



Global Ecology from a Buddhist Perspective

H.H. the Sakya Trichen (the 41st Sakya Trizin)



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By the merit of this work, may His Holiness the Sakya Trichen enjoy perfect health and extremely long life, and continue to turn the wheel of Dharma.

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This Life Is Precious

The life we have is very precious, even from our own point of view. We can see this from the way we worry about losing this life. We worry about falling sick, or we worry that somebody may attack us, and so we make every effort to preserve our lives. Nothing is more precious to us than our own lives—not just from a religious point of view, but even from a worldly point of view.

Similarly, every living being also thinks his or her own life is very precious. We do not want to lose this life. We wish to sustain it and continue it for as long as possible. Therefore, it is very important to understand that our lives and the larger environment are connected to each other.



Mind Is the Most Powerful Factor

The Buddhist teachings, especially the Mahayana, say that we have both body and mind. The body is easy to describe. We know where this body came from, that is, from our parents; how it is formed; how it is developed; and how it is maintained. The body is visible: we can describe its size, color, and shape, and whether somebody's body is beautiful or ugly, and so on. When we leave this world, the body will be disposed of in one way or another.

However, the mind is something very different. The mind cannot be seen with our naked eyes, nor can we touch it with our hands. We cannot describe its size, color, or shape. Yet, mind is the most powerful factor; without mind the body is dead. The mind does everything; everything works with the mind. It is the mind that performs all the good actions and all the bad actions. It is the mind that experiences happiness, and it is the mind that also experiences suffering. Therefore, the most important phenomenon is the mind.

From where, then, does this mind come? How it is formed? According to the teachings, that mind has no beginning as such.

We refer to it as “beginningless time” or “beginningless.” You cannot say, “This person’s mind began at this time,” because the mind is invisible. Therefore, it is something that continues indefinitely.

Your mind and body are very different. The mind that is invisible and indescribable could not arise from such a thing as the visible body or visible elements. Mind has to have its own same type of continuity. With this reasoning, one can establish that there is life before our present life. From that life, although the previous body was disposed of in one way or another, the consciousness of the mind continued and entered into the present body. So presently our mind is residing in this body. When we leave this world, the present body again will be disposed of in one way or another. But the mind cannot be disposed of. Mind cannot be cremated or buried because it is invisible. Since it is invisible, we cannot make it disappear. So this very powerful mind again continues and enters into another life. With this reasoning, we can establish a future life, and this process goes on repeatedly.



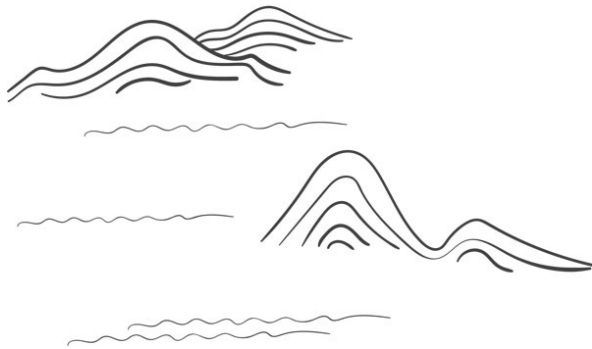
Life Is Precious for Every Being

Many of you are already familiar with what we call the “Wheel of Life.” A wheel turns once, turns again, and goes on and on without beginning or end. Similarly, life has no beginning or end as such and it goes on and on. We have taken birth from beginningless time until now innumerable times, and in the future we will continue to take birth again and again unless we attain liberation or enlightenment. Wherever our defilements and the winds of karma blow, there one must be born. We have no choice. Therefore, there is not a single place in the universe where you have not been born.

Furthermore, there is not a single sentient being who has not been our parent, our friend, our partner, our child, and so on. But due to the change of life, we do not recognize each other. We see some people as our friends, some as our enemies, and some as indifferent to us. But in reality, every sentient being is one of our very dear ones, including our presently most hated enemies.

I think it is important for everybody to realize that because life is precious to oneself, therefore it is also precious to others. When you think about your own feelings, you can learn how every

individual also has the same kind of feelings. Not only is life precious for you; it is also precious to every living being, from the tiniest, almost indivisible worms or insects up to the gods. Therefore, we should remember that life is precious to all beings and concern ourselves with how to protect life.



Love and Compassion Toward Every Sentient Being

If life is precious, then we must protect where we live. We cannot live in places with no water, no trees, and so on. All environmental problems, therefore, are connected with our lives.

