

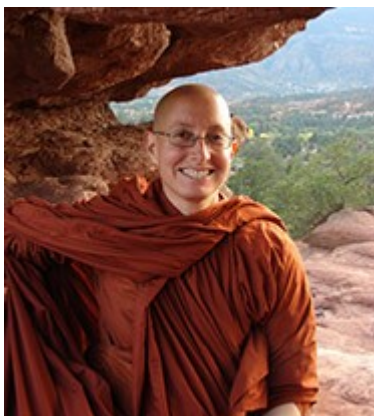
We Are In This Together Compassion and Climate Change

An Interview With Venerable Bhikkhuni
Thanasanti

by Brenna Artinger

Venerable Bhikkhuni Thanasanti chooses to go by the name Amma (“dear one”), a name that contrasts the traditionally used Ayya. Thus, she will be addressed as Amma for the duration of this interview.

On September 21, 2014 the People’s Climate March took place in New York City with hundreds of thousands of people in attendance. Included were Amma Thanasanti Bhikkhuni’s colleagues, Ayya Santacitta, Ayya Santussika and Thanissara, now post-monastic – was one of the founders of the Siladhara order of nuns. Simultaneously, there were over 200,000 people marching in 160 countries from all over the world. Among those present in New York City were several Buddhist organizations, including the One Earth Sangha and the Buddhist Council of New York. The march was a profound step forward, one that marked the growing despair towards climate destabilization, and the concern that very little is being done about it.



Amma Thanasanti Bhikkhuni

But for Amma, the presence of Buddhist organizations addressing climate change is a natural extension of bringing attention to suffering, seeing

suffering's cause, and finding a path that supports it's end- all fundamental to the Buddha's teachings. She notes, "For many people who are very committed contemplative practitioners, there has been an overarching bias that if you practice meditation and have profound insight then there's no more suffering. This is the prevailing view of a traditional approach whereby engagement can seem to be in conflict with the path of contemplation." For Amma, this bias has resulted in a lack of response from Buddhist communities within the United States. However, recently we have seen a change. More and more Buddhist practitioners are bringing the power of insight and compassion into dealing with the imminent and global problems at hand.

For Amma, "recognizing the impact of climate destabilization and working towards eradicating it goes hand in hand with the insight into conditionality. With climate destabilization, we feel the impact of what is going on in the world in our body, heart, and mind, look for causes, and move towards a compassionate and wise response. It is similar when we are practicing with the foundations of mindfulness. The difference is that the field of attention includes the sensations, feelings, and thoughts that are arising in relationship to what is going on in the world, and then we feel the impact they have on our body, heart, and mind. When we look closely at the causes of climate destabilization, we can see our part. The mess we are currently in is a result of greed, aversion, and ignorance. For too long the overriding assumption has been that the Earth's resources were unlimited, that no matter how much crude oil we extracted and burned, how many forests we cut down, we would be OK. We assumed that the stuff we didn't want, like the pollution from CO2 emissions, or the methane from large-scale cattle farming, could forever just be absorbed into the atmosphere. We didn't see the way our use of car, choices for food, holidays and the stuff we buy are also part of the problem.



Bhikkhu Bodhi, Santussika Bhikkhuni & Santacitta Bhikkhuni at People's Climate March in New York City <https://www.facebook.com/santacitta.bhikkhuni/photos>

Our individual contribution may be tiny compared to big oil, but it is part of the same mindset – impacting the very systems we depend upon for life and each other's capacity to sustain life. Collectively we have been operating from the perspective that 'my needs as an individual and taking care of my family are the only ones I can really focus on.' Since the problem has come about from a level of conscious awareness, the solution will be to change that conscious awareness. The more that we are able to see ourselves and each other as part of a great web of life, dependent on many factors to sustain the gift of life, then taking care of 'my needs' shifts to 'what works for everyone?'. This change of mindset shifting from 'me and mine' to 'we and our', is what is needed to address the issues."

"We are impacted by suffering but we are also impacted by joy."

One of the exciting prospects that this overwhelming challenge brings is that for the first time in human history, no matter what country, ethnic group, race, sexual orientation, gender, religious belief, political view or economic

bracket, we are all in this together. As a result, people who ordinarily do not associate with one another are coming together to work towards the common goal of finding solutions to climate destabilization.

Amma lives in Colorado Springs- the national headquarters of the Religious Right. Amma says, “Ordinarily, I have thought of the Religious Right as a group that I have nothing in common, and no need to associate with. But when I heard that Jim Daly, the president and chief executive officer of Focus on the Family has a radio show with two million people who listen every day, I thought, I need to go talk to him and see if we can agree that having a habitable planet is worth working towards together. For the first time, I started to see him as a potential ally.”



