

DHARMA RAIN: A STUDY IN BUDDHIST ENVIRONMENTALISM KARIDA BUDDHIST SANGHA

Learning and Sharing Ideas with Joe Swaffar, Steward of the Hall of Flowers, Karida Sangha.

Basis for Our Study: Kaza, Stephanie and Kraft, Kenneth, ed., Dharma Rain, Shambala Publications, 2000

Desired Outcomes of Our Study:

Clarify the meaning and the dimensions of the "environmental crisis" so often referred to in the world media.

Develop a Buddhist perspective on the relationship of human beings, other sentient creatures and their natural environment.

Familiarize yourself with actions taken by Buddhist practitioners around the world to nurture and protect the environment and other creatures.

Study how Buddhist practitioners have developed and used rituals and ceremonies to promote environmental awareness in themselves and others.

My Expectations for Our Exchange:

I am most interested in your perceptions, reactions and feelings about these wide-ranging and provocative readings. So, there are no "right" answers. Let us simply dialogue on the readings and see where it takes us.

This is not simply a textbook exercise, as I see it. I shall suggest activities that I hope will promote our understanding of and feelings for the readings. Let me know if any of the other exercises are difficult to accomplish or of uncertain relation to our stated purposes.

The study is not specifically intended as an exercise in learning about Buddhism, but rather in learning about Buddhists' concerns and responses to a range of environmental issues. So, an interest in those issues is imperative for the course, but I shall assume varying levels of interest in and familiarity with Buddhism on your part.

E-mail me your responses to the activities, no more than one part of the seven part table of contents at a time. Even smaller portions might be meaningful at the beginning of our exchange. This will allow me to be a more meaningful part of your study process. Your

Responses may be of any length you feel appropriate. (I will read whatever you write!) If you find a question of questionable relevance or otherwise tedious, let me know and we can revise it or simply agree that you can format your own query on that reading. I am most interested in us both learning from this process. That objective should be our guide throughout.

OBJECTIVE ONE: The Meaning and the Dimensions of the Environmental Crisis

As you begin to read Dharma Rain, I suggest that you go "on-line" as your time and resources allow getting a deeper feeling for the nature and extent of today's environmental concerns. Using "Google" as a search engine, the following representative terms and number of websites for those terms are listed below—(examples only)

"environment"—25,000,000 sites

"ecology"—2,630,000 sites

"conservation"—6,250,000 sites

"environmental organizations"—1,690,000 sites

"endangered species"—759,000 sites

"save the whales"—112,000 sites

"engaged Buddhism"—33,900 sites

After you have completed some sampling of such sites, consider the following Activities:

First, list three or so websites that you found most illuminating. (I will compile these over time for future participants to view.)

Second, summarize your feelings and perceptions about the gravity of the environmental crisis. In your mind, how important are these crises relative to other contemporary social and world problems?

Third, take a walk with nature, whether in a park or your own yard, and be aware of all of the signs of life that you encounter—the noises, colors, smells and movements. Enjoy.

OBJECTIVE TWO: A Buddhist Perspective on the Environment and Mankind's Relationship to It

Parts One and Two of the Dharma Rain text present how Buddhism addresses the environment. In Part One, pay particular attention to the readings entitled "Reverence for Life" and "The Nature of Nature". In Part Two, note Thich Nhat Hanh's powerful argument for "engaged Buddhism". (Another source for Thich Nhat Hanh's thinking on interdependence and his term "interbeing" is The Heart of Understanding, Parallax Press, 1988. Pages 3-5 are sheer poetry.)

After reading Parts One and Two, complete the following Activities:

First, in your mind, how is it that so many of the authors of these sections agree that Buddhism provides a powerful philosophical, moral and ethical basis for our

environmental concerns and actions? In your response, include references to such terms as "non-duality", "interbeing" and "Indra's Net".

Second, take a meaningful time interval, perhaps a meal, to be mindful of all the individuals, animals, plants and minerals that make our lives possible.

Third, purchase, pick or otherwise obtain some flowers; arrange them and meditate on them after reading the poem below. There is substantial Dharma in those flowers, is there not? Enjoy.

