

# A Buddhist Perspective on Climate Change

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*“With Our Thoughts We Create the World”*



**Do no harm. Do what is good. Purify the mind.  
If you cannot purify the mind,  
then do no harm and do what is good.  
If you cannot do what is good,  
at the very least, do no harm.**

Everything is manifested by the mind and altered by the consciousness. In other words, with our thoughts we create the world. As Buddhists, we learn that our greed results in floods. Angry thoughts result in fires, and ignorant thoughts are the cause of disasters involving wind. This is causality: every cause will have a result. As we continuously crave more power, more material goods and experiences, and we fail to obtain what we desire, the results—like natural disasters and environmental degradation—likewise intensify.

When we look around, consider what we see: prolonged drought; more frequent tornadoes; recording-breaking floods, hurricanes, and wildfires. These are the results of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. The terrible truth

we are facing in the world today is that we are unable even to “Do no harm.” We are poised at the brink of worldwide environmental collapse and have very likely already reached our “tipping point.” This is the point at which we have gone too far and are no longer able to pull back from the plunge into the abyss. The question becomes “How deep is the abyss?” And then, “How did we get to this point?”

The more power and wealth politicians and companies want to have and the more comfort individuals seek to enjoy, the more we will harm the environment and every person, animal, and plant who struggle to exist in that environment. We are now experiencing the result: climate change. This now looming worldwide disaster has arisen from a very real cause—craving.

We consume more, thinking all the things we crave will make us happy. But in reality we are depleting our nonrenewable resources and exhausting our planet. Toxic waste seeps into the earth and works its way into our rivers and oceans, contaminating everything it touches. Our imported goods and exotic foods are transported around the world on ships, planes, and trucks that spew toxic fumes and pump tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The rights of the poor to have clean water, arable land, and a safe place to raise their children are completely disregarded in the name of profit. As corporations become larger and larger, their preoccupation with the bottom lines makes them forget that those “purchasing units” are real people, struggling to live on this planet. One agribusiness fund manager gleefully said recently “Higher food prices are inevitable all over the world; we’re in a sweet spot.”

The more we buy and the less mindfully we live, the more we destroy what is natural and pure. In its place, we leave devastation. Tragically, we are committing unimaginable harm. Because of our greed and wish for control, we are coming precariously close to destroying our world as we know it.

Is there a way to stop this reckless behavior—a way to behave responsibly and stop climate change? Is there still time? We do not know the answer to these questions. But we need to do everything within our power to try.

*Even if everyone else does not do what is right,  
I alone will.*

*Even if everyone else is doing wrong,  
I alone will not.*

## **The Result: Climate Change**

Ice caps and glaciers melted. The world's most famous cities underwater. One-third of the planet turned to desert; the other two-thirds filled with people struggling for enough food and water to survive. Is this to be our future?

Our world is spiraling out of control and yet we still have leaders failing to take action on global warming. Newscasters and journalists report on how the stock market bounced back after some minor profit taking and what the latest tidbits from Hollywood are. People complain about the price of gasoline as they get back into their SUV and drive off, alone. Parents shake their heads and worry about how climate

change will affect their children, then board the plane to go visit their children and grandchildren because they love them.

On March 11, 2007, the Sunday Times, a major newspaper in the United Kingdom, detailed the earth-changing scenarios degree by degree that would likely occur in global warming. The article was an interview with Mark Lynas, the author of *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet* and referenced research by the Hadley Centre for Climate Change in the United Kingdom. Based on tens of thousands of pages of scientific research, *Six Degrees* provides a succinct analysis of what the world could look like after global warming:

“At one degree of warming, the Arctic is ice-free for half the year, the South Atlantic—typically void of hurricanes—experiences coastal hurricanes, and in the western U.S. severe droughts are plaguing residents.

Two Degrees of Warming: Polar bears struggle to survive as glaciers increasingly melt away. Glaciers in Greenland begin to disappear, while coral reefs are vanishing.

Three Degrees of Warming: The Amazon rain forest is drying out and El Niño’s intense weather pattern becomes the norm. Europe repeatedly experiences searing summer heat that has rarely happened before.

