

THE DALAI LAMA ■ THE KARMAPA ■ THICH NHAT HANH
BHIKKHU BODHI ■ ROBERT AITKEN and many more



A Buddhist Response to

THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Edited by John Stanley, David R. Loy, and Gyurme Dorje

A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency

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Edited by John Stanley, Ph.D., David R. Loy, Ph.D.,
and Gyurme Dorje, Ph.D.

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Khor Yug (Environment)
Dedicated calligraphy by Thrangu Rinpoche

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Acknowledgments

This book presents the efforts and aspirations of eminent Buddhist teachers, and we are tremendously grateful to all of them. Its story began in late 2006, when Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche composed a special aspirational prayer, and encouraged us to prepare and publish a pan-Buddhist response to the threat of global warming, together with an accurate account of the relevant science and the solutions. Shortly afterward, we discussed the subject with Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche in Bodh Gaya. He composed an aspirational prayer, gave key guidance, and suggested the construction of a website as a first step.

In the course of 2007, Ringu Tulku Rinpoche generously provided interviews and he has continued to offer sterling support throughout the project. Interviews and encouragement were provided by Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, Tsikey Chokling Rinpoche, and Tsoknyi Rinpoche. Through the assistance of Jigme Tenzing Lama, Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche composed an aspirational prayer to protect the global environment. Through the good offices of Kunzang Lama of Darjeeling, a prayer was received from the revered Kyabje Chatral Rinpoche. Rinchen Ato arranged a key interview in Cambridge with her father, Ato Rinpoche. Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche discussed the subject with us in detail during his visit to Ireland. A profound aspirational prayer was received from the forty-first head of the Sakya tradition, Kyabje

Sakya Trizin. This and the other *monlams* were expertly translated by our co-editor, Gyurme Dorje.

On the Tibetan New Year, 2008, thanks to the essential help of Alexander Venegas, we launched a website: Ecological Buddhism, at www.ecobuddhism.org. It continues to attract significant attention from the international Buddhist community. Buddhist philosopher David Loy then joined us as a co-editor, opening up the project to the essential participation of Zen and other lineages. Important and moving contributions were received from senior American Zen master Robert Aitken Roshi, and from Joanna Macy, a respected leader in the Buddhist movement for peace, justice, and deep ecology. Eddie Stack capably assisted us to produce an intermediate, digitally published version of the book.

In November 2008, we met with the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala to brief him on the climate emergency, especially the rapid degradation of the great glaciers of the Tibetan plateau, upon which depend the major rivers and water supply of Asia. Through the assistance of Ringu Tulku, we were also able to discuss these issues with Gyalwang Karmapa. Meeting these two great spiritual leaders represented an auspicious turning point, at which this project entered upon a more universal stage. It is therefore most appropriate, as well as a great honor, that the Dalai Lama contributes the opening chapter of this book, while Gyalwang Karmapa's essay opens the section entitled "Asian Buddhist Perspectives." As it happens, this section also re-unites four great reincarnate lamas and lineage heads who, between 1959 and 1981, led Tibetan Buddhism into the world beyond the "Land of Snows"—the Dalai Lama, Gyalwang Karmapa, Sakya Trizin, and Dudjom Rinpoche.

We are delighted that other accomplished Western Buddhist teachers then offered their distinctive contributions to the book. In

our lifetime, transmission, dedication, scholarship, and practice have made Buddhism a truly global religion. This is fully evident in the originality and authenticity of essays we received from Bhikkhu Bodhi and Joseph Goldstein (representing the Theravada and Insight Meditation traditions), Taigen Dan Leighton, Susan Murphy, Alan Senauke, and Lin Jensen (representing the Zen tradition), and Matthieu Ricard (a Western teacher of Tibetan Buddhism).

It is wonderful that we are able to end this work with a characteristically eloquent essay by Thich Nhat Hanh. The book thereby begins and concludes with the views of two Buddhist leaders who have brought the universal essence of the Buddha's teachings right into the heart of the contemporary world.

