

Earth Day as Earth Care Day

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So good day, my friends. Here we are, for I am. See, Celebration of Earth Day. In Buddhism, we don't call it Earth Day. We call it Earth Care Day, where the emphasis is not on simply appreciating, valuing, celebrating this earth that we live on, but also our role in caring for it. And part of the Buddhist emphasis is to emphasize human responsibility more than human rights.

Both are very important, but sometimes the idea of rights blinds people from our ability to respond, our capacity for sharing and building and creating a better world for everyone. And then what we're learning so much is how interconnected we all are, and that the welfare of others is clearly important for our own welfare, and our welfare is important for them. And how do we care for the world, the earth, and how do we care for ourselves so it's mutually supportive? This is one of the big tasks of our era, this generation of people we are living in, the remarkable times. We all know that it's no one unfair. Few people could have expected this even a few months ago.

The radical ways in which our societies, the whole globe, have been changed in unimaginable ways. And to some degree, it's been a global pause. How many things have slowed down, many things have stopped, and many people—not everyone for sure, but many people—are not doing many of the normal activities they would have done before. And it is in this global change that it's an opportune time to rethink how society is organized, how governments run, how we care for the earth, how we live and live our lives now. There's an opportunity now to change in ways that probably were unimaginable, that we could change even just a few months ago. I mean, what has happened now is, as I said, unimaginable. And it has happened.

People who were environmentalists wanted us to use fewer airplanes. Airplane traffic is down ninety percent, apparently useless. Fossil fuels—there's a little bit of a crisis in the oil industry because people are using a lot less oil and gas. Air has gotten cleaner, waters have gotten cleaner, animals are happier. Apparently, the anecdote is a story of the pandas. I heard that in a zoo where they're trying to mate the pandas for thirteen years, they finally got mated in the last few months, last month or so.

And now the theory is that when they're finally left alone—maybe pandas don't like to mate on display—and so the zoos are closed, and they're left alone and quieter, and they could mate. Some kind of a nice, kind of representative story. Or maybe the natural world is renewing itself without the ongoing onslaught of a human society and its insatiable consumption of goods. So Earth Day is a day to appreciate the natural world. And I was very surprised a couple of weeks into the sheltering in place to walk outside here in Redwood City, and breathe the air in a way that I've never breathed the air before. Here I think it was a combination of all kinds of factors that made it so fresh and so alive, and had little elements of the sea coming in as well.

And it wasn't just that there was much less car pollution and factory pollution, but certainly that contributed. Without that, I wouldn't have been able to feel this beautiful fresh air that felt like it was a medicine. It felt like it was healing and helpful and beautiful, wonderful to breathe. And I reflected how, you know, a hundred years ago, probably less for many people, this was an ordinary part of human life to have fresh air in most places in the world. And that, you know, in a sense it was a right that people had, a right that didn't have to be right, because the air was clean. And that's now representative to me of so much that we've lost.

We've lost so much. We've lost clean water, clean air. You know, some of the places with the most polluted air right now in the United States are places I wouldn't have imagined myself. Los Angeles still has a lot of pollution. But Fairbanks, Alaska and Chico, California, and some of that, especially for Fairbanks last year, had to do with fires. The particulate matter that came from fires elevated quite a bit, and this idea, you know, the air becoming clean and quiet—oh, I just love the quiet that I'm experiencing now.

Certainly no leaf blowers, or very few. I don't hear the regular airplanes flying over, which is really nice. And now there's not much traffic. And it's really something to experience the quiet, and also the space, the spaciousness, all the space. Looking back to my growing up, I grew up in different countries, in different circumstances, for sure. But I look back at that time, maybe an innocent time compared to now, and I remember there was much more space than what I experience in this area where there has been so much traffic and so many cars

and people.

But now the streets are empty. Sometimes I walk in the middle of the street just because I like all the open space around me, and, you know, there's no cars coming, so might as well enjoy the space, spaciousness. And the other day I was walking down from my house, down the hill in the middle of the road, and there was a little intersection, and there, with the intersection kind of sharing it with me, was a four-foot heron. Who could have imagined a four-foot heron, oh, you know, on the asphalt on an intersection? And now, you know, we looked at each other, and I stood there for a while, enjoying it, and it was a kind of a wonderful pleasure.

Then fifty years ago, when the first Earth Day happened—there have been fifty of these now, celebrations—and perhaps this is the most sober one, and sober, I think, in the sense that both meanings of the word sober: it means serious and solemn. It's a serious time we're in. It also means free of alcohol, to be sober and free of addiction. And now, certainly, our society is addicted to consumption. We can see it, you know, addicted to oil production, oil sales and oil usage because of the huge need for employment in the oil industry, for profits in the oil industry, for stockholders in oil industry. It just goes on and on, you know, in all this.

