

A Buddhist Diagnosis of the Climate Crisis

By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

I. The Ecological Truth of Suffering: Future Perils, Creeping Crisis

- A. The four **incipient catastrophes** (our fate if effective action is not taken)
 - 1. Unbearable heat waves, large tracts of the Earth become uninhabitable; massive die-offs
 - 2. Floods, violent hurricanes, whole communities destroyed
 - 3. Ice sheets melt:¹ rising sea levels; island-nations, coastal land, cities lost
 - 4. Changes in oceans:² acidification, warmer temperatures, changing currents
- B. The four **vanishing foundations** of human civilization (current trends portending the approach of I-A)
 - 1. **Land** (soil erosion, droughts, desertification, creeping sea encroachment)³
 - 2. **Water shortages** (exhausted aquifers, vanishing glaciers, longer dry spells, water pollution)⁴
 - 3. **Food** (crop failures, lower grain yields,⁵ loss of fisheries, degradation of land by monocrops)
 - 4. **Social stability** (regional wars, ethnic-religious conflict, migration, tyranny and failed states)

II. The Ecological Truth of the Origin of Suffering: Roots of the Crisis

- A. The four **pervasive global threats** that cause I-B
 - 1. Population growth
 - 2. Poverty⁶
 - 3. Global warming
 - 4. Destruction of natural ecosystems and biodiversity loss
- B. The four **sustaining causes** of II-A
 - 1. Dependency on **fossil fuels** (for electricity, agriculture, transport, construction, heat, etc.)
 - 2. **Free-market economic system** that exalts short-term profits and other quick returns above long-term economic stability and allows corporate domination of political systems and mass media (the Triumvirate of Domination)
 - 3. Model of **industrial agriculture**:⁷ land clearance, high carbon emissions; consumption of meat⁸
 - 4. A reckless **consumerist culture** driven by debt
- C. The **four inner roots** of II-B (“mind is the cause of good and bad”)
 - 1. **Greed** — of corporations, financial institutions, politicians
 - 2. **Fear and anxiety** — in general population (over jobs, terrorism, economic security, surveillance)
 - 3. **Arrogance** — national, social, racial, and cultural (“American exceptionalism,” “Manifest Destiny,” natural entitlement; scorn for peoples, values, cultures of traditional world)
 - 4. **Ignorance** — “obfuscation and distraction” leading to apathy, skepticism, and denial (e.g., majority in Congress refuse to admit climate change is real; MS media don’t “connect the dots”); entertainment as distraction

the four
great
elements

earth

fire

water

air

The Critical Key to Decoding the System

The pathology of the whole system arises because monetary value — which is originally and by essence of instrumental value — is exalted to the position of ultimate value. All other domains of intrinsic life value — natural, human, and spiritual — are colonized, subjugated, and turned into instruments for maximizing monetary value.

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- D. The **deep meta-program** (source code) behind II-C (an ideological cancer)
 - 1. The **metaphysic** of personal atomism; objectification of others and of nature
 - 2. The **ethics**: rational behavior means seeking to maximize one's own private self-interest; commodification of nature and other people
 - 3. The **application** of the program: the quest for exponentially increasing returns on investment
 - 4. The **consequences**: the pursuit of infinite growth, colonization of all other domains of value by market value⁹
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III. The Ecological Truth of the Cessation of Suffering: Saving the Earth and Redeeming Human Civilization

To avoid I-A & B, we must promptly and seriously address II-A, B, C, D

IV. The Ecological Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to Save the Earth and Redeem Human Civilization

- A. Four **prerequisites** to a solution = *right view, right intentions, right speech*
 - 1. **Clearly discerning**, understanding, and explaining the dangers of escalating carbon emissions
 - 2. **Understanding and explaining** the benefits of a transformed economy, social order, and culture — esp. adoption of green technology (encourages enlightened self-interest)
 - 3. **Awakening** a sense of global human justice (impact of climate change on communities around the world, especially in the Global South)
 - 4. **Inspiring solidarity** based on universal love and compassion (enlightened altruism)
- B. Four steps to **eliminate obstructions** = *right action and right effort*
 - 1. **Break the grip of corporations on politicians**: by limiting the role of money through lobbying and election contributions; reject trade agreements that allow corporations to abrogate laws and regulations adopted by sovereign governments to protect health, social wellbeing, and natural environment
 - 2. **Break the grip of corporations over the media**: stricter regulation; end to media empires
 - 3. **Reform the political system**, support publicly financed elections, to give real opportunity to independents and third-party candidates
 - 4. **Establish greater power balance in international bodies** (e.g., UN) to give traditionalist countries a more prominent voice in decision-making