Four Degrees of Warming: Oceans could rise, taking over coastal cities. The disappearance

of glaciers may deprive many of fresh water. Northern Canada's agriculture could boom and a Scandinavian beach could be the next tourism hotspot. A part of Antarctica could collapse, causing water to rise even further.

Five Degrees of Warming: Uninhabitable zones could spread, snow pack and aquifers feeding big cities could dry up, and climate refugees could run in the millions. Human civilization could begin to break down with this drastic of changes to the climate. The poor would likely suffer the most.

Six Degrees of Warming: The oceans could be marine wastelands, the deserts could march across continents, and natural disasters could become common events. The world's great cities could be flooded and abandoned. This could be 'the doomsday scenario.'"<sup>1</sup>

## **The Cause: Us**

For the past 150 years, we were slowly drawn in by cheap, accessible energy. It became inevitable that the environmental costs of pollution and resource depletion, not borne by consumers, would fall on others. In time, as health care problems arose, these costs were borne by taxpayers who were not quite sure exactly where their tax dollars went. But

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<sup>1</sup> <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel/sixdegrees/>

as long as the system seemed to be working, few people were inclined to ask questions. Periodically a story would be on the news—the deplorable conditions miners labored under, increasing cancer rates, inequality issues—but people did not connect the dots. Most were engrossed with the commercials after the news and dreaming of what to buy next.

How did they get to this point? As consumers, after World War II, Americans became caught up in the government promoted dream of owning a house in the suburbs. There was seemingly endless land, government programs and loans for the soldiers returning home, and lots of cheap oil to power the dream. So Americans in record numbers began moving to the new suburbs. Dad drove into the city to work while Mom stayed home and looked after the children. It seemed idyllic.

But somewhere along the way, the dream of suburbia became complicated. People got caught up in the tragically mistaken idea that possessions and experiences would make them happy. The message they kept hearing was “more is better.” Gradually, the houses became larger and families found themselves separated as grown children, now with their own dreams of an idyllic life, left home to work in other places.

But without the grandparents around to help care for the children, Mom needed to get a job to help pay for childcare. Dad found he needed to work longer hours to be able to afford all the good things they wanted for their children. Short on time, the parents turned to the new electronic help. Dishwashers, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners were

soon deemed household necessities. The number of ‘must have’ electronic appliances increased as more products came to market. But with planned obsolescence carefully calculated to increase corporate profits, the cars and all the other modern gadgetry needed to be frequently replaced. Since there was so much land and so many garbage dumps, the no longer wanted goods were simply thrown away. Plastic, polystyrene and other petroleum by-products that would take centuries to break down ended up at dumpsites. Toxins began to leach into the soil and groundwater. But it was okay because there was so much land.

As the list of modern conveniences grew, time-honored household skills were deemed old-fashioned and unnecessary in the modern world. The victory gardens that were a major source of food during the war gave way to lawns and flower beds. There was no need to cook anymore because there were TV dinners and prepared foods that could be quickly heated up by a Mom now very tired from working all day at the office or factory. There was no need to personally preserve foods anymore because there were lots of canned and frozen food in the supermarket. Dad forgot the skills he had learned from his father because it was now easier to hire people to do what needed to be done. Plus, he had all those timesaving power tools and could easily buy ready-made items at the store. People, hooked on the electronic marvels to do their work, became increasingly dependent on all the cheap energy that powered their lifestyles.

Today, none of this has changed. We see people buying larger houses to store all the new electronic gear. The children, seeing Mom and Dad buying more, want their

own televisions and computers just like all their friends have. Families might gather to eat dinner at the same time, but Dad and the children often heat up their own food in the microwave even though Mom has prepared dinner for everyone. After throwing away the microwavable containers, tossing the pizza carton in the trash, and putting the cutlery in the dishwasher, parents and children go to their own rooms. They then immerse themselves in their home entertainment centers or play games on their computers until it is time to go to sleep. Then in the morning, it's time to get up and begin all over again.

