

## A Task for Mindfulness: Facing Climate Change

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### **Abstract:**

This article presents a Buddhist perspective on the challenge posed by climate change, with particular emphasis on the role of mindfulness. Based on translated excerpts from parallel versions of early Buddhist texts extant in Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan, three possible reactions to climate change are correlated to three root defilements recognized in early Buddhist psychology: greed, anger, and delusion. Their recognition requires mindful monitoring, which is in turn based on the compassionate intention for the absence of any harm. The noble eightfold path sets the context for the collaboration of such compassionate intention with the cultivation of mindfulness. According to a simile of two acrobats, such cultivation of mindfulness provides the foundation by establishing the balance within oneself that then enables helping others.

### **Key words:**

Acrobat simile; climate change; compassion; contemplation of the mind; ecological destruction; eightfold path; empathy; mindfulness; right intention; root defilements; *satipaṭṭhāna*

### **Introduction**

On May 2, 2019, the parliament of the United Kingdom declared climate emergency. The undertaking of this action at the governmental level is an important step in taking seriously the current ecological and climatic crisis. The destruction of the environment and climate change have reached dimensions that, if unchecked, threaten the very survival of humanity on this planet. The possible future scenarios are truly devastating: oceans becoming acidic and fish dying, extinction of the majority of animal species, large areas of fertile land turning into deserts, massive depletion of drinking water supplies, crop failure, large scale migration and warfare in competition for dwindling resources. Such scenarios are so horrible that one would rather not think about them. Yet, avoiding to think about it is a factor contributing to the present crisis. A tool is required to counter such avoidance and also the tendency to succumb to “catastrophe fatigue,” which tends to prevent the taking of meaningful action. As noted by Tokar (2018, p. 182), “while some authors focus on the most dire future scenarios, hoping that people can be shocked into realizing the magnitude of changes that are necessary, this approach appears more likely to inspire despair and withdrawal than meaningful action.”

Here mindfulness can offer a much-needed solution. It can become a central tool to enable facing the horror with inner balance and, based on that, then taking the steps needed to transform what might well be the most serious challenge human beings have ever faced in their history. With

mindfulness this challenge could be transformed into an opportunity to increase global awareness and move to a level of interaction among human beings that gives precedence to the common welfare over individual profit in order to maintain the living conditions required for the survival of human civilization.

### **Moral Decline and the Environment**

Already the texts of early Buddhism, roughly reflecting the period between the fifth and third century BCE (Anālayo 2012), envisage the possibility of a serious deterioration of the ecological conditions on the earth. The relevant passage describes how poor political administration and a gradual moral decline among the population affect the environment, whose deteriorating conditions in turn lead to further loss of moral standards. The discourse is extant in Pāli (DN 26) and in two Chinese parallels (DĀ 6 and MĀ 70), which vary in the detail with which they describe the impact of moral decline on the environment. The passage translated below is based on extracts from one of the Chinese versions, which fit the current crisis particularly well. The relevant parts describe an

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unspecified time in the future when a low point in moral behavior and living conditions will be reached:

At that time one no longer hears in the world the names of ghee, rock honey, dark rock honey, or of any sweet delicacies. Rice seeds and rice seedlings turn into grass and weeds ... at that time many thorny bushes grow on this earth and there are many mosquitoes, gadflies, flies, fleas, snakes, vipers, wasps, centipedes, and poisonous worms ... on the surface of the earth there appear only clay stones, sand, and gravel ... at that time [human] beings are capable of being extremely evil and there is no filial piety towards parents, no respect for teachers and elders, no loyalty, and no righteousness. Those who are rebellious and without principles are esteemed ... on seeing one another, [human] beings constantly wish to kill one another. They are just like hunters on seeing a herd of deer. Then on this earth there are many ravines, deep gorges with rushing rivers. The earth is a wasteland. Human beings are scarce. People go about in fear. At that time fighting and plundering will manifest.

(DĀ 6: 是時世間酥油, 石蜜, 黑石蜜, 諸甘美味不復聞名, 粳糧, 禾稻變成草莠 ... 是時此地多生荊棘, 蚊, 虻, 蠅, 虱, 蛇, 虻, 蜂, 蛆, 毒蟲眾多 ... 唯有瓦石砂礫出於地上 ... 是時眾生能為極惡, 不孝父母, 不敬師長, 不忠, 不義. 反逆無道者更得尊敬 ... 眾生相見, 常欲相殺, 猶如獵師見於群鹿. 時此土地多有溝坑, 溪澗深谷. 土曠, 人希, 行人恐懼. 爾時當有刀兵劫起; adopting the variants 唯 instead of 遂, 反 instead of 返, 更 instead of 便, and 人 instead of 來).

The similarities between the above description and the potential scenarios resulting from climate change are striking. What was seen as a far distant future in the ancient Indian setting seems from the contemporary perspective to have come rather close in time, even imminent.

The other two parallels are considerably less detailed, so the excerpts translated above are specific only to this particular discourse. This makes its description peculiar to a single lineage of

textual transmission, rather than representing an “early Buddhist” consensus on the details of the repercussions to be expected of moral decline. For developing an early Buddhist perspective on a particular teaching, material common to different lineages of textual transmission needs to be identified. In the remainder of this article, most passages will be taken from several parallel versions, in order to ascertain to what degree a common message emerges through comparison.