We are grateful to Josh Bartok, Laura Cunningham, and Tony Lulek of Wisdom Publications who, understanding the spiritual and practical importance of a Buddhist response to the climate crisis, contributed much personal effort to this book.

The book is respectfully dedicated:

To the human generations to come,
To our companions, the kingdom of the animals of
land, sea, and air,
The great plant kingdom that sustains us all,
The single-celled ones and fungi that recycle and
transform,
All of you who have no voice,
With whom we are inextricably linked
In this net of exquisite energy, this living world.

John and Diane Stanley
Galway, Ireland

Introduction
David R. Loy and John Stanley

The Buddhadharma and the Planetary Crisis

If we continue abusing the Earth this way, there is no doubt that our civilization will be destroyed. This turnaround takes enlightenment, awakening. The Buddha attained individual awakening. Now we need a collective enlightenment to stop this course of destruction. Civilization is going to end if we continue to drown in the competition for power, fame, sex, and profit.

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*¹

Today we live in a time of great crisis, confronted by the gravest challenge that humanity has ever faced: the ecological consequences of our own collective karma. Scientists have established, beyond any reasonable doubt, that human activity is triggering environmental breakdown on a planetary scale. Global warming, in particular, is happening very much faster than previously predicted.

An increasing number of senior scientists concur with Thich Nhat Hanh that the survival of human civilization, perhaps even of the human species, is now at stake. We have reached a critical juncture in our biological and social evolution. What role might Buddhism play in our response to this predicament? Can the Buddhist traditions help us meet this challenge successfully? These urgent questions can no longer be evaded.

Our physical environment is changing at a rate that is faster than at any time in the past hundreds of millions of years, except for those rare cataclysmic events that have killed off most life on Earth.

—*Ken Caldeira, Stanford University*²

We do not like to think about this ecological crisis, any more than we like to think about our personal mortality. Both individually and collectively, humanity's main reaction has been denial. We repress what we know to be happening—but repression carries a high price. Haunted by vague dread, we become ever more obsessed with competition for profit, power, fame, and sex. Many psychologists believe that people in advanced industrial societies are psychically numbed as a result of being cut off from nature and are unable to feel the beauty of the world—or respond to its distress. The pervasive influence of advertising promises to fill this void, and we spend our time pursuing commodified substitutes that never satisfy. But you can never get enough of what you don't really want.

Escaping this attention trap requires conscious choices based on greater awareness of our true situation. As eco-philosopher and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy says, denial of what is happening is itself the greatest danger we face. Unfortunately, our collective tendency to denial has been strongly reinforced and manipulated by economic and political forces, whose well-financed advertising and public relations campaigns have succeeded in muddling the issue of climate change.

In June 2008, James Hansen, director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and one of the world's most respected climatologists, called for the chief executives of large fossil fuel

companies to be put on trial for crimes against humanity and nature. Twenty years ago Hansen's groundbreaking speech to the U.S. Congress warned about the grave dangers of global warming due to human use of carbon fuels. Since then the global climate crisis has become much worse: carbon gas emissions have been increasing radically. If present trends continue, carbon dioxide levels will double by mid-century. Radical steps need to be taken immediately if runaway warming is to be avoided. Not only must we reduce our greenhouse emissions, we need to find ways to remove a lot of carbon dioxide already in the atmosphere.

A dramatic example of our predicament is provided at the poles, where global warming is occurring most rapidly. For far longer than our species has lived on the Earth, the Arctic Ocean has been covered by an area of ice as large as Australia. Now, due to rising air and ocean temperatures, it has been melting rapidly. In 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) forecast that the Arctic might be free of summer sea ice by 2100. It is now apparent that it will disappear within five years. Without the albedo effect of that white ice reflecting the sun's rays, the Arctic ocean will absorb even more solar radiation. This will accelerate the warming of Greenland, whose massive glacial ice sheet alone will, if it melts fully, raise sea levels worldwide by 7 meters.

The Arctic is often cited as the canary in the coal mine for climate warming... and now the canary has died.