By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (continued)

the
ecological
noble
eightfold
path

right
view

right
intention

right
speech

right
action

right
livelihood

right
effort

right
mindfulness

right
concentration

Universal
Happiness
on
Earth

- C. Four **pragmatic solutions** = *right action, right livelihood, right effort*
1. **Mitigation:** Clean energy technologies (especially solar and wind power), with transfers to traditional world; better energy efficiency (retrofits, LED lights, electric cars); sustainable agriculture via agro-ecology¹⁰
 2. **Adaptation:** to rectify environmental damage — flood control, fire fighting, rescue missions
 3. **Resilience:** Prepare people to face change and loss; poverty alleviation, food security, health care, family planning (birth control), education especially of girls
 4. **Change:** From growth economy to steady-state economy; principle of sufficiency (contentment) over infinite growth and endless consumption
- D. Cultivating **spiritual mindfulness** = *right mindfulness and right concentration*
1. **Respecting Natural Value:** reverence for the earth (honoring nature, other species, restoring a sense of the sacredness of the cosmos)
 2. **Restoring Human Value:** affirmation of human dignity, celebration of human unity and equality; new models of governance rooted in intersubjective solidarity
 3. **Rediscovering Aesthetic and Intellectual Value:** more leisure, less work time, paid vacations
 4. **Seeking Ultimate Value:** cultivating higher consciousness beyond greed and fear

Actualizing the Goal

Realization of peace, happiness,
and prosperity on Earth.

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and NASA Visible Earth at <http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/>



Further Reading

Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed: [A User's Guide to the Crisis of Civilization](#)

Lester R. Brown: [Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity](#)

Lester R. Brown: [Plan B 4.0](#)

Lester R. Brown: [The Great Transition](#)

Richard Heinberg: [The End of Growth](#)

Naomi Klein: [This Changes Everything](#)

Bill McKibben: [Eaarth](#)

John McMurtry: [Value Wars: The Life Economy vs the Money Economy](#)

John McMurtry: [Winning the War of the World](#)
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/winning-the-war-of-the-world/5375649>

Oxfam: [Growing a Better Future \(Oxfam Report, 2011\)](#)
<http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/growing-a-better-future-010611-en.pdf>

Olivier de Schutter: [The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food](#)
http://www.srfood.org/images/stories/pdf/officialreports/20140310_finalreport_en.pdf

James Gustav Speth: [America the Possible](#)

James Gustav Speth: [The Bridge at the End of the World](#)