In fact, one can say that the Lord Buddha was the founder of environmentalism because in his Vinaya (the rules by which monks and nuns abide) are rules that you cannot cut down trees, pluck flowers, disturb the forest, pollute the river, or soil the grass. These are exactly the type of environmental protections we talk about today. A long time ago, the Buddha already laid them down as rules for Buddhist monks and nuns.

Also, the Buddha said that every being's life is precious, especially in the Mahayana teachings. Every sentient being was once our parent, so we must repay the love, kindness, and benefits we received from him or her. Even our enemies—who are harming us or creating trouble for us—are also our very dear ones, but because we do not recognize them, instead of paying them back with kindness, we pay them back with anger. In the Buddha's teachings, love and compassion are described as infinite. There is no exception: we should love everybody—known and unknown, near and far, loved and hated. Everybody should have equal love and compassion toward every sentient being.

Love Our Environment and Love All Sentient Beings in Equanimity

The present world faces many environmental problems. Many people fear that in a matter of years, the world will be a desert: there will be no water, no trees, no rain, and so much pollution in the air that everyone will have to carry around oxygen tanks to breathe! Therefore, it is very important to think about our planet for the sake of our future generations, and for them, we have to think about these problems and make some changes to our present behavior.

The Buddha's teachings are deep and wide; everything is included.

But Buddhists mainly devote their time and energy to practices such as meditation, so they do not conduct many external activities. By contrast, environmentalists are very active; they do many things to directly help animals and plants and so on. The difference between modern environmentalists and Buddhists is that the former are more practical, whereas the latter have a much deeper and wider view.

Modern environmentalists consider life as precious, and they do not just talk, but they actively work to protect life.

However, their approach is incomplete. For example, in India, many people are worried about protecting tigers. It is said that India used to have forty thousand tigers, but now the number has drastically dropped to only fourteen thousand tigers. Tigers are very beautiful and powerful and nice, so environmentalists wish to protect them. They also focus on animals that need to be protected because they are rare, such as some species of deer in India. Anyone who hunts those deer faces severe punishments. This is very good.

But we do not only need to protect rare and beautiful animals; life is for everybody. And yet, there are no environmentalists who say that we need to protect mosquitos. Perhaps they don't want to protect them because mosquitos are very ugly and noisy, and they disturb and bite you, and they carry diseases such as malaria. Therefore, many think it is better to destroy mosquitos. But mosquitos are also living beings. Life is precious everywhere.



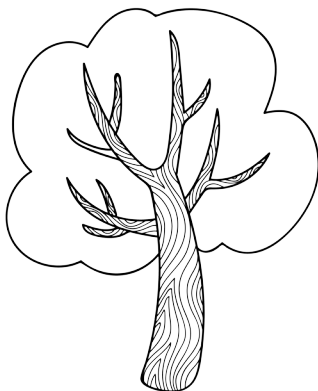
Combine the Buddha's Teachings with Practical Actions to Protect the World

Buddhist teachings tell us that every living being needs to be protected, whether they are harmful or beneficial to us, whether they are beautiful or ugly, plentiful or rare. In India, you are allowed to shoot some wild animals that are plentiful. From the Buddhist point of view, this is not correct. In practicality, not everyone will agree with this. But I speak from a Buddhist perspective. The main point is that life is precious, to ourselves and also to mosquitos. Indeed, mosquitos' lives are very short; some of them live for only a day or two. Even though they do not have much time to live, whenever people see mosquitos, they kill them.

The Buddhist idea of protecting life with love and compassion is much deeper and wider than this, yet not all Buddhists do it in practice. Some Buddhists may meditate and recite prayers saying, "May all sentient beings be happy and have the cause of happiness," yet when animals nearby are suffering or crying, they are not bothered.

Whereas environmentalists and other people may not say prayers or meditate, but they go into the field where animals are suffering, crying, and sick, and help them. I think this is very good.

Therefore, I think we should combine these two together: the Buddha's teachings and compassionate people's active works. If we combine these two, I think it would be of great benefit. It will be much more powerful, much wider than either approach alone.



Everyone Is Responsible for Protecting the Environment—a Global Effort

Right from the beginning, the Buddha himself taught that life is precious, so therefore we should make this world beautiful and clean, not only for human beings, but for the sake of all sentient beings.