Although differing in the level of detail provided by their depictions of the future moral and ecological decline, the above discourse and its two parallels do agree in the main aspects of their presentation. They also concord in indicating that a change for the better results from an improvement of the mental attitudes and moral conduct of the population. Such improvement on the personal level similarly affects the environment, which gradually recovers from its desolate condition.

In all three versions, the entire description functions as a parable and should therefore not be taken too literally. Nevertheless, the basic message this parable conveys is meant seriously and for this reason is quite appropriate to the present-day situation.

### **Ethics of the Mind**

The current ecological crisis has also received attention from contemporary Buddhist leaders. The Karmapa (2013, p. 87), for example, offered the following assessment:

one area crying out for attention is our treatment of our natural environment. Protecting the environment that we all rely on for our survival is an immediate way to care for all beings. We have seen that the global culture of consumerism that has been so devastating for our planet stems from an emotional force that creeps into human hearts—the force of greed. In that and other ways, human attitudes and feelings are causing large-scale destruction of our physical environment. Therefore our efforts to protect the environment are best effected by making changes to our attitudes.

The decline of moral behavior, described in the passage translated above, springs from the mind. Hence the canonical passage also points to a need to change mental attitudes. Of particular relevance here are three root defilements recognized in Buddhist thought: greed (or sensual lust), anger (or ill will), and delusion. These three are the roots of what is unwholesome, in the sense of being detrimental for oneself and others. Their relationship to unethical or unwholesome conduct emerges from the following passage, extant in Pāli and Chinese:

Whence do unwholesome conducts originate? Their origin is also stated: it should be answered that ‘their origination is in the mind.’ What mind? For the mind is manifold, variegated, and diverse. The mind that is with greed, with anger, or with delusion; unwholesome conducts originate from here.

(MN 78: *akusalā sīlā kiṃsamuṭṭhānā? samuṭṭhānam pi nesaṃ vuttam: cittasamuṭṭhānā ti ’ssa vacanīyam. katamaṃ cittam? cittam pi hi bahu anekavidham nānappakāraṃ sacittam sarāgaṃ sadosaṃ samohaṃ, itosamuṭṭhānā akusalā sīlā*).

Whence do unwholesome conducts arise? I declare the place from which they arise. One

should know that they arise from the mind. What kind of mind? If the mind is with

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sensual lust, with ill will, or with delusion, one should know that unwholesome conducts arise from this kind of mind.

(MĀ 179: 不善戒從何而生? 我說彼所從生, 當知從心生. 云何為心? 若心有欲, 有恚, 有癡, 當知不善戒從是心生).

On adopting the perspective provided in these two passages, the current climate crisis could be considered from the viewpoint of the three root defilements. These are the conditions for unwholesome conduct and in the long run for a deterioration of the environment in the way depicted in the passage translated earlier.

Viewing the ecological challenge in terms of the states of mind that are responsible for it can help to keep a focus on the main issues at hand and avoid generating personal animosity toward certain individuals in political and economic leadership positions. It also serves as a reminder that these states are common to human beings, which can aid in creating a sense of commonality and thereby engendering precisely the type of mental attitude needed to tackle the crisis.

### **Mindfulness of States of Mind**

The three root defilements are objects for contemplation of the mind, the third establishment of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*) in the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels (Anālayo 2013). The task in all three versions is to recognize when greed, anger, or delusion are present and also when they are absent.

Only when the mind is at least temporarily free from these three detrimental mental conditions can its potential to understand and find appropriate responses to any problem be fully tapped. Hence, be it in formal meditation or when acting in response to the ecological crisis, mindful monitoring of the mind to detect the potential impact of any of these three root defilements remains crucial. Such monitoring or inspecting of states of mind, either one's own or those of others, finds illustration in looking into a bowl of water to see the reflection of one's face. This illustration, found in a Pāli discourse and two parallels extant in Sanskrit and Chinese, proceeds as follows.

Great king, it is like a woman or a man who are young, youthful, fond of adornment, who were to examine the reflection of their face in a clear bright mirror or in a bowl with clear water. Being with a spot, they would know they are 'with a spot,' and being without a spot, they would know they are 'without a spot.'

(DN 2: *seyyathā pi, mahārāja, itthī vā puriso vā daharo vā yuvā maṇḍanajātiko ādāse vā parisuddhe pariyodāte acche vā udakapatte sakaṃ mukhanimittaṃ paccavekkhamāno sakaṇikaṃ vā sakaṇikan ti jāneyya, akaṇikaṃ vā akaṇikan ti jāneyya*).

It is like a clear-sighted person who has taken hold of a round mirror that is very clear and were to examine the image of one's own face.

(Gnoli 1978, p. 248: *tadyathā cakṣumān puruṣaḥ supariśuddham ādarśamaṇḍalam grhītvā saṃmukhanimittam evā pratyavekṣate*).

It is like a person who, by employing clear water to look at oneself, will detect with certainty what is attractive or repellent.

(DĀ 27: 譬如有人以清水自照, 好惡必察; the text has been supplemented from DĀ 20, as DĀ 27 abbreviates. The entire section in which this simile occurs is not found in another parallel, EĀ 43.7, and yet another parallel, T 22, has instead a different simile that describes someone on a high building who watches people below).