—Jay Zwally, *NASA glaciologist*²

Another area critically endangered by global warming is the Tibetan plateau. The mountain ranges that ring it are the source

for rivers that supply water to almost half the world's population: the Ganges, Indus, Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, Yangtze, and Yellow Rivers, among others. Mountain glaciers maintain those river systems by accumulating ice in the winter and melting slowly in the summer. Himalayan glaciers are receding faster than in any other part of the world, and may well disappear by 2035 or sooner, if the Earth keeps warming at the present rate.

Now the adverse effects on forests through over-population and the development of various chemical elements in the atmosphere have led to irregular rainfall and global warming. This global warming has brought changes in climate, including making perennial snow mountains melt, thereby adversely affecting not only human beings but also other living species. Older people say that these mountains were covered with thick snow when they were young and that the snows are getting sparser, which may be an indication of the end of the world. The harmful effect on the atmosphere brought about by emissions in industrialized countries is a very dangerous sign.

—*Dalai Lama XIV*³

Extreme weather events have quadrupled in frequency since the 1950s. The planetary hydrological cycle has been destabilized, producing bizarre flooding in some places and expanding desertification elsewhere. For the last thirty years, however, our corporations, politicians, and the media they largely control—an “unholy trinity”—have actively resisted the mounting scientific data on the causes and consequences of global warming. What has been the corporate and governmental response to the sudden

disappearance of Arctic ice? Oil companies are excited about the prospect of accessing new oilfields. Nation-states are jockeying to claim possession of new territories whose fossil fuel and mineral resources will soon be available for exploitation. This behavior reveals the gap between the economic and political systems we have and the ones we need. Ecologically, such reactions are no less crazy than the alcoholic who thinks that the solution to his hangover is another stiff drink in the morning.

Global warming is one of a number of ecological crises, yet it plays a major role in most of the others—for example, in the disappearance of many of the plant and animal species that share this Earth with us. Almost all scientists are agreed that the Earth is now experiencing a massive species extinction event, the sixth to have occurred in its geological history. Edward O. Wilson of Harvard University, one of the world's most respected biologists, is among those who predict that business-as-usual will drive up to one half of all species to extinction within this century. For a Buddhist, this may be the most sobering statistic of all. What does it mean for a bodhisattva, who vows to save all sentient beings, when most of them are being driven to extinction by our economic and technological activity?

The effectiveness of corporate misinformation about global warming suggests that the critical element of our predicament is lack of awareness—which brings us back to Buddhism. The Buddhist path is about awakening from our delusions. Today we need a collective awakening from collective delusions—including those skillfully manipulated by fossil fuel corporations at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars a year. The mainstream media—our collective nervous system, so to speak—are corporations whose primary concern is advertising revenue, rather than elucidating for

us what is happening to the Earth. We cannot simply rely upon current economic and political systems to solve the problem, because to a large extent they themselves are the problem.

This implies an increasingly urgent need for Buddhists to reflect upon our ecological predicament and bring to bear the resources of our great traditions. The environmental crisis is also a crisis for Buddhism, because Buddhism is the religion most directly concerned with the relationship between the alleviation of delusion and the alleviation of suffering—the *dukkha* (suffering) of all living beings, not just humans. This means that Buddhism has something distinctive to contribute at this crucial time when humanity needs to marshal the best of what it has learned over the course of its history.

The kind of consumer society we take for granted today is so toxic to the environment that continuing business-as-usual is a grave threat to our survival. To address our obsession with consumerism we need different perspectives that open up other possibilities. New technologies alone cannot save us without a new worldview, one that replaces our present emphasis on never-ending economic and technological growth with a focus on healing the relationship between our species and the Earth.

What, more precisely, does Buddhism have to contribute to this urgent conversation? Its traditional teachings offer no easy solution to our environmental crisis, but their familiar critique of greed, ill will, and the delusion of a separate self—the three poisons, which today function institutionally as well as personally—point us in the right direction. Moreover, Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence, interdependence, and non-self implies an insightful diagnosis of the roots of our quandary. To a large extent, our ecological situation today is a greater and more

fateful version of the perennial human predicament. Collectively as well as individually, we suffer from a sense of self that feels disconnected from other people, and from the Earth itself.