And this addiction to these things, you know, abated certainly with a lot of suffering, which has to be taken seriously and considered. But to have this sober time, this very serious time, very important time, crisis time that is giving us an unparalleled opportunity to rethink everything, including our relationship to the earth, to the natural world, the more-than-human world. The earth is not a passive entity. We can't just keep using it and exploiting it and polluting it, as if it's just a passive recipient that can absorb it all. As this *gāyā*, this earth lives in this amazing homeostasis, trying to come back and forth, it rebounds, it reacts, it responds to what is done to it, especially at the scale which humans can do it. Now that scale, which wasn't really that relevant long ago.

I wasn't here so long ago. There is a very odd teaching that I had never really understood in early Buddhism. There are just a few, one or two places in the texts where they make a reference—not even a teaching, it's just like a concept. It says that the earth, that human beings have the idea of six consciousnesses. There is eye consciousness, ear consciousness, taste, smell, body consciousness, tactile consciousness, and then the consciousness or awareness of the mind. So there's six consciousnesses. And the teaching or the concept is that the earth has only one consciousness, and so it doesn't explain what it is. But it's kind of intriguing. The idea of the earth, too, is conscious, and perhaps it's a tactile consciousness, and that's what is done to the earth physically, materially, physically. The earth responds

accordingly, and in some way or other, it's responsive.

It changes. Things die. Fall comes. Spring comes. And we say, it's said now repeatedly that because of how much human beings have pushed into the natural world, that it's having an impact that is affecting us back. All the fires in California that we've had in recent years, partly because we've moved into places that are fire zones, and without setting up proper safety measures or pushing too far into it, we have polluted waters. We have water crises in this country and certainly around the world—rivers that can no longer be drunk out of, rivers that are so polluted we can't even swim in them. In this country, some of the poorest people in the country, in Detroit, for example, Alabama, and in central California, there's a major water crisis. Either there is no water, or the water is very polluted, full of lead, full of all kinds of things. And so we put things into the water, pollute it, and it comes back.

We put chemicals into the soil—pesticides and herbicides—and it percolates down into the groundwater, and it comes back. There is this kind of rebound, this cycling, this returning that goes on. The earth, we know, is a phenomenal, complex ecosystem that constantly is shifting and moving into homeostasis. But if we contribute too much into that homeostasis, then we affect it. That rebounds. It changes things, and that change then can affect us.

Our health depends on having clean air. Our health depends on having clean water. Our health depends on having just the right balance of fire—not too much, not too little. Our health depends on having the land be harmonious, be intact, be a system, the earth system. That's something that then what grows on the land, something that lives, is in harmony and supportive. I grew up in a town. Part of my growing up was in a city in Italy called Trieste, the top of the Adriatic, and we would drive down the coast of Yugoslavia—back then Yugoslavia, the Adriatic coast—sometimes for a weekend, and to visit some of the islands there. Beautiful islands on that Yugoslavian coast, as now it's Croatia, Serbia. They were beautiful, but they are beautiful because they were so stark. They were barren for the most part of soil.

They had been filled with soil and forests, and the Romans came in and cut down the forests and grew grapes. And still, back in the nineteen sixties, you could go diving in some of the harbors, bays, and you could see all these Roman shards on the ground. Some people found whole vases that had been lost overboard from held wine, and it was over-farmed, and the soil washed away, and now it's stark. Much of the islands of Greece, the same thing, Mesopotamia. There are all these places in the world where human beings have stretched and overdone, overutilized the environment, and destroyed it, and destroyed the very things that were their subsistence, the very things that supported them. So humans have a long history of doing this. This is not a new phenomenon. It's just the scale now

is at a global level. And this coronavirus is an indication, a symptomatic or representative of the phenomenal ways in which we're interconnected, phenomenal way in which we influence others, affect each other, and connect each other for better or for worse. And with coronavirus counting for worse, and people are dying, people are trying to figure out how to stay alive, and having a tremendous damaging effect on the economy.

And now, you know, I think that the coronavirus easily could be the first of a number of crises that come. So rather than being Earth Day for Buddhists, it's Earth Day, and the idea that we're caring for the earth is the same for Buddhists as caring for ourselves. These two are intimately connected to each other, inseparable. The more we care for the earth, the more we care for ourselves and for the people we love. There was a remarkable study that was done a few years ago. They had the Olympics in Beijing—a Beijing is one of the most polluted cities in the world. But for the Olympics, for three months, they cut back on cars and factories, car driving and factories, so to clean up the air for the Olympics. And so for three months, and during that time in China, they did studies about the effect on health for, you know, this clean air. And one of the things they found is that during that time of clean air, on that time, in the wake of it, women who were pregnant stayed in gestation longer than the average had been for many years, and the babies were larger and heavier. In other words, there was a correlation between smog and how long, you know, birth, gestation rates for human beings.