Similar to holding up a mirror to see one's face, with mindfulness established it becomes possible to monitor the condition of the mind and recognize whether one of the three root defilements is present or absent. This mirroring potential of mindfulness practice is crucial, as it provides the indispensable precondition for being able to do something about the presence of greed, anger, or delusion. As long as their presence remains unnoticed, little can be done to emerge from them. One is at their mercy, in the sense of acting and reacting in ways that, instead of reflecting the actual demands of the situation at hand, result from the distorting influence of these defilements.

In the *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels, contemplation of the mind starts off by directing mindfulness to one's own mental condition and then turns to that of others. In line with this procedure, training in mindfulness could begin by discerning the presence or absence of the three root defilements in one's own mind, as a foundational training for then discerning their presence in others. Already this foundational training can be directly related to the current crisis, in the sense that the challenges it poses can lead to three unhelpful reactions: denial, anger, or resignation. These can conveniently be correlated with the three root defilements of greed, anger, and delusion.

## **Denial**

When faced with information about ecological destruction and climate change with their potential repercussions, it is a natural reaction of the untrained mind to want to avoid and forget about it, in order to be able to continue enjoying the pleasures of this world without having to worry too much about the consequences. In this way denial, which can be considered an expression of the root defilement of greed, prevents reacting appropriately to what is taking place. The forces of

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greed are strong enough to have made denial an intentionally cultivated strategy by some leading politicians and high-level executives of companies who would be affected by actions taken to counter the crisis. A common mode of such denial is to pretend that the information we have is not sufficiently well established to be taken seriously.

Yet, regular reports by international committees of scientists abound, summarizing our current level of knowledge. There can be no doubt that the situation is serious and that it demands swift

action. In fact, it is in principle enough to know that a threat is probable; there is no need to be absolutely certain. This is part of how human perception works, which involves “perceptual prediction” (Anālayo 2019). On suddenly seeing a dangerous animal in front, one will react on the spot. One cannot afford to wait until all possible information about the animal has been gathered and one is completely sure that the animal is indeed intent on attacking, since by then it may be too late. Similarly, faced by the probable outcomes of the current crisis, it is time to act now, before it is too late.

Yet, the tendency to want to forget about it can exert a strong influence that is hardly noticed, unless mindfulness is established. From this viewpoint, the global crisis can become an opportunity for regular mindful scrutiny of the mind in order to detect the potential influence of the root defilement of greed, however subtly it might manifest, in fostering denial.

### Anger

Another type of reaction to the crisis is anger. As just mentioned, some leading politicians and high-level executives are actively working to prevent appropriate changes from taking place. Yet, getting angry with them is not a solution. For one, to some degree almost all human beings contribute to the problem. Let the one who has never driven a car, taken a flight, eaten food imported from abroad, worn clothing manufactured in a distant country, etc., throw the first stone.

Besides, at least from an early Buddhist perspective, even righteous anger is a defilement of the mind. There is definitely a place for stern and strong action, but this should better come with inner balance rather than aversion. Inner balance is crucial for any possible activity to achieve maximum benefit. From the viewpoint of mindfulness practice, getting angry equals succumbing to one of the root defilements and thereby to what has contributed to and sustains this very crisis. Anger is a problem and not a solution. A solution can only be found when the mind is not clouded by defilements and therefore able to know and see things accurately.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta* and its two Chinese *Āgama* parallels list anger not only as a state of mind under the third establishment of mindfulness, but also as the second in a set of five “hindrances,” called such because they *hinder* the proper functioning of the mind. A set of similes describes the effect of each of these five hindrances on the mind. Extant in a Pāli discourse and a parallel in Sanskrit, the set of similes involves a bowl of water used to look at the reflection of one’s own mind. Being angry compares to the water being heated up so that it is boiling:

Monastics, it is like a bowl of water that is heated by fire, boiling and bubbling up. Then a clear-sighted person who were to examine the reflection of one’s own face would not know or see it as it really is.

(SN 46.55: *seyyathāpi, bhikkhave, udapatto agginā santatto ukkaṭṭhito usmudakajāto, tatha cakkhumā puriso sakaṃ mukhanimittaṃ paccavekkhamāno yathābhūtaṃ na jāneyya na passeyya*).

It is like a bowl of water that is heated by fire, greatly heated, boiling and bubbling up. Then a clear-sighted person who were to examine the reflection of one’s own face would not see it

[properly].

(Tripāthī 1995, p. 129: *(tadyathā udakapātri) agninā taptā samtaptā kvathitā utsadakajātā syāt, tatra cakṣuṣmān puruṣaḥ svakaṃ mukhanimittaṃ pratyavekṣamāṇo na paśyēt*).

The simile employed here relates to the other one translated earlier, which compared contemplation of the mind to looking into a bowl of water or a mirror. The present example complements this by indicating in what way an angry condition of the mind can be recognized: one feels heated up and ready to boil over.

The inability to see one's own face when the water is boiling illustrates how a mind in the grip of anger is unable to see accurately what is for one's own benefit and for the benefit of others. The force of anger distorts perceptual appraisal of the situation and does not allow a balanced and correct discernment. Such a condition of the mind needs to be recognized with mindfulness; it calls for refraining from taking action until the mind has cooled down, as only then does it become possible to see things in proper perspective. In sum, the current crisis is best handled with a mind that is not boiling in anger.