Websites

Climate Progress

Desmog Blog

Inside Climate News

Climate Central

Notes

- 1 A section of the West Antarctic Ice Sheet has declined to a point that's irreversible. Six glaciers in particular are rapidly melting into the Amundsen Sea. Scientists point to climate change and warmer ocean temperatures as causes. These glaciers already significantly contribute to sea level rise, but their collapse calls for an increase in global sea level predictions by an additional 12 to 15 feet. And while this change is estimated to occur anywhere from 200 to 1000 years, scientists say this scenario is inevitable.
- 2 Human induced climate change threatens coastal and marine ecosystems through (1) sea-level rise, (2) acidification, and (3) changes in weather patterns and water temperatures. Oceans and climate are inextricably linked and oceans play a fundamental role in mitigating climate change by serving as a major heat and carbon sink. The surface ocean currently absorbs about one-fourth of the CO₂ emitted to the atmosphere from human activities. Oceans also bear the brunt of climate change, as evidenced by growing acidification, sea level increase, and changes in temperature and currents, all of which in turn impact the health of marine species, ecosystems, and coastal communities. As concerns about climate change increase, the interrelationship between oceans and climate change must be recognized, understood, and incorporated into climate change policies.
- 3 In the 20th century soil erosion began to exceed new soil formation. Now nearly a third of world's cropland is losing topsoil. Erosion caused by wind, water, and animal grazing. Wind erosion leads to dust storms, followed by sand storms and desertification. Two giant dust bowls forming in areas that play vital role in crop production: Northwest China, due to animal grazing, and African Sahel, south of Sahara Desert, due to wind erosion. In Nigeria much productive land is turning into desert. The result is that farming communities are deprived of their livelihoods and the region loses its capacity to feed its population.
- 4 Seventy percent of the world's water use is for irrigation. But underground water is being depleted and rivers are running dry, portends of future food shortages. In aquifers, water tables are falling, deep wells going dry, due to population growth and over-pumping: in US Ogallala, in northern China, in Saudi Arabia. Glaciers in major mountain ranges have been diminishing over the past few decades. This could be the world's most massive threat to food production. In the Himalayas and Tibetan plateau glaciers provide the water for irrigating the growing regions that feed the populations of India, China, and Southeast Asia. Hindu Kush glaciers provide the water for irrigating the regions that feed the populations of Central Asia; Andes glaciers provide the water for irrigating the regions that feed the populations of the Andean countries; Rocky Mountain glaciers provide the water for the population of the southwest US and for agriculture in California.
- 5 As Earth's temperature rises above a certain point, photosynthesis occurs more sluggishly. Studies have shown that with each 1 degree Celsius rise above normal temperature, yields of rice, wheat, and corn drop by 10%; more recent US data suggests a 17% decline for corn and soy.
- 6 Reduction of poverty is difficult or impossible at current levels of population growth in many poor countries and regions. Mutual conditioning takes place between poverty and population size: poor people tend to have more children; this places more demand on limited resources, increasing poverty. To keep a lid on population growth, there is an urgent need for universal access to birth control. The world must strive for an average of two children per couple.
- 7 Olivier de Schutter, UN Rapporteur on the Right to Food, writes: "The most potentially devastating impacts of industrial modes of agricultural production stem from their contribution to increased greenhouse gas emissions. Field-level practices represent approximately 15% of total human-made GHG emissions In addition, the production of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides, ... transport, packaging and conservation of food result in an additional 15 to 17% of total man-made GHG emissions"—thus for a total of 30-32% of GHG emissions attributable to the industrial food system. ("The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food," p. 5.)
- 8 The grain-to-meat ratio indicates that vast amounts of grain that could be used to feed poor people are instead being fed to animals to produce meat for the more affluent. Thus it takes six pounds of grain to produce a pound of beef; at the low end, it takes two pounds of grain to produce a pound of chicken. Producing meat is also much more carbon intensive than growing grain. Beef production is responsible for seventeen times as much GHG emissions as wheat cultivations; chicken, at the low end, is responsible for five times as much. (See the Oxfam report, "Growing a Better Future," p. 15.) An FAO study estimated the livestock sector was responsible for 18% of GHG emissions – a larger share than transport. Once other factors are taken into account, livestock is found to be responsible for 51% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. (See "The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food," p. 6.).
- 9 The deep meta-program: (1) A metaphysics of personal atomism: Individuals are basically separate atomistic entities, whose basic needs are materialistic and egotistical, whose relations with others are competitive, aimed at domination through objectification of persons and of nature. (2) An ethic encouraging selfishness: People are driven to pursue their own interest; therefore rational behavior is to maximize one's material and monetary gains, to outdo others in the struggle to get ahead. (3) The application of the program: Money is used to generate ever increasing returns on investments: "multiplying growth of transnational money-sequences at ever higher velocities and volumes with no life limits tolerated" (John McMurty, "Winning the War of the World"). (4) The consequences: "Colonization" of all other domains of value by market values.
- 10 Agroecology refers to a range of agronomic techniques that reduce the use of external inputs and maximize resource efficiency. But agroecology also provides other social and health benefits: more diverse diets, thus improving nutrition; minimizes use of expensive inputs, thus improves the livelihoods of poorest farming households. Agroecological techniques can be disseminated on a large scale; they are found to yield harvests equal to or greater than those of industrial agriculture. (See "The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food," p. 9; Oxfam Report, "Growing a Better Future," pp. 52–57.)