There is a story of a monk who was meditating, and suddenly a leaf fell on him and disturbed him. He got very angry, crushed the leaf into pieces, and cut the tree from which it fell, saying, “Why did the Buddha make such a strange rule of not allowing monks to pluck leaves and flowers?” and he felt anger toward the Buddha of his era.⁽¹⁾

So in his next life, he was born as a naga (a serpent-type being) with a huge tree growing on his head. Of course, there are such animals; for example, in the ocean, there are corals that are living beings yet they look like trees or plants. Anyway, the growing tree was very painful and heavy as the root was growing downward, and so the former monk was in great suffering. At one point, the Buddha came across him while traveling with a king. The king asked the Buddha, “Why does

this person have this strange tree on his head and suffer so?” The Buddha replied that during the time of an earlier Buddha, this person was a monk who grew angry, crushed a leaf, and cut the tree from which it fell—thus disrespecting the rules laid down by the Buddha of his era. As a consequence, he was born into his current life.

This story shows how much the Buddha was concerned about trees, flowers, water, streams, pools, and so on. I think it is important for modern environmentalists to take ideas from the Buddha’s teachings, especially the rules of the Vinaya.

Of course we cannot protect everything and everyone, but whatever we can do, we should. Environmental protection is not something that only one individual or organization can do. It is something that everybody must do; everybody has this responsibility. First of all, it is very important to make people aware of the danger for the future if we do not take care of the environment. In many ways it is already too late; we cannot protect the environment for everybody everywhere. But if we are aware and many individuals make the effort, we will certainly produce a definite and concrete result.

The main thing everyone should realize is that life is precious. If life is precious, then we must do something. We must make this life beneficial and sustain it longer. And especially for future generations, we must protect this world because many things are already changing. For example, many

of my friends in Tibet have told me that the climate in Tibet is changing. The snow is melting, and the rate of melting is increasing. Consequently, the water and climate are changing and growing disturbed.

We believe these changes affect not only that which is visible, such as mountains, trees, and so on, but also that which is invisible. In Tibet, every mountain has its own local deities that reside there. Ancient beliefs say that they can also be disturbed: if they are not happy or healthy, it will create disaster in the outside world.

I think this phenomenon is due to people becoming too greedy. They cut too many trees, doing all kinds of mining and so on—disturbing the trees, mountains, ground, water, and everything. These disturbances also affect the spirits and deities. Many people do not believe in local deities and the like. But I think there is definitely something distinct going on. Due to all these changes, we face many disasters like earthquakes, tsunamis, fires, and tornadoes; all kinds of problems arise. I believe these phenomena are all connected to one another.

So not only do we have to protect the environment, but we must also rejuvenate mother earth herself. For that, we must do rituals. There are many rituals such as burying treasure vases, bathing rituals, incense offerings, and so on. Doing these things will certainly bring very good effects. For example, Taiwan and

Japan are in an earthquake zone and have many earthquakes quite often, sometimes very severe ones. But lately, many Taiwanese Buddhist masters have performed offering rituals, fire rituals, bathing rituals, and treasure vase burials. Many people have told me that since then, there are fewer earthquakes and typhoons. Not everybody believes this, but I think that by trying from every angle and every side, conditions will definitely improve.

Again, protecting the environment is not something only a few individuals or a few organizations can accomplish. Everyone has responsibility because we are all human beings, and we have to think about future generations of human beings. For the sake of their well-being, we must act now. Otherwise, our future generations will have to live as though they are in a hungry ghost town. If they have to live in such an environment, it would be very sad. Therefore, while we are alive, we should make efforts to protect the environment. First, it is important to realize in the depth of our hearts how precious life is and how important it is to make this life healthier, happier, longer, and more sustainable.

In this way, I think it is very important to adopt the teachings of the Buddha, who possesses omniscient wisdom. The Buddha's wisdom is infinite. He sees all of the past, present, and future just like we see our own palms, very clearly, knowing each and every cause and effect. Therefore, the teachings he gave are great, wondrous, and most authentic. The teachings from the Buddha encourage us to work for the benefit of the

world and the environment. This will be of great benefit. Therefore, I sincerely hope everyone will make some effort to preserve and sustain the environment.

Notes:

(1) This monk lived during the time of the previous Buddha of this aeon, Kasyapa. He was reborn as the naga Elapatra who lived during the time of Buddha Shakyamuni.

-The End-



- His Holiness the Sakya Trichen is the 41st Sakya Patriarch of Sakya Order throne holder of the Khön Lineage. His Holiness is widely recognized as the emanation of Mañjuśrī, is a very well respected and accomplished great master. His Holiness is the teacher of many eminent and accomplished Buddhist masters, and is acknowledged as the “King of Vajrayana Masters”. His Holiness manifests profound wisdom and compassion, and his teachings benefit countless students all around the world.



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