### **Resignation**

The third reaction to the crisis to be discussed here is resignation. This can be related to the root defilement of delusion. It manifests in a sense of feeling overwhelmed and helpless. As a single individual, it just seems so hopeless to try to effect any change. What is the point of even trying? Yet, society is made up of individuals and does not exist apart from them. The question is not whether a single individual can bring about all required change alone. The question is rather whether every single individual can contribute to the required change. This is

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indeed the case. The step taken by the UK parliament is ample proof for that. It comes in response to the lobbying of ecological activists and thereby to acts undertaken by individuals.

By way of countering the impact of the type of delusion that leads to resignation, it can be helpful to approach the situation from the viewpoint of the early Buddhist conception of conditionality. In a nutshell, this teaching implies that anything experienced, bodily or mental, is the product of various causes and conditions. Such a vision of causality can be employed to counter the assumption of mono-causality, be it held consciously or unconsciously, in the sense that just a single cause is held responsible for a particular situation or problem. Such an assumption can easily lead to searching for a single culprit that can serve as the scapegoat for one's feelings of negativity. It can also result in overestimating one's own personal responsibility and as a result falling prey to feelings of helplessness in view of the magnitude of the problem. Viewing oneself and others instead as co-participants in a large network of conditions can help to counterbalance such tendencies.

From this viewpoint, then, even small steps taken in daily life are significant. They are significant not because on their own they will change the whole world. They are significant because they contribute to a network of causes and conditions that can change the whole world.

Divested from the pressure of having to yield immediate and tangible results, such small steps can become an embodiment of mindfulness practice. Be it living more simply, shifting to a vegetarian or vegan diet, recycling, or forgoing unnecessary travel by car or plane, these deeds become meaningful not because the world will change if one individual acts in this way. They become meaningful because they embody awareness of the global crisis and express it on the individual level as a form of training in mindfulness and ethical responsibility.

Of course, the more who act in this way the greater the effects will be. This ties in with the internal and external dimensions of mindfulness, where the internal builds the foundation for the external. It is precisely through embodying what needs to be done on the personal level that the outside world can be positively affected. In this way, mindfulness can become a way to protect both oneself and others, a topic to be taken up again below in relation to a simile describing the cooperation of two acrobats.

Just as mindfulness enables being with physical pain without either switching off or else resisting (Anālayo 2016), similarly mindfulness can ease the mental pain of facing the horror of what human beings are doing to themselves. By training oneself to face the crisis with mindful balance, one will be able to embody mindfulness in an authentic way and share this attitude with others, inspiring them to cultivate the same. Equipped with this attitude, any ecological activism to confront the crisis, which can manifest in various ways (Cassegård et al. 2017), has the greatest potential for success.

### **Compassion**

The Karmapa (2013, p. 92) also stated that “the single most important factor that will move us to act to protect the world is compassion.” Compassion is indeed the needed quality to inform one’s attitude when facing the current crisis. In early Buddhist thought, a prominent dimension of compassion is the wish for the absence of any harm (Anālayo 2015). First and foremost, this implies the absence of cruelty in one’s own mind and the avoidance of doing anything harmful to others. But it also covers the wish for others to be free from harm that has not been inflicted by oneself.

The attitude relevant here can conveniently be exemplified with a passage, found in a Pāli discourse and a parallel extant in Chinese, which describes how to avoid resentment towards someone who behaves in thoroughly unwholesome ways. The passage ties in with the observation above that, from an early Buddhist perspective, anger is not an appropriate response. This holds even when another is behaving in ways that are entirely irresponsible and reprehensible.

The two parallels first recommend that one should avoid resentment toward another who is acting in unwholesome and bad ways by trying to find something good in this person and paying attention to that. However, if the person is entirely evil and nothing good at all can be found, then such a person provides an excellent opportunity for the cultivation of compassion. This is the appropriate response here.

Besides making the important point that the unwholesome and bad conduct of others is no



excuse for getting angry, the actual description of the attitude toward such a person provides helpful information about the nature of compassion. The two versions illustrate the arousing of compassion in the following way:

Friends, it is like a person travelling along a main road who is sick, afflicted, seriously ill. The last village is far behind and the next village is far ahead. He would not get appropriate food, he would not get appropriate medicine, he would not get an appropriate nurse, and he would not get someone guiding him to the vicinity of a village. Another person travelling along the main road were to see him and were to arouse compassion, were to arouse sympathy, and were to arouse empathy for this person, [thinking]: ‘May this person get appropriate food, get appropriate medicine, get an appropriate nurse, and get someone guiding him to the vicinity of a village! Why is that? May this person not encounter misfortune and ruin right here!’