One Flower" by Haya Akegarasu

"I hold here a single violet. The Kegon Sutra, Lotus Sutra, Muryoju Sutra – none of them can compare to this single violet. The Koran, the Bible, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Analects of Confucius – none of them can compare to this single violet. Paintings by Raphael, sculpture by Rodin, brushpainting by Sesshu – none of these works of art on earth can compare to this violet.

Things made by a person's hands or words that come out of his mouth are always secondary as compared with the person himself. Something that is made cannot compare with something that is born. I like that man who said about the lilies of the field: 'King Solomon in all his glory is not clothed as one of them.' No empire or kingdom can compare to the single violet that is smiling in my hand."

It's not just the violet I'm talking about. Take a single Chinese milk-vetch or dandelion or any nameless weed from anywhere. I can't help it – such a precious form makes the tears come to my eyes." Shout of Buddha, translated by Gyoto Saito and Joan Sweany. (Teacher of Roger Irwin Sensei, Karida Sangha)

OBJECTIVE THREE: How Buddhists Have Responded to the Environmental Crisis

The readings in Part three describe the responses of Buddhist activists to the environmental degradation they observe in Asian countries familiar with the tenets of Buddhism. A growing global perspective and the movement west of Buddhism suggest a role for the entire world in addressing the ecology of the Far Eastern countries. After completion of these readings, complete the following Activities:

First, present two or more common threads of thought in the four readings by the Dalai Lama, P. Payatto and S. Sivaraksasa.

Second, briefly Summarize any three (3) of the six (6) readings under the heading "Buddhist Countries in Environmental Trouble". Then, respond to these statements:

Why might religious responses be such a powerful a force in these societies?

Use examples of how Buddhism specifically relates to the activists' responses, e.g., tree ordination and Dharma walking.

What is your reaction to "The Agony of Tibet"?

Third, contact the Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club or other environmental organization to identify environmentally sensitive sites in your area, or visit/volunteer at a homeless

shelter or the Humane Society so you may glimpse the plight of sentient beings in your own backyard. Share with me your feelings on the experience.

B. Part Four's Readings illustrate how Buddhist practices in the West have incorporated a responsibility for the environment of the world and all that it contains. The term "bodhicitta" refers to a path dictated by both wisdom and compassion. Mindfulness and loving kindness are, indeed, at the heart of Buddhism and Buddhist practice.

Read the 10 articles and then complete the following Activities:

Referring to Kapleau's reading, you may be familiar with the Buddhist tenet that the thought of something and that thing itself are one-in-the-same. Can you reconcile his belief of no difference between "being and doing" and relate it to his "foundations of activism"?

Based on your reading of "Zen Work", what is "work" and how does Fisher's perception of work relate to the cause of environmental activism?

List the "three things" that Joanna Macy enlists to overcome the six obstacles she believes hinder our actions to protect the earth. Then, explain how she believes mudras can be of assistance.

Define the following terms used in the reading "Practicing With Passion": Metta; Karuna; Mudita; and Upakkha. How does Titmuss relate these terms to environmental activism?

C. Trungpa's "Activist Perspective of the Shambala Warrior" is founded on what he terms the "logic of basic goodness". What do you think he means by that term and how does it relate to his belief that "whatever exists in our world is worth experiencing"?

"You can create a special space in your home. This can be your sacred place to practice in..." How does this quote from "Meeting the Dralas" relate one's own special place to concern for and actions in the world?

The organization, Buddhists Concerned for Animals, studied pigs for years in an attempt to have them recognized as sentient beings. Can you add one activity to the list of four used by the organization to promote pigs? What do you think of such a tactic?

In Volheimer's "Universal Chainsaw, Universal Forest", what is the meaning of "ecosattva"?

"The Rain Forest as Teacher" has a statement by author Seed that says, "a radical change in human consciousness is required if nature is to survive." What does the rain forest teach that is this "radical change"?

"Guarding the Earth" requires a "guardian eye", says Nisker and Gates. What is your understanding of such an eye and how does it come into being? Second, create your own special place-- a la Jeremy Hayward-- for your meditation or simply as a periodic refuge. (It is uncanny how we can condition ourselves to a state of calm with such a place!) After it is identified/created, describe it for me, please. Enjoy.

C. The readings in Part five present methods of integrating the world around us into Buddhist practices...

After you have read the 11 articles, complete the following Activities:

First, summarize any two (2) of the seven (7) in the "Introduction" portion and any one (1) of the four (4) in the "Choosing What to Eat" portion. Indicate the articles you select and indicate what was important about them.