In contemporary terms, the personal sense of self is a psychological and social construct, without any self-existence or reality of its own. The basic problem with this self is its delusive sense of duality. The construction of a separate self inside alienates me from a supposedly external world outside that is different from me. What is special about the Buddhist perspective is its emphasis on the *dukkha* built into this situation. This feeling of separation is uncomfortable because a delusive, insubstantial self is inherently insecure. In response, we become obsessed with things that (we hope) will give us control over our situation, especially the competition for power, profit, sex, and fame. Ironically, these preoccupations usually reinforce our problematic sense of separation.

The Buddhist solution is not to get rid of the self, which cannot be done since there is no inherently existing self. As Thich Nhat Hanh puts it,

We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.

When I realize that “I” am what the whole world is doing, right here and now, then taking care of “others” becomes as natural and spontaneous as taking care of my own leg. This is the vital link between wisdom and compassion. My own well-being cannot be distinguished from the well-being of others.

Doesn't this account of our individual predicament correspond precisely to our ecological predicament today? The larger duality is between humanity and the rest of the biosphere, between our collective sense-of-self inside and the natural world believed

to be outside. Human civilization is a collective construction which induces a collective sense of separation from the natural world—a sense of alienation that causes *dukkha*. The parallel continues: our response to that alienation has been a collective obsession with securing or grounding ourselves technologically and economically. Ironically (again), no matter how much we consume or dominate nature, it can never be enough. The basic problem is not insufficient wealth or power, but the alienation we feel from the Earth. We cannot “return to nature” because we have never actually been able to leave it. We need to wake up and realize that the Earth is our mother as well as our home—and that in this case the umbilical cord binding us to her can never be severed. If the Earth becomes sick, we become sick. If the Earth dies, we die.

Such a realization implies much greater sensitivity to what is happening to the biosphere, and an acknowledgment of the limitations of human knowledge. We cannot “control” a world that is far more complex than our abilities to understand it. Robert Jensen has called for “the intellectual humility we will need if we are to survive the often toxic effects of our own cleverness.”⁴

Our present economic and technological relationships with the rest of the biosphere are unsustainable. We must be radical to be conservative—to conserve what we are currently destroying through exploitation. To survive and thrive through the rough transitions ahead, our lifestyles and expectations must be downsized. This involves new habits as well as new values. Here the traditional Buddhist emphasis on nonattachment and simplicity becomes very important in helping us rediscover and revalue the virtue of personal sacrifice.

We will need to recover a deep sense of community that has disappeared from many of our lives. This means abandoning a sense of ourselves as consumption machines, which the contemporary culture promotes, and deepening our notions of what it means to be humans in search of meaning.

—Robert Jensen⁴

To recognize the seriousness of our situation is to live with a profound sense of grief for what we have collectively done and continue to do. We must not close our eyes to a real possibility raised by recent scientific studies: the extinction of our own species. We are challenged by a new type of *dukkha* that previous generations of Buddhists never faced. Acknowledging this *dukkha* helps us to let go of the delusive competition that distracts us, to focus instead on the crucial work that needs to be done. This grief does not negate the joy of life, which becomes even more precious in light of our heightened awareness of its impermanence. Devotion to doing this great work together can also become a source of great joy. We need new kinds of bodhisattvas, who vow to save not only individual beings but also all the suffering species of a threatened biosphere.

We are challenged now as Buddhists to work together and learn from each other, in order to respond appropriately. By clarifying the essential Dharma of the Buddha, inherent in its diverse cultural forms, we can strengthen its core message for this pivotal time and global society. Although all religious institutions tend to be conservative, Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and insubstantiality implies an openness and receptivity to new possibilities that we certainly need now.