[p. 1931]

(AN 5.162: *seyyathā pi, āvuso, puriso ābādhiko dukkhito bāḷhagilāno addhānamaggappaṭipanno. tassa purato pi ’ssa dūre gāmo pacchato pi ’ssa dūre gāmo. so na labheyya sappāyāni bhojanāni, na labheyya sappāyāni bhesajjāni, na labheyya paṭirūpaṃ upaṭṭhākaṃ, na labheyya gāmantanāyakaṃ. tam enaṃ aññataro puriso passeyya addhānamaggappaṭipanno. so tasmim purise kāruññaṃ yeva upaṭṭhāpeyya, anuddayaṃ yeva upaṭṭhāpeyya, anukampaṃ yeva upaṭṭhāpeyya: aho vatāyaṃ puriso labheyya sappāyāni bhojanāni, labheyya sappāyāni bhesajjāni, labheyya paṭirūpaṃ upaṭṭhākaṃ, labheyya gāmantanāyakaṃ. taṃ kissa hetu? māyaṃ puriso idh’eva anayavyasanaṃ āpajjeyya).*

It is like a person who is on an extended journey along a long road. Becoming sick halfway he suffers extremely and is exhausted. He is alone and without a companion. The village behind is far away and he has not yet reached the village ahead. Suppose a person comes and, standing to one side, sees that this traveler, who is on an extended journey along a long road, has become sick halfway, suffers extremely, and is exhausted. He is alone and without a companion. The village behind is far away and he has not yet reached the village ahead. [The second person thinks:] ‘If he were to get an attendant, emerge from being in the far away wilderness and reach a village or town, and were to be given excellent medicine and be fed with nourishing and delicious food, be well cared for, then in this way this person’s sickness would certainly subside.’ That is, that person has extremely compassionate, sympathetic, and kind thoughts in the mind towards this sick person.

(MĀ 25: 猶如有人遠涉長路, 中道得病, 極困委頓, 獨無伴侶, 後村轉遠, 而前村未至. 若有人來住一面, 見此行人遠涉長路, 中道得病, 極困委頓, 獨無伴侶, 後村轉遠, 而前村未至, 彼若得侍人, 從迥野中, 將至村邑, 與妙湯藥, 舖養美食, 好瞻視者, 如是此人病必得差. 謂彼人於此病人, 極有哀愍慈念之心).

Both versions do not proceed beyond the point of depicting the mental attitude in response to seeing the sick traveler. This is unsurprising, as the episode is meant to illustrate the appropriate attitude toward someone thoroughly bad and thereby counter potential resentment; it is not meant to describe a course of action to be taken. Had the story been employed in a different context, it would quite probably have continued by showing the compassionate person doing whatever possible to ensure that the sick traveler indeed receives the type of assistance needed. In other

words, the fact that the two versions do not report actual assistance rendered to the afflicted person is simply due to the purpose for which the description is being employed.

From the viewpoint of the close relationship between compassion and the wish for the absence of harm, it is significant that the harm in this case has not been inflicted by someone else on the sick traveler. Instead, it is simply due to unfortunate circumstances.

Another point of interest in the above description is that compassion finds expression in the witnessing person's wish for the sick person to be in some way relieved from misfortune. In other words, although the vision of the ailing traveler's distress forms the starting point, the actual compassion takes as its main object the idea of the sick person being helped and finding relief. The task is not to keep dwelling on the actual suffering, imagining in detail how it must feel to be sick and helpless in this way. Instead of dwelling on the pain of the other, the cultivation of compassion takes as its object the potential alleviation of the pain.

A helpful distinction in this respect can be found in a later text, a practice manual of the Theravāda tradition called the Path of Purification, *Visuddhimagga*. The passage in question presents a “near enemy” of compassion (Vism 319), in the sense of a quality that, in spite of some superficial similarity, turns out on closer inspection to be inimical to genuine compassion: sadness or grief (*domanassa*). This needs to be avoided.

The important distinction made in this way is not always evident in later Buddhist traditions, as with some of these a tendency developed to conceptualize compassion as a form of taking on oneself the pain of others (Anālayo 2017). Although certainly a meaningful approach within its particular doctrinal and historical setting, such notions differ from the early Buddhist conception of compassion.

When applied to the current crisis, the compassionate intent to avoid and minimize harm need not result in sadness and grief. In view of the magnitude of the problem, the inertia of major parts of the human population, and the existence of antagonistic forces in leadership positions, sadness and grief can easily arise. This is where mindfulness can be of crucial support, by helping to monitor and adjust in such a way that inner balance can be maintained.

Remaining free from grief and sadness is in fact a key element in the cultivation of the establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna/smṛtyupasthāna*). In relation to each of the four domains of such practice, which cover the body, feeling tones, mental states, and dharmas, the following qualities should be cultivated:

Being diligent, clearly knowing, and mindful, removing greedy desire and sadness in the world.

(SN 52.6: *ātāpī sampajāno satimā, vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ*).

Being with diligent effort, right mindfulness, and right knowing, overcoming greed and sadness in the world.

(SĀ 537: 精勤方便, 正念, 正知, 調伏世間貪憂).

[p. 1932]

In this way, it is a key aspect of mindfulness practice to ensure that one stays free of grief or sadness. This relies on the potential of mindfulness to be with what is, acknowledging it without either turning away or reacting to it.