Second, based on your summaries above, what changes will you consider in your practice and/or in your life?

Third, I recommend that you begin a meditation practice, if you do not already do so, or that you meditate more regularly, if you meditate but only periodically at present. Guidance and direction for your meditation practice may be found at the Hall of Meditation at the Karida Sangha website.

Try "just sitting".

D. Readings in Part Six

"A Buddhist philosopher works with the grain of history, respecting the actual situation: he has no grand designs, no inflexible ideologies, no particular set of instructions to peddle — only the principle of upaya, or "skillful means" that manifest wisdom in action."

This quote taken from page 354 of Dharma Rain is an excellent guide to the readings of this Part Six. The "difficulty moral terrain" that Buddhist environmentalists encounter in the West is the general focus of the four articles addressing the complexities of interdependence. Some speculate on the shape of future communities which incorporate Buddhist tenets. Do you see a "formidable eco-koan" suggested by these readings?

After reading Part Six, complete the following Activities:

First, answer any three (3) of the following questions based on the readings of Part Six.

a) Based on Timmerman's article, "Western Buddhism and the Global Crisis", what do you think he means by his statement—"If there is a basic premise of our global situation, it is that there is no escape from the world."?

b. Also based on the above article, do you agree or disagree with his assertion that the "essential task" for environmentalism today is to create a "new politics"? What is that new politics, in your mind?

c. For a political philosophy to be founded on "the pursuit of the Dharma rather than happiness..", Ophuls provides five (5) major tenets for pursuing the Dharma. List the five principles he presents.

d. In the Devall article on Deep Ecology, he asks and provides answers to some basic questions related to political activism. Take any one (1) of his seven (7) questions and evaluate his response and present your reaction to that same question.

What is the meaning of "engaged Buddhism" as discussed in the article entitled, "Nuclear Ecology and Engaged Buddhism" by Kraft? (Recall the 33,000 websites on engaged Buddhism, too.)

Why does Rita Gross—"Population, Consumption and the Environment"—paraphrase the Buddha's thought (page 414) that humanity requires the pursuit of the Middle Way? What does that mean to you?

How do you react to Roshi Aiken's statement that "the time has surely come when we speak out as Buddhists with firm views of harmony as the Tao." Page 424. Why has the time "surely come" now, in your mind?

Aiken's article contains numerous quotes from a book entitled Small is Beautiful. What are some manifestations of "large" that appear in modern societies that complicate, if not cause, the environmental crises?

Second, meditate on the fundamental issue raised by these readings in a U. S. society with a Constitution that requires the separation of church and state. In your mind, does this document seriously complicate the decisions of concerned citizens, Buddhist or not, to actively push the changes suggested by Aiken, Gross, Macy and Kraft?

Third, visit the website for the Arcosanti community (Camp Verde, AZ) to view one perspective on restructuring communities to fit in with the environment and to promote social interaction. (www.arcosanti.org)

OBJECTIVE FOUR: How Buddhists Worldwide Have Developed Ways of Incorporating Environmental Awareness into their Practices.

This final Part Seven provides rituals, chants and meditations on the environment and environmental issues. Hopefully, concluding with such positive and upbeat materials will lessen the negative impact of the preceding articles and provide you with some optimism about what we can do in the world.

After reading the poems and other materials, complete the following Activities

First, indicate which two (2) of rituals and chants you believe might be most helpful/meaningful to you. How do you see yourself incorporating them into your life?

Second, write a paragraph, poem, or song that expresses how you have been affected by the reading of Dharma Rain. How might you behave mindfully/differently in your interactions with others and the natural world after having read it?

Third, Tell me what you liked about this study and present any suggestions you have for changes, additions or deletions. When I receive this last section of the exercises, I will send you a certificate of completion for the course. Thank you in advance for your comments on improving the study.

A personal note: It has been my pleasure to interact with you as we have learned together how Buddhists have reacted to and are proposing we might behave in a world with so many cries for the Kuan Yin's assistance. I firmly believe, as expressed in these pages, that the tenets of Buddhism, such as interbeing, hold out the best hope for society's recognition of these problems and for the implementation of actions to resolve them that are both wise and compassionate. I hope that you too share my optimism.

Hridayam.