Most people still get their worldview from their religion, and this implies a special responsibility for religions today. If religious worldviews need to be updated in response to the climate emergency, different religions need to do a better job talking to each other and learning from each other. But how can they do that unless different groups within each religion communicate better? What an inspiring example Buddhism could provide, if the various Buddhist traditions were able to work out a joint response to this climate emergency. Given the failure of our economic and political systems, this is an opportunity for religions to rise to the challenge in a way that no other human institutions seem able to do. In this time of great need, the Earth calls out to us. If Buddhism does not help us hear its cries, or cannot help us respond to them, then perhaps Buddhism is not the religion that the world needs today.

Ah, World! It's in your lap we do our lives and deaths
 It's on you we play out our pleasures and pains.
 You are such a very old home of ours;
 We treasure and hold you dear forever.
 We wish to transform you into the pure realm of our
 dreams,
 Into an unprejudiced land where all creatures are equal.
 We wish to transform you into a loving, warm, gentle
 goddess.
 We wish so very firmly to embrace you.
 To that end, be the ground which sustains us all.
 Do not show us the storms of your nature's dark side,
 And we, too, will transform you, all your corners,
 Into fertile fields of peace and happiness.

May the harvest of joyfulness and freedom's million
sweet scents
Fulfill our limitless, infinite wishes, so we pray.

—*Gyalwang Karmapa XVII*⁵

Overview of the Book

The book begins and concludes with contributions (Parts I and VI) from the two most influential Buddhist teachers of our times: the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, and the Vietnamese master Thich Nhat Hanh. As their essays reveal, the climate emergency has become a paramount concern for both of them.

Part II provides a summary of the most recent scientific findings on the climate crisis, as well as related developments across the spectrum of environment and energy. The information is presented in a broad historical–evolutionary context, which incorporates a Buddhist perspective on how our present situation developed.

The following two sections form the heart of this collection. They offer a variety of Buddhist perspectives on the climate and sustainability crisis, by many well-known Asian (Part III) and Western (Part IV) Buddhist teachers. The first section opens with an essay by Gyalwang Karmapa and includes several aspirational prayers (monlam) by eminent Tibetan masters. Since this type of Buddhist meditative prayer may be less familiar outside Asia, Gyurme Dorje offers an explanatory preface to the section (footnotes to this section, and the translations, precede the general references on p. 279). A functional division “Asian Buddhist Perspectives” and “Western Buddhist Perspectives” was made to

structure the book. The intention here is not to create an artificial division in the one world of Buddhism, but to acknowledge how Buddhism has been transmitted in our time, and also to show how the new, global, Buddhist world is coming together over this crucial issue.

Steadily increasing awareness of the global ecological crisis and its implications means that these two parts could have been expanded indefinitely, with contributions from many other Buddhist figures. While we regret the absence of other Asian traditions in Part III, considerations of time and space placed limits on what could be included. We believe that it is important to publish this volume in 2009, the year when the United Nations Climate Conference in Copenhagen will decide a successor to the Kyoto treaty.

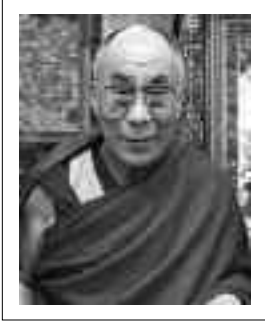
Part V reviews some major, collective responses we urgently need to implement if we are to manage and reverse the climate emergency. These solutions have intellectual, psychological, and social as well as technological dimensions. The emphasis is on scientific validity, proven efficacy, the absence of side-effects, and consistency with Buddhist values. In other words, here are solutions that work, that we can begin to actualize now. The section is not meant to be exhaustive, but to outline the direction of a rapid positive transformation of global society. We must all inform ourselves and play our part to assure a safe-climate future, for human civilization and for all the other beings who share this precious world with us.



JUST AS A MOTHER, even at the risk of her own life, protects her child, her only child, in the same way one should cultivate a measureless heart of love toward all beings. One should cultivate a measureless heart of love toward the whole world—above, below, and across—without constriction, enmity, or rivalry. Whether standing, walking, sitting, or lying down, as long as one is awake, one should maintain this mindfulness: they call this “divine living” in this world.