### The Eightfold Path

The need for inner balance when facing the current crisis requires a skillful interrelation between compassion and mindfulness. How to achieve this can best be appreciated from the viewpoint of the noble eightfold path, a central teaching in early Buddhism. This eightfold path presents in a nutshell the different dimensions or activities whose collaborative cultivation leads to awakening. According to a discourse extant in Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan, the eight factors of this path build on each other in the following way:

Monastics, in one of right view, right intention comes into being; in one of right intention, right speech comes into being; in one of right speech, right action comes into being; in one of right action, right livelihood comes into being; in one of right livelihood, right effort comes into being; in one of right effort, right mindfulness comes into being; in one of right mindfulness, right concentration comes into being.

(MN 117: *sammādiṭṭhissa, bhikkhave, sammāsaṅkappo pahoti, sammāsaṅkappassa sammāvācā pahoti, sammāvācassa sammākammanto pahoti, sammākammantassa sammā-ājīvo pahoti, sammā-ājīvassa sammāvāyāmo pahoti, sammāvāyāmassa sammāsati pahoti, sammāsatissa sammāsamādhi pahoti*).

Right view gives rise to right intention, right intention gives rise to right speech, right speech gives rise to right action, right action gives rise to right livelihood, right livelihood gives rise to right effort, right effort gives rise to right mindfulness, and right mindfulness gives rise to right concentration.

(MĀ 189: 正見生正志, 正志生正語, 正語生正業, 正業生正命, 正命生正方便, 正方便生正念, 正念生正定).

Here from right view, right intention arises, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration arises.

(Up 6080: *de la yang dag pa'i lta ba las yan dag pa'i rtog pa skye bar 'gyur zhing, yang dag pa'i ngag dang, yang dag pa'i las kyi mtha' dang, yang dag pa'i 'tsho ba dang, yang dag pa'i rtsol ba dang, yang dag pa'i dran pa dang, yang dag pa'i ting nge 'dzin 'byung bar 'gyur ro*).

In this way, with the directional input provided by the appropriate perspective in the form of right view, the second path factor of right intention sets the course for right ethical conduct in the domains of speech, action, and livelihood. Based on the foundation laid in this way, next comes the right effort to remove defilements and maintain beneficial states of mind, the cultivation of right mindfulness in the form of its four establishments, and finally the gaining of right concentration in the sense of mental composure.

Whereas mindfulness finds explicit mention in this list, the placing of compassion in this scheme

is not immediately self-evident. However, a closer look at the second path factor of right intention reveals where compassion falls into place:

Monastics, the intention of renunciation, the intention of non-ill will, and the intention of non-harm: this is right intention.

(MN 117: *nekkhammasaṅkappo, abyāpādasāṅkappo, avihimsāsāṅkappo, ayam, bhikkhave, sammāsaṅkappo*).

Thoughts of dispassion, thoughts of non-ill will, and thoughts of non-harming: this is reckoned right intention.

(MĀ 189: 無欲念, 無恚念, 無害念, 是謂正志).

The intention for freedom, the intention of non-covetousness, and the intention of non-harm: this is reckoned right intention.

(Up 6080: *thar pa'i rnam par rtog pa dang, brnab sems med pa'i rnam par rtog pa dang, rnam par mi 'tshe ba'i rnam par rtog pa ste, 'di ni yang dag pa'i rtog pa zhes bya'o*).

The last-quoted Tibetan version departs from the usual enumeration of the first two types of right intention, found in the other two versions and in general in the early discourses. Nevertheless, it agrees with the Pāli and Chinese versions on the third, which in all versions concerns the intention for the absence of harm. This corresponds to compassion, which in early Buddhist thought is precisely the wish for the absence of harm.

On this understanding, then, compassion as a dimension of right intention sets the framework for the cultivation of right mindfulness in the form of its four establishments. This implies that, from the viewpoint of the eightfold path, establishing at least some degree of compassionate intention provides a background to engaging in the formal cultivation of the establishments of mindfulness. The same holds for loving kindness or benevolence (*mettā*), which corresponds to another aspect of right intention in the way this is usually described in the early discourses. In other words, some basis in the cultivation of these two divine abodes, loving kindness and compassion, can serve as a preparatory work for formal mindfulness practice.

At the same time, however, this does not mean that mindfulness needs to be left aside until such preparations have been completed. The relationship between compassion and

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mindfulness is more complex than that. This becomes clear on examining another part of the same discourse, which shows how right mindfulness in turn relates to right intention. Here mindfulness is one of three path factors, the other two being view and effort, which together ensure that intention is of the right type.

In this context, the task of right view is to distinguish wrong from right intention. Right effort stands for the effort to abandon wrong intention and to establish right intention. Right mindfulness monitors such abandoning and establishing. In this way, the parallel versions show that right intention requires the collaboration of these three path factors:

Thus, these three states pursue and circle around right intention, that is, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.

(MN 117: *itiyime tayo dhammā sammāsaṅkappaṃ anuparidhāvanti anuparivattanti, seyyathīdaṃ sammādiṭṭhi, sammāvāyāmo, sammāsati*).

These three factors go along with right intention, from view to effort [and mindfulness]. (MĀ 189: 此三支隨正志, 從見方便).

These three path factors follow right intention, namely view, effort, and mindfulness.

(Up 6080: *lam gyi yan lag gsum po 'di dag ni yang dag pa'i rtog pa nyid kyi rjes su 'jug ste, 'di lta ste lta ba dang, rtsol ba dang, dran pa'o*).