And so we have the American dream today, a dream that many people around the world want to have. But this is a dream gone terribly wrong.

## **Elephant in the Living Room**

From deep within each person who begins to grasp the enormity of climate change and global warming, a profound sense of grief—and fear—begins to arise. Humanity's dream of prosperity is now becoming a nightmare. We are now learning what the future of our world will be like. And with this realization comes another: that six-degrees future has already begun. And it is even more horrific than we had feared.

Climate change has been called the “elephant in the living room.” Think of it as a large, unruly guest who does whatever it wishes to do. But climate change is not the only elephant. Peaking oil, natural gas, coal and uranium reserves

are another four. Then there is aquifer depletion and a human population the size of which the earth cannot sustain. It takes so much land and water to feed one human and we have only a finite amount of these resources in our world. Once we exceed that natural carrying capacity, there is no longer enough food and water for everyone.

Our current world situation is that we are at the brink of an energy crisis that began with global oil reserves peaking. The U.S. Energy Information Administration reported in 2007 that the peak occurred in May 2005.<sup>2</sup> It is more difficult to gauge natural gas reserves but it is generally accepted that they have either also peaked or are close to doing so. Coal and uranium are expected to peak around 2020 and before 2050, respectively. Oil, natural gas, coal, uranium, and hydroelectric currently provide 93 percent of the global energy supply. The remaining 7 percent is mainly hydropower followed by biomass with a fraction provided by renewables like solar and wind power.

Peak resources means we have reached the point in time when the maximum production rate of the resource has been reached. Once past the peak, these natural resources will become increasingly difficult and costly to extract and process. As the prices rise, each of us will reach our personal peak, the point where our life is impacted negatively by the high cost brought about by ever-increasing competition for the remaining oil.

Also, we are moving closer to the point at which the extraction and production costs outweigh the energy

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<sup>2</sup>Electric Power Annual for 2006 Report released October 22, 2007

obtained. We can see the logic in this with our food. It would make no sense to expend one hundred calories to eat food that will only provide ten calories of energy.

In addition to extraction, production and distribution costs, there are the hidden costs like pollution, aquifer depletion, soil degradation, and human health issues. These costs are not calculated in the price at the pump when we fill up our cars or at the store when we buy a box of imported chocolate encased in layers of plastic packaging. The costs are being borne by taxpayers and those who were forced off the land by governments and international conglomerates who are focused on profit not on climate change or the suffering of humans. These millions of economic refugees have no choice but to move into cities where they cannot find work or raise the subsistence crops that used to feed their families. The costs are borne by the children who must breathe polluted air, drink contaminated water, and live in squalid conditions—children who have no future for they will not be able to make a living or farm the land. Nor will they be taught by those who dispossessed them how to provide for their own families in the future.

Understanding what peak oil means, what happens when we reach it?

The United States, the largest oil consumer, reached the peak of its domestic oil reserves in the 1970s. Now, when the United States is relying more heavily on imported oil, India and China are also becoming major oil importers. This is happening at the same time that domestic demand is increasing within the oil exporting countries. So countries like Venezuela and Saudi Arabia need to supply the increasing

needs of their own citizens as well as their foreign customers.

As the gap between supply and demand increases, the price per barrel will continue to hit new highs. This is already happening. In the fall of 2004 a barrel of oil hit \$50. Just three and a half years later, on March 12, 2008, oil hit \$109.72. Already we are seeing people in the developed world having to decide whether to spend money on heating oil or on food, agonizing decisions those in the developing world have faced for years. What do people choose? They are choosing to buy heating oil because it takes longer for children to starve to death than it does or them to freeze to death.

Even if we have reached the maximum of global production, don't we still have a lot left? Surely we have plenty of time to come up with another solution to the increasing energy demands?

No, we do not have time because the ease and cost of extraction for the remaining reserves are very different from the already extracted oil both in quality and ease of extraction. Also, new solutions take a long time to develop. As reserves dwindle and become more difficult, and thus expensive, to extract, the quality grade of the oil also decreases as does the energy output per barrel. Higher oil prices reflect the additional production expense.