—*Suttanipata*

Part I
Mind, Heart, and Nature
The Fourteenth Dalai Lama



Dalai Lama XIV, Tenzin Gyatso (b. 1935), is the revered spiritual leader of the Tibetan people and former temporal ruler of Tibet. Born in Takster, in Amdo (northeastern Tibet), into a peasant family, he was recognized as the fourteenth Dalai Lama, the embodiment of compassion, at age 2. He was enthroned in Lhasa in 1940. In November 1950, he was obliged to assume full political power following the Chinese invasion of Tibet. When in 1959 a Tibetan national uprising spread to Lhasa and was on the verge of being crushed by the People's Liberation Army, he managed to escape into exile and sought political asylum in India—an event that captured the imagination of the world. Half a century later, he still resides in Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile. Awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama is widely regarded as an outstanding international statesman of the Gandhian persuasion—a spiritual mentor of unexcelled moral stature.

Universal Responsibility and the Climate Emergency

It is difficult to fully comprehend great environmental changes like global warming. We know that carbon dioxide levels are rising dangerously in the atmosphere leading to unprecedented increases in the average temperature of the planet. The Earth's great stores of ice—the Arctic, the Antarctic, and the Tibetan plateau—have begun to melt. Devastating sea level rises and severe water shortages could result this century. Human activity everywhere is hastening to destroy key elements of the natural ecosystems all living beings depend on. These threatening developments are drastic and shocking. It is hard to imagine all this actually happening in our lifetime, and in the lives of our children. We must deal with the prospect of global suffering and environmental degradation unlike anything in human history.

If we can begin to act with genuine compassion for all, we still have a window of opportunity to protect each other and our natural environment. This will be far easier than having to adapt to the severe and unimaginable environmental conditions projected for a “hothouse” climate. On close examination, the human mind, the human heart, and the human environment are inseparably linked together. We must recognize we have brought about a climate emergency in order to generate the understanding and higher purpose we need now. On this basis we can create a viable future—sustainable, lasting, peaceful co-existence.

Ignorance of interdependence has harmed not only the natural environment, but human society as well. We have misplaced much of our energy in self-centered material consumption, neglecting to foster the most basic human needs of love, kindness, and cooperation. This is very sad. We have to consider what we human beings really are. We are not machine-made objects. It is a mistake to seek fulfillment solely in external “development.”

This blue planet of ours is a delightful habitat. Its life is our life; its future is our future. The Earth, indeed, acts like a mother to us all. Like children, we are dependent on her. In the face of such global problems as the climate emergency, individual organizations and single nations are helpless. Unless we all work together, no solution can be found. Our Mother Earth is now teaching us a critical evolutionary lesson—a lesson in universal responsibility. On it depends the survival of millions of species, even our own.

The destruction of nature and natural resources results from ignorance, greed, and lack of respect for the Earth’s living things. Future human generations will inherit a vastly degraded planet if destruction of the natural environment continues at the present rate. Our ancestors viewed the Earth as rich and bountiful. They saw nature as inexhaustible. Now we know this is the case only if we care for it. It has become an urgent necessity to ethically re-examine what we have inherited, what we are responsible for, and what we will pass on to coming generations. We ourselves are the pivotal human generation.

Since the industrial revolution, the size of our population and power of our technology have grown to the point where they have a decisive impact on nature. To put it another way, until the latter half of the twentieth century, Mother Earth was able to

tolerate our sloppy house habits. However, our environmental recklessness has brought the planet to a stage where she can no longer accept our behavior in silence. The sheer size and frequency of environmental disasters—Atlantic hurricanes, wildfires, desertification, retreat of glaciers and Arctic sea ice—these can be seen as her response to our irresponsible behavior.

