a cow [into pieces by cutting through] its tendons. While dividing it he contemplates and sees for himself that “these are the feet,” “this is the heart,” “these are the tendons,” and “this is the head.”} \]

The purpose of the element contemplation is to lead to a dissection of one’s sense of selfhood by driving home the fact that what is experienced as “my” body is, after all, just a combination of the four elements.

The shift of perspective to be achieved in this way is similar to a butcher who, after having slaughtered a cow and cut it up, no longer thinks that “this is a cow,” as his perception of the cow as a compact unit has ended. Instead, he thinks in terms of pieces of meat, which he is putting out for sale.

This helps to draw out the implications of this particular mindfulness exercise of contemplating the earth element, which serves as a way of putting into practice the realization of the empty nature of the human body, in line with the chief teaching of the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint.

**A Mind Like the Earth**

In addition to the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint and the Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness, a third discourse relevant to developing a meditative approach to the earth, to be examined in this installment, takes up each of the four elements as an inspiration for cultivating equanimity. This is a topic also thematized in the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint. The relevant instruction for the case of the earth element proceeds as follows:

\[ \text{You should maintain your mind like the earth. Just as this earth receives what is pure and also receives what is impure, it receives excrement and urine, and all that is dirty and disgusting, yet the earth does not give rise to a discriminatory mental attitude; it does not say: “This is attractive, this is repulsive.” Now your practice should also be like this.} \]
This passage encourages taking inspiration from the imperturbability of the earth in order to develop a mind that similarly remains unperturbed.

The meditative perspectives that emerge from the three discourses taken up in this installment point in complementary ways to the themes of emptiness and equanimity. Here the Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint provides the foundational perspective on the similarity in nature of the internal and the external earth element, thereby undermining the tendency to consider the human body as separate and special. The empty nature of the human body emerges in particular in its utter dependency on what is external to it.

A practical way to explore this empty nature of the human body can be found in mindful contemplation of the elements. The present passage offers additional support for what has already emerged from these discourses by presenting the earth as a model for cultivating mental balance, in order to remain unperturbed in the face of the vicissitudes of life.

**The Earth and Sentience**

In addition to providing this practice-related perspective, the passage on keeping the mind like the earth also offers an indication relevant to environmental ethics.

The reference to what is dirty and loathsome being dumped on the earth links the passage translated above to ecology, even though this was of course not the intention of the original discourse. Of further significance is the encouragement to remain free from reactivity when facing agreeable and disagreeable experiences, as it relies on the notion that the earth does not react. The passage thereby gives the impression that the earth and the other elements were not seen as endowed with sentience.

Of relevance to this topic is also a rule of monastic conduct, which forbids digging the earth. Seeing monastics engaged in digging the earth had provoked censure by people who did perceive the earth as sentient, a view apparently common in the ancient Indian setting. The ruling presumably reflects the need to avoid offending public opinion. In fact, a monastic text extant in Chinese, the Mahāsāṅghika Vinaya, reports the Buddha stating explicitly that the earth is not endowed with the faculty of sentence, before promulgating the rule against digging it oneself or getting it dug by others.

The famous scene when, on the eve of his awakening, the Buddha called the earth to witness, is an element of later hagiography and not attested in the early discourses. Even this later stage, however, does not involve the idea of anthropomorphizing the earth as a mother, an image sometimes invoked to inspire environmental protection.

Considering the earth as a mother, in the sense of viewing the production of food and living conditions as something done intentionally to benefit sentient beings, does not seem to be successful in providing a coherent grounding for environmental concerns. If the earth is endowed with intentionality, then volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and tsunamis, with all their catastrophic repercussions, would also have to be attributed to intentional acts of the earth.

Once such intentionality is granted, in order to stimulate a debt of gratitude to mother earth for her abundant gifts, it can hardly be avoided that such destructions are equally viewed as the earth’s intentional deeds. Intentional destruction on a massive scale like this, however, does not fit the image of a mother particularly well.

In order to motivate environmental concerns, a different approach would seem to be required, at least as long as such concerns are to be grounded in early Buddhist thought.