The above passage clarifies that mindfulness is already required when establishing right intention. In other words, it is not the case that compassion comes invariably first, because it relates to the second path factor, and mindfulness only after that, because it corresponds to the seventh path factor. Much rather, mindfulness is required from the outset, as it serves to monitor the arousing of right intention and to provide the required feedback for the implementation of right effort. From this viewpoint, then, mindfulness lays the foundation for the right intention of non-harm, just as the intention of non-harm in turn sets up the proper background for formal mindfulness practice.

Applied to the challenge of facing climate change, this means that the task of mindfulness is not only to keep a lookout for the three root defilements but also to ensure that intention remains the right type. Here mindfulness can ensure that compassion neither gets lost nor shades over into its near enemy of sadness. When the demands of the situation are no longer fully in view, mindfulness notices this and provides the feedback that there is a danger of lapsing into some degree of apathy. More emphasis on compassion and a sincere concern for the absence of harm is called for. When the magnitude of the challenge leads to sadness, again mindfulness notices this and provides the information that a shift of gears is required. More emphasis on mental balance is required, on just remaining mindful and equipoised.

## Balance

The importance of mental balance and its relation to mindfulness and compassion finds illustration in a simile that involves two acrobats who are about to perform a feat together. One acrobat tells the other that they should make sure to take care of each other, so that they can perform well. The other responds that this will not do. They first of all need to take care of themselves. It is in this way that they will be able to protect both themselves and the other, and at the same time perform well. The three extant versions of this discourse report the Buddha drawing out the implication of this simile in the following way:

Monastics, protecting oneself one protects others; protecting others one protects oneself.

Monastics, and how does protecting oneself protect others? It is by practicing, cultivating, and making much of [the mind]. Monastics, in this way protecting oneself protects others.

Monastics, and how does protecting others protect oneself? It is by patience, non-harm, loving

kindness, and sympathy. Monastics, in this way protecting others one protects oneself. Monastics, [thinking:] ‘I shall protect myself,’ the establishment of mindfulness should be practiced; [thinking:] ‘I shall protect others,’ the establishment of mindfulness should be practiced.

(SN 47.19: *attānaṃ, bhikkhave, rakkhanto paraṃ rakkhati, paraṃ rakkhanto attānaṃ rakkhati. kathaṃ ca, bhikkhave, attānaṃ rakkhanto paraṃ rakkhati? āsevanāya, bhāvanāya, bahulīkammaṇa; evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, attānaṃ rakkhanto paraṃ rakkhati. kathaṃ ca, bhikkhave, paraṃ rakkhanto attānaṃ rakkhati? khantiyā, avihimsāya, mettatāya, anudayatāya; evaṃ kho, bhikkhave, paraṃ rakkhanto attānaṃ rakkhati. attānaṃ, bhikkhave, rakkhissāmī ti satipaṭṭhānaṃ sevitaḥḥam; paraṃ rakkhissāmī ti satipaṭṭhānaṃ sevitaḥḥam).*

When having protected oneself, one right away protects the other; when protecting the other and oneself as well, this is protection indeed. [How does protecting oneself protect others]? Becoming familiar with one’s own mind, developing it, protecting it accordingly, and attaining realization; this is called ‘protecting oneself protects others.’ How does protecting others protect oneself? By the gift of fearlessness, the gift of non-violation, the gift of harmlessness, by having a mind of loving kindness and empathy for others; this is called ‘protecting others protects oneself.’ For this reason, monastics, you should train yourself like this: ‘Protecting myself I will cultivate the four

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establishments of mindfulness, protecting others I will also cultivate the four establishments of mindfulness.’

(SĀ 619: 已自護時即是護他, 他自護時亦是護己. 心自親近, 修習, 隨護, 作證, 是名自護護他. 云何護他自護? 不恐怖他, 不違他, 不害他, 慈心哀彼, 是名護他自護. 是故, 比丘, 當如是學: 自護者修四念處, 護他者亦修四念處).

If one is able to protect oneself, one is able to protect others. If one has the wish to protect others, one is in turn ( ) able to protect oneself. How does protecting oneself enable protecting others? By making a diligent effort at repeated cultivation, by being accordingly protected on encountering with the mind what manifests before one; therefore, in this way, when protecting oneself one is also able to protect others. How does protecting others ( ) enable protecting oneself? By not becoming annoyed with others, and also not angry with others, and not at all harming them, having loving kindness, compassion, pity, and empathy; therefore, in this way, being able to protect others one is ( ) able to protect oneself. For this reason, monastics, you should train in this way: If at times you wish to protect yourself, then you should cultivate the four establishments of mindfulness; if you wish to protect [others], if you say [you wish] to protect yourselves and protect others, you should also cultivate the four establishments of mindfulness.

(T 1448: 若能守護自身, 即能守護於他. 若欲守護於他, 即便( )能自守. 如何自守能守護他? 由勤策勵數數修習, 由隨守護觸境現前, 所以如是自守護時亦能護他. 如何護他( )能自護? 由不惱他, 亦不瞋他, 并不損害, 慈, 悲, 憐, 愍, 愍, 所以如是能守護他( )能自護. 是故, 汝等苾芻, 應如是學: 若欲自守護時, 應當修習四念住處; 若欲守護, 若言自護及守護他, 亦應修習四念住處; the emendations involve deletions of the negation 不, which regularly

tends to be either lost or else added when Indic texts are translated into Chinese).