The air we breathe, the water we drink, the forests and oceans which sustain millions of different life forms, and the climate that governs our weather systems all transcend national boundaries. It is a sobering thought that every breath we now take contains more carbon dioxide than at any time for the past 650,000 years—long before the advent of the modern human species. No country, no matter how rich and powerful or how poor and weak, can afford to ignore global warming. It is time for the industrially developed nations to take rapid action to greatly reduce energy waste and to replace fossil fuels with renewable sources such as wind, solar, geothermal, and ocean power. Let us adopt a lifestyle that emphasizes contentment, because the cost to the planet and humanity of ever-increasing “standards of living” is simply too great.

Sometimes we entertain an incorrect belief that human beings can “control” nature with the help of technology. The emergency that climate change represents now proves otherwise: we must restore the balance of nature. If we ignore this, we may soon find that all living things on this planet—including human beings—are doomed.

We are part of nature. Ultimately nature will always be more powerful than us, despite all our knowledge, technology, and super-weapons. If the Earth’s average temperature increases by two to three degrees centigrade more than the pre-industrial

level, we will trigger a hostile climate breakdown. Morally, as beings of higher intelligence, we must care for this world. Its other inhabitants—members of the animal and plant kingdoms—do not have the means to save or protect it. It is our responsibility to undo the serious environmental degradation caused by thoughtless and inappropriate human behavior. We have polluted the world with toxic chemical and nuclear waste, and selfishly consumed many of its resources. Now we stand at the precipice of destroying the very climate that gave rise to human civilization.

Eminent scientists have said that global warming is as dangerous for our future as nuclear war. We have entered the uncharted territory of a global emergency, where “business as usual” cannot continue. We must take the initiative to repair and protect this world, ensuring a safe-climate future for all people and all species.

The Sheltering Tree of Interdependence

*A Buddhist Monk's Reflections on
Ecological Responsibility*

During the course of my extensive travels to countries across the world, rich and poor, east and west, I have seen people reveling in pleasure, and people suffering. The advancement of science and technology seems to have achieved little more than linear, numerical improvement; development often means little more than more mansions in more cities. As a result, the ecological balance—the very basis of our life on Earth—has been greatly affected.

On the other hand, in days gone by, the people of Tibet lived a happy life, untroubled by pollution, in natural conditions. Today, all over the world, including Tibet, ecological degradation is fast overtaking us. I am wholly convinced that, if all of us do not make a concerted effort with a sense of universal responsibility, we will see the progressive breakdown of the fragile ecosystems that support us, resulting in an irreversible and irrevocable degradation of our planet Earth.

The following stanzas, originally composed in November 1989, underline my deep concern, and call upon all concerned people to make continued efforts to reverse and remedy the degradation of our environment.

O Tathagata

Born of the Ikṣvaku lineage,^a

Peerless One who, seeing the all-pervasive nature

Of interdependence

Between the environment and sentient beings,

Samsara and Nirvana,

Moving and unmoving,

Teaches the world out of compassion,

Bestow your benevolence on us!

O Saviour

You who are called Avalokiteshvara,

Personifying the body of compassion

Of all buddhas,

We beseech you, enable our spirits to ripen,

Come to fruition, and observe reality

Devoid of illusion.

Our obdurate self-centeredness,
Ingrained in our minds
Since beginningless time,
Contaminates, defiles, and pollutes
The environment
Created by the common karma
Of all sentient beings.

Lakes and ponds have lost
Their clarity, their coolness.
The atmosphere is poisoned.
Nature's celestial canopy in the fiery firmament
Has burst asunder
And sentient beings suffer diseases,
Previously unknown.

Perennial snow-mountains, resplendent in their glory,
Bow down and melt into water.
The majestic oceans lose their ageless equilibrium
And inundate islands.

The dangers of fire, water, and wind are limitless.
Sweltering heat dries up our lush forests.
The world is lashed by unprecedented storms.
The oceans surrender their salt to the elements.

Though people do not lack for wealth,
They cannot afford to breathe clean air.
Rain and streams do not cleanse,
But remain inert and powerless.