**Humans and Animals**

The Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint does provide a starting point for such a different approach in order to situate ecological ethics within the context of early Buddhist thought. However, such relating an environmental concern to the dependency of humans on an intact ecosystem, in order to be able to practice the path to awakening, remains within an anthropocentric perspective.

Although this would suffice as a rationale for environmental action when living conditions on earth are endangered, it will probably not satisfy those who consider the privileging of humans over other species to be the chief culprit for the current predicament. Yet, from an early Buddhist perspective, accepting the idea of some hierarchical superiority of human beings does not mean that compassion and care based on a moral sense of responsibility are
being diminished.

**The Food Chain**

Turning from secondary sources to the early discourses, the reasoning underpinning a consideration of animals as inferior to humans finds expression in the following manner:

*Among animals there is no practice of altruism and justice, no practice of the principles of moral conduct, no practice of what is sublime and wholesome. Those animals eat up one another. The strong eat the weak; the big eat the small.*

According to this passage, it is precisely the lack of moral agency that, from an early Buddhist perspective, makes animals appear inferior to humans. This lack is particularly evident in the food chain, which involves much killing and pain. From this viewpoint, there would be little room left for considering animals as in themselves sacred. Taking into account the repercussions of the food chain could hardly instill veneration or be considered in some way sanctified, unless one were to redefine the notion of sacredness completely, as a result of which it would no longer be able to function as a motivation for environmental activism. In other words, to endorse fully the killing done by animals would substantially weaken the ethical basis for censuring the destruction caused by humans.

In the case of plants, the early discourses do reflect the ancient Indian belief that these can be inhabited by spirits. Hence cutting down a tree, for example, might incur the wrath of the spirit that dwells in it. However, in modern times it seems less probable that such beliefs still have sufficient influence to promote forest preservation. Besides, even in the ancient Indian setting such beliefs do not involve attributing sacredness to the trees in themselves.

Of interest here is a discourse which describes how someone might fell a great tree, cut it into pieces, dry these, burn them up in a fire, and then throw the ashes into a river. This description serves to convey positive connotations. The point made in this way is that, just as this tree has no scope to arise again, in the same way *dukkha* has no scope to arise again in the case of one who has reached full awakening.

A similar attitude is also evident in the simile employed to convey the gist of mindful contemplation of the earth, taken up earlier, which describes a butcher cutting up a cow for sale.

Both cases of course do not actively encourage the slaughter of an animal or the destruction of a plant. Nevertheless, the image of their destruction is employed to convey a positive nuance. Had plants and animals been considered sacred, such a depiction would hardly have been chosen to illustrate a commendable form of meditative practice or attainment.

**Dependent Arising**

The above survey of problems related to construing an ecological ethics is certainly not meant to dismiss forms of environmental activism that are based on a biocentric approach. The point is only that, in order to stay within the framework of early Buddhist thought, the pragmatic approach I attempt to present here needs to rely on an anthropocentric concern with the environment rather than attributing an intrinsic value to animals or nature. At the same time, as already mentioned earlier, what I present here is just one of many possible approaches to achieve the common goal of reducing the dire effects of climate change.

The anthropocentric concern adopted here is based on the understanding that for human beings to walk the path to liberation requires basic living conditions, which in turn are dependent on the natural environment.

The dependency of the human body on the earth as the motivator for environmental activism could then be considered an instance of specific conditionality, the principle underlying the early Buddhist teaching on dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*).

The Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint, taken up earlier in this installment, in fact explicitly connects its presentation to dependent arising. Its exposition culminates in the following statement:

*Friends, the Blessed One has also spoken in this way: “If one sees dependent arising, one in turn sees the Dharma; if one sees the Dharma, one in turn sees dependent arising.”*

*Why is that? Friends, the Blessed One taught that the five aggregates of clunging arise from conditions: the form aggregate of clunging, the feeling tone, the perception, the formations,*
and the consciousness aggregate of clinging.

In this way, the discourse moves from the individual elements back to the level of the five aggregates of clinging as a summary statement of the first truth. The whole intervening exposition was a detailed breakdown of the first of these aggregates, and the present passage clarifies that this served to exemplify its dependently arisen nature.