People's Climate March in New York

City <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=oa.10153173929582678&type=1>

The good news is that despite the overall initial lack of enthusiasm from Buddhist practitioners, the Buddhist community's response is growing and responding in more passionate and increasingly hopeful ways. Amma herself is making progress, as she participates in 'Earth Holders', an Inter-Buddhist group created in response to a frustrating lack of progress on the part of city council members in the conservative Colorado Springs. The intention of the group is “to contemplate the impact of fossil fuel usage globally, how our global usage connects with personal use of energy...to look at the places where we can personally change, the places where we can get engaged; it's a way of sharing successes and sharing innovations and of collaborating together.” Though the group is currently made up of Buddhist practitioners from various traditions, Amma notes that they intend to include people from many different faiths.

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In fact, bringing people of different faiths together is fundamental to success. Kumi Naidoo, the executive director of Greenpeace, said, “when the people of faith get involved in a grassroots movement, that is when the momentum begins to gather and things start to shift and change.” The People’s Climate March shows that community outreach and collaboration becomes an undeniably powerful force. Furthermore, our efforts need to be supported with education; and education needs to be differentiated between ignorance as a force of deception, and ignorance due of a lack of clear information.

As Amma notes, “the fossil fuel industry has created a propaganda campaign in order to confuse and generate wrong information...it’s exactly the same thing that happened with the cigarette industry. When there was research that was coming out showing that cigarette smoking was dangerous—the tobacco industries generated false scientific research in order to prove the opposite—that cigarette smoking was safe.” This method of deception is dangerous not only because it is inherently and purposefully misleading, but because it purports the claim that climate destabilization is a non-occurrence. The best way to respond to these false claims, according to Amma, is through education and “calling out the propagators”. “People such as the Koch brothers,” says Amma, “are high up on the list of propagators who are involved in strategically deceptive tactics. When we connect the dots between their invested interests and their lies, we are in a strong position to advocate for the truth.” By educating people on the nature of climate destabilization, by showing legitimate research that is not distorted by the big oil agenda, the clarity of the situation becomes all the more apparent.

However, focusing on those people that are adamant in their denial of climate destabilization is futile. Instead it is much more important, much more encouraging, to focus on those who are committed to bringing about change. As Amma notes, “for a grassroots movement to be effective, you don’t need a 100% buy-in, you need 10%. When you get 10% of the population actually believing something and moving towards [it], then you can have a global change.” “What is truly important,” Amma conveys, “is moving more people into the 10%.”

For Amma, “a way to get involved and build community is fairly simple: plant vegetable gardens.”

It is important to note that the problem of climate destabilization is a complex one that “has a huge number of places where it needs to be addressed and tackled. And I think that the core fundamental ingredient is people coming together with a shared vision and purpose of something that they feel called to do.” Thus, an immediate solution to climate change may seem abstract and unreachable, but it is not in vain to ask, ‘what can I do?’. For Amma, “a way to get involved and build community is fairly simple: plant vegetable gardens.” By planting vegetable gardens wherever we can, a certain amount of independence is gained from agricultural businesses, our carbon footprint is lowered, and access to healthy organic food becomes affordable. “Whether they’re on pots on patios, or instead of lawns, or sidewalk, or ornamental gardens, to put in gardens or fruit trees, we can start having a little bit of our own produce. Then we can share surplus with family and friends and neighbors – sharing builds community.” Amma also describes how genetically modified food, and finding food that was nutritious and free from pesticides was not an issue during the Buddha’s time. It is unique to our generation. The beauty of planting gardens is that food is a universal motivator, and that “no matter what your politics or any of the ways we can be divided — you need to eat food.”



Amma has even begun to create a community garden herself. As her Bhikkhuni discipline prohibits her from digging the earth and harvesting, she hopes to “host” the garden and have others harvest. “I’m maintaining the core principles that the Buddha intended which is to maintain a lifestyle of harmlessness and a relationship of interdependence, but I’m also hoping to [address] some of the desperate issues that we’re dealing with in a way that models other options.” The interdependence that Amma hopes to create through her garden is one that parallels the reliance on community that is necessary to create a more sustainable future. Recognizing our dependence on one another is key to

cultivating compassion that allows us to help alleviate the suffering of others. Recognizing one's place in the larger picture is what will ultimately make climate destabilization a priority. As Amma says, "the interdependence that magnifies our suffering is also something that brings about great joy. And that's important to remember."

This interview was conducted on December 19, 2014.