The above explanations draw out in detail the implications of the motif of the two acrobats who, in order to be able to perform their feat properly, first need to make sure that they are centered themselves. Based on having in such a way protected their own balance, they will be able to protect each other. The key throughout is mindfulness, which builds the foundation for being able to protect oneself through cultivation of the mind and protect others in the form of being compassionated toward them, avoiding any harm.

Self-protection through mindfulness is what enables recognition of the presence of greed, anger, and delusion. Without such recognition, the three root defilements will have free rein to wreak havoc in the mind, hiding under any of the various pretenses and excuses that can serve to disguise their true nature. Mindfulness enables seeing through these disguises. In this way, established mindfulness can counteract an innate unwillingness to admit to oneself that one is greedy, angry, or confused. To the degree to which mindfulness in this way becomes a continuous self-protection, to that same degree it also protects others from the repercussions of any action undertaken under the influence of the three root defilements. As explained by Ñāṇaponika (1990, p. 5),

moral self-protection will safeguard others, individuals and society, against our own unrestrained passions and selfish impulses ... they will be safe from our reckless greed for possessions and power, from our unrestrained lust and sensuality, from our envy and jealousy; safe from the disruptive consequences of our hate and enmity, which may be destructive or even murderous; safe from the outbursts of our anger and from the resultant atmosphere of antagonism and conflict which may make life unbearable for them.

Based on such self-protection, compassion naturally falls into place. Its very cultivation, taking place in one's own mind, will have immediate beneficial effects and thereby contribute to protecting oneself. A mind that dwells in compassion is far removed from intentions of harm, from getting irritated and annoyed, whereby others are protected.

From the viewpoint of the interrelation between compassion and mindfulness, it is noteworthy that laying the groundwork is the task of mindfulness. The three versions agree in concluding their advice by commending the formal cultivation of mindfulness as a *satipaṭṭhāna/smrtyupasthāna* in order to protect oneself and protect others. This clearly serves as the indispensable foundation. The reason for that is that one's own mental household needs to be taken care of first. In the words of Ñāṇaponika (1990, p. 8),

if we leave unresolved the actual or potential sources of social evil within ourselves, our external social activity will be either futile or markedly incomplete. Therefore, if we are moved by a spirit of social responsibility, we must not shirk the hard task of moral and spiritual self-development. Preoccupation with social activities must not be made an excuse or escape from the first duty, to tidy up one's own house first.

## **Global Mindfulness**

The passages surveyed in this article put a spotlight on mindfulness as the central tool to face the current ecological crisis. The crisis itself can be seen as the result of the three root defilements, in particular rampant greed and the deluded tendency to ignore its repercussions. Although anger may at first

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sight seem less prominent, with the deterioration in living conditions imminent it can safely be expected to become more conspicuous.

The cultivation of mindfulness facilitates approaching the disastrous external repercussions of the three root defilements without succumbing to them oneself internally. Such cultivation rests on the intention for the absence of harm as an expression of compassion. It monitors and finetunes the contribution made by compassion, ensuring that one neither succumbs to its near enemy of grief nor switches off due to being unable to face it any longer. Viewed from this perspective, facing climate change becomes a mindfulness practice all the way through. Not only that, but its final goal is precisely a raising of the level of awareness on a global scale.

The potential of mindfulness in this respect can nowadays be tapped more easily due to its worldwide spread, as a result of having been adapted to a variety of areas in contemporary society and modern culture (Wilson 2014). Training in mindfulness is available throughout the world and accessible to people from a wide variety of backgrounds. Viewed from this perspective, what started in the seventies at the University of Massachusetts Hospital in the form of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction might carry a significance that goes far beyond stress reduction at the individual level. From this viewpoint, it seems appropriate to conclude this essay with reflections on mindfulness and the ecological crisis by Kabat-Zinn (2019, p. 59):

How will we know when the world is close to not breathing and therefore it is already past time to act? Will it be when we can no longer go outside in our cities and breathe the air? ... Or will it be when the global temperatures warm up to the point of melting the ice caps and all the glaciers? ... What will it take to wake us up, and for us to take a different, more imaginative, and wiser path? To face the autoimmune disease we are suffering from as a species, and that we are equally the cause of, we will need, sooner or later, to realize the unique necessity for the cultivation of mindful awareness, with its capacity for clarifying what is most important and most human about us, and for removing the thick veil of unawareness from our senses and our thought processes; its capacity for re-establishing balance to whatever degree might be possible.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Ethical Approval:** This article does not contain any studies performed by the author with human participants or animals.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares he has no conflict of interest.



## Abbreviations

AN, *Aṅguttara-nikāya*; CBETA, Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association; DĀ, *Dīrgha-āgama*; DN, *Dīgha-nikāya*; EĀ, *Ekottarika-āgama* (T 125); MĀ, *Madhyama-āgama* (T 26); MN, *Majjhima-nikāya*; SĀ, *Samyukta-āgama* (T 99); SN, *Samyutta-nikāya*; T, Taishō edition; Up, *Abhidharmakośopāyikā-ṭīkā*; Vism, *Visuddhimagga*; ⟨ ⟩, emendation.

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