That smog doesn't come, you know, cost free. It has a huge impact on our health, and we don't pay attention to it enough. As a society, we're willing to have pollution and smog. And the Bay Area goes up to Chico and goes down to Fresno, where it affects people. We have asthma. We're willing to have dirty water. We're willing to destroy pieces of land and have soil erosion that destroys it even more. Our society as a whole is willing to live with a lot, a lot of damage that is unhealthy for human beings. There is a trade-off. Is that a trade-off we want to live with?

Do we have human rights? Does everyone have a human right to health services, to clean air, to clean water? Is that a right that we should prioritize? And are there human responsibilities where we, as a society, as a community, provide that to each other, really guarantee that everyone has health care? Everyone has clean air, clean water, clean earth. And how do we do it? So this is where this cause, this global pause we're in. I very much hope that everyone is deeply emotionally, psychologically, intellectually, philosophically, politically influenced by what's happening right now, that we don't go back to how things were, that we begin some serious conversations, serious study, about how we can live differently, how we can do things differently. If we go back to what we had, you know, it's going to get awful. It's going

to get worse.

Climate change—the word climate change is just kind of a polite word to say that crisis after crisis is going to come, and even how much has changed now, which is kind of like an environmentalist's dream. How far we've come for these, you know, six weeks or something in terms of reduced consumption, reduced pollution, turns out it's not enough. And if that's not enough, you know, doing even more is going to disrupt the economy. And we don't want people out of work. So how do we form an economy, create an economy, robust, that's dynamic, that supports people, where people feel that they are used in good ways and being supported, that also takes care of the environmental health of our planet? This idea that we're in it together, and that it really requires us to think it out. It's something that I have put a lot of hope in, not from a leadership from the top down, especially at this era, but from the ground up, that we have to all not just contribute by recycling. That's just, it's almost ineffective the way it's going on, the recycling the last years, but something much more radical that we do. And I was struck by a figure I saw recently that a few things, you know, saw that half of the United States population lives and breathes dirty air. Half of them—amazing.

And the people who are poorest have the most bad air. The bad air that by the poor are the people who have the least voice. The earth has no voice for itself. It doesn't vote. Those who have the least amount of voice or are not heard are the people who suffer the most. How do we listen to the people who don't have a voice so that they count and are supported and they can be helped? And then there are, but there are all kinds of ground up things. There's a lot of people involved with solar power—probably not. The air should be seen as a solution, of the solution. But apparently in twenty sixteen there was a hundred million dollars in investment for solar power around the world.

That's pretty impressive. I'm impressed by the scale of money that's being used these days. I mean, why not use it wisely? Let's use it carefully. Let's be smart about this and really think out how we do this, because if we want to become free, we want freedom and liberty. There's no liberty—from a Buddhist point of view, there is no liberty without caring for others. If we're not interested in the welfare of others and the world, liberty is actually the opposite. From a Buddhist point of view, to have freedom to do whatever we want without being any interest in the consequence it has in the wider world is actually to be caught in the opposite of freedom. There's something about caring, about being interested, that comes out of freedom. That's part and parcel of that freedom.

If you want to know if you're free, see how much you care about others. I once asked a Zen teacher of mine, I said, "How do you know if someone's enlightened?" And his answer really,

for me, was quite powerful for me. So how would you know if someone's enlightened? He said, "If they help people." There are certainly people who help others who are not enlightened, so it's not the only criteria. But if that's the first criteria, how do you know that you're maturing in the *Dhamma* and practice? Sooner or later—and it can be later, because sometimes self-care is really, really important—there's certainly a time to go deep inside during your meditation time. But rather than caring for others, caring for the earth being an obligation, rather than being a responsibility that's a heavy weight, through freedom we discover an ability to respond. We have a response-ability, a response that can flow out of freedom, and that is peaceful, that is not weighed down by duty or responsibility, or weighed down by all the difficult emotions that come with, you know, being in the world.

There's a freedom. There's an ease. There's a peace that is possible, that might not be popular because we're supposed to care by worrying. We're supposed to care by being angry, but that's not necessary. But if you're free, if you discover it in the freedom of the heart, that freedom of the heart gives you an ability to respond from that peace, from that freedom, from that sense of well-being. As we discover spiritual well-being, emotional well-being, that's what is, that's responsive to the world. The earth is responsive to how we act, and our liberated heart responds to how the world is. So we care day to day to care for the world. We use our meditation practice, the Buddhist practice, to prepare ourselves for what's coming, and what we want to see is a well-prepared world. Crisis are coming. Do we prepare ourselves for it? How do we prepare ourselves for it spiritually, emotionally, psychologically? And how do we prepare for it as a society, as a global community? These are the tasks of our times. This is the challenge of our times. I suspect that this, the challenge of this, is as big or may be bigger than some of the major challenges of previous generations that I've known. Challenges of World War Two. Challenges of World War One. Challenges of the Depression, nineteen thirties. What's happening now is on that scale. And just as those times required so much of the people of that time, this is our time to be the generation that cares, to be the generation that makes a difference. May it be that Earth Care Day is every day for us. Thank you.