The early Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising concerns specific conditions and their cessation; it does not establish a general interconnectedness of all things, comparable to systems theory. The notion of a general interconnectedness of all things, as a basis for inspiring action to preserve a harmonious balance in nature, differs from the purpose of the early Buddhist teaching on dependent arising, whose aim is rather to step out of conditionality. Be it the dependently arisen five aggregates of clinging or the dependency of the body on the external earth element, the ultimate aim of such teachings is complete transcendence rather than a positive evaluation of these conditions.

Besides, it is also not clear how, on being invested with a positive evaluation, the notion that everything is interrelated could provide a coherent basis for an ecological concern, because interrelatedness as a general principle includes insecticides, totalitarian regimes and nuclear weapons. In other words, it lacks moral value and further principles would be needed to establish an ethical foundation for environmental concerns.

In sum, from an early Buddhist perspective it seems difficult to ground ecological concerns coherently by anthropomorphizing the earth as a mother whose benevolent care needs to be recompensed, by viewing animals and plants as sacred, or by relying on the notion that everything is interrelated.

The Beauty of Nature

The above considerations regarding the early Buddhist perspective on the earth do not imply that there cannot be an appreciation of the beauty of nature. Such appreciation occurs indeed regularly in the discourses.

An example in case is a discourse which takes the beauty of a flowering forest as its starting point. The discourse begins with some fellow monastics approaching Sāriputta for a Dharma discussion. He starts off the discussion by drawing attention to the delightful place in which they had met, which forms a recurrent theme throughout their exchange. According to the Chinese version of the discourse in question, Sāriputta formulates this theme in the following manner:

This sal forest at Gosinha is highly delightful, the night is brightly moonlit, and the sal trees are spreading a delicate fragrance, as if from divine flowers.

The beauty of the moonlit forest, with the flowers in full bloom, leads on to a discussion on what particular spiritual quality could match this beauty. Each of the monastics present on this occasion describes one particularly praiseworthy quality, such as dwelling in seclusion, mastery of the mind, exemplary moral conduct, etc. In this way, the aesthetic dimension of the beauty of nature acquires its true significance from a soteriological perspective.

Another example would be a verse in a collection of early Buddhist poetry, which proceeds as follows:

Delightful are forest wilds,
Here ordinary folk will not delight;
The passionless find delight here.
Those who are not in quest of sensual pleasures.

The charm of forest wilds relates to freedom from sensual desire. This holds to such an extent that those who have reached this lofty goal are fully able to delight in them, unlike those caught up in the quest for the pleasures of sensuality.

Summary

From an early Buddhist viewpoint, animals and nature are not invested with value in and of themselves. The earth is not conceived as a mother, and the teaching on dependent arising is not an affirmation of the interrelationship of all things.

An approach to environmental concerns that wishes to stay in line with the teachings of early Buddhism can therefore best be developed based on an anthropocentric perspective, in the
sense that the human body requires appropriate living conditions on earth in order to be able to serve as a vehicle for progress to awakening. Such an anthropocentric paradigm comes with a recognition of the moral responsibility of humans toward other sentient beings.

From a meditative perspective, central themes that emerge in relation to the earth element are emptiness and equanimity. These can be cultivated through a mindful contemplation that proceeds from the internal earth element, found inside the body, to its external counterpart.

**Meditation**

The material in this and the ensuing installments is meant to help strengthen mental resilience for facing the current environmental challenge and for taking appropriate action. Each of the four installments provides a background to a particular aspect of the meditation presented here.

In the case of the first installment, this is contemplation of the earth element. Such contemplation can make it a matter of personal experience that one is intrinsically related to nature outside. The second installment relates to contemplation of the mind, with a particular emphasis on recognition of the three root defilements. The third installment concerns the cultivation of compassion. The last installment introduces contemplation of impermanence on a global scale and recollection of death. Coming to terms with one’s own mortality has its complement in the ability to face the possible end of human civilization with inner balance as the foundation for taking appropriate action.

Although inspired by the early discourses, the actual instructions summarized below and also offered as guided instructions online are my own and come with no claim of being accurate reflections of meditation practice undertaken in ancient India.

The basic suggestion would be to proceed through these meditations step by step, finding time each weekend to study the relevant installment and during the ensuing week to practice the corresponding meditation on a daily basis.