Human beings
And countless beings
That inhabit water and land
Reel under the yoke of physical pain
Caused by malevolent diseases.
Their minds are dulled
By sloth, stupor, and ignorance.
The joys of the body and spirit
Are far, far away.

We needlessly pollute
The fair bosom of our Mother Earth,
Rip out her trees to feed our short-sighted greed,
Turning fertile land into sterile desert.

The interdependent nature
Of the external environment
And people's inward nature,
Described in the tantras,
Works on medicine and astronomy,
Has certainly been vindicated
By our present experience.

The Earth is home to living beings;
Equal and impartial to the moving and unmoving.
Thus spoke the Buddha in truthful voice
With the great Earth for witness.

As a noble being recognizes the kindness
Of a sentient mother

And seeks to repay that kindness,
So the Earth, the universal mother
Which nurtures all equally,
Should be regarded with affection and care.

Forsake wastage.
Do not pollute the clean, clear nature
Of the four elements,
Or destroy the well-being of people,
But absorb yourself in actions
That are beneficial to all.

Under a tree the great sage Buddha was born.
Under a tree he overcame passion
And obtained enlightenment.
Under two trees he passed into Nirvana.
Indeed, the Buddha held trees in great esteem.

The place in Amdo, where Manjusri's emanation,
Je Tsongkhapa's body, bloomed forth,
Is marked by a sandalwood tree,
Bearing a hundred thousand images of the Buddha.

Is it not well known
That some transcendental deities,
Eminent local deities and spirits,
Make their abodes in trees?

Flourishing trees clean the wind,
And help us breathe the sustaining air of life.

They please the eye and soothe the mind.
Their shade makes a welcome resting place.

In the Vinaya, the Buddha taught monks
To care for tender trees.
From this, we learn the virtue
Of planting and nurturing trees.

The Buddha forbade monks to cut
Or cause others to cut living plants,
To destroy seeds or defile fresh green grass.
Should not this inspire us
To love and protect our environment?

They say, in the celestial realms,
The trees emanate
The Buddha's blessings
And echo the sound
Of basic Buddhist doctrines,
Like impermanence.

It is trees that bring rain,
Trees that hold the essence of the soil.
Kalpataru, the wish-fulfilling tree,^b
Manifests on Earth
To serve all purposes.

In times gone by,
Our ancestors ate the fruits of trees,
Wore their leaves,

Discovered fire by rubbing sticks,
And sheltered amid the foliage of trees
When they encountered danger.

Even in this age of science and technology,
Trees provide us shelter,
The chairs we sit on,
The beds we lie on.
When the heart is ablaze
With the fire of anger,
Fuelled by conflict,
Trees bring refreshing, welcome coolness.

In the tree lie the roots
Of all life on Earth.
When it vanishes,
The land exemplified by the name
Of the rose-apple tree^c
Will remain no more than a dreary, desolate desert.

Nothing is dearer to the living than life.
Recognizing this, in the Vinaya rules,
The Buddha lays down prohibitions,
Such as the use of water containing living creatures.

In the remoteness of the Himalayas,
In days gone by, the land of Tibet
Observed a ban on hunting, on fishing,
And, during designated periods, even on building.
These traditions are noble,

For they preserve and cherish
The lives of humble, helpless, defenseless creatures.

Playing with the lives of beings,
Without sensitivity or hesitation,
Such as the pursuits of hunting or fishing for sport
Is an act of heedless, needless violence,
A violation of the solemn rights
Of all living beings.

Being attentive to the nature
Of interdependence of all creatures,
Both animate and inanimate,
We should never slacken in our efforts
To preserve and conserve the harmony of nature.

On a certain day, month, and year,
We should observe the ceremony
Of tree planting.
Thus, we will fulfill our responsibilities,
And serve our fellow beings,
Which not only brings us happiness,
But benefits all.

May the force of observing that which is right,
And abstinence from wrong practices and evil deeds,
Nourish and augment the prosperity of the world!
May it invigorate living beings and help them flourish!
May sylvan joy and pristine happiness
Ever increase, ever spread and encompass all that is!