The meditations presented here are based on extracts from more comprehensive practices that have considerably more to offer. The combination of these extracts yields a viable form of meditation that fits the challenge of facing climate change and at the same time has a liberating potential. Nevertheless, in addition to cultivating such meditation on a daily basis, it would be opportune to explore the relevant complete practices during a time of retreat.

Building on the daily practice of the meditation presented here, a time of the year set apart for silent retreat could be used to cultivate contemplation of all four elements in the way described in the discourse, even to explore the full scheme of the four establishments of mindfulness. Other opportunities for deepening the practice would be to implement the complete instructions on mindfulness of breathing in sixteen steps or else to develop all of the four divine abodes. Such full exploration will provide additional depth to the meditation presented here and strengthen its daily practice.

Turning to the meditation practice relevant to the present installment, cultivating insight into the close relationship between the body and the earth on a personal level can begin with a focus on the earth element. Although such an approach is inspired by the contemplation of the four elements described in the Discourse on the Establishments of Mindfulness, it lacks the analytical edge of this exercise, due to taking up only one of the four elements.

For exploring the earth element in daily meditation, the recommended approach is to use a body scan. Such a form of practice is not described in the early discourses and only seems to have come into existence in later times. Its purpose is to provide a grounding in bodily presence, making it easy to collect the mind and avoid that it succumbs to distraction.

In actual practice, after having taken a moment to settle in by just being with the presence of the body in the sitting posture, the scan can begin with the head and from there proceed to the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, torso, hips, legs, and feet. At first it might be preferable to take the limbs separately, but eventually these can be covered at the same time.

The meditative task is simply to be aware of a particular part of the body in the knowledge that there is the internal earth element, in the sense that there is some degree of solidity in this part of the body. When cultivating this meditation there is no need to strain in order to feel distinctly and with total precision the presence of solidity in each and every part of the body. Obviously, the body is solid; there is solidity in each part of the body. Given that this is already clear, it is not necessary to struggle in order to prove that. It suffices just being aware of the
body and knowing that there is solidity, which is sensed only to the degree to which this naturally manifests.

Having completed the body scan can then lead on to sensing the solidity of the ground below, wherever this is in direct contact with the body. This is a way of transitioning to becoming aware of the external earth element. Even sitting on a chair on the highest floor of a skyscraper, there definitely is solidity below that reaches all the way down to the earth. Awareness can note the sense of gravity and allow the body to relax into that gravitational pull, letting all bodily and mental tension sink into the ground.

Having in this way come into contact with the earth below can lead over to a perception of the extensiveness of the earth in all directions. This can be done by first becoming aware of the frontal direction, in the acknowledgement that the element of solidity felt below the body extends to the front into the far distance. Proceeding from the front to the right, then the back, and finally the left, eventually a perception of the vastness of the external earth element can arise. The body can feel firmly grounded in this experience of solidity that extends into all directions; in fact, it is an integral part of it.

The perception of the body as an integral part of the earth can be further strengthened by way of the following reflection, brought in briefly and only to the extent to which this supports the meditation, without leading to mental chatter: The body depends on a constant supply of solid food and is thereby in a relationship of exchange with the external earth element. It is entirely dependent on the earth for its survival. The same holds not only for the earth element. The body also needs the water element in the form of beverages, the fire element in the form of protection from extremes of temperature, and the wind element in the form of breathing. The oxygen breathed in comes from plants that live on the surface of the earth and in the ocean.

The last reflection can lead over to becoming aware of the process of breathing. Ideally this is done while maintaining whole-body awareness. In other words, instead of cultivating an exclusive focus on the breath, the process of breathing can be experienced as part of the whole body seated on the earth. With every breath, an exchange takes place with the plants on the earth. For the body’s survival, this is even more vital than its food supply.

The practice of the body scan can serve as a convenient tool for adjusting to the degree of distraction of the mind. When the mind tends to wander frequently, repeated and swift scanning can help to counter this tendency. Once, sooner or later, the mind becomes willing to settle down, the time has come to give attention to the breath. Throughout, the relationship between the body and the earth, the dependency of the body on the earth for its survival, can remain as the central theme.

A pdf version with diacritics and annotation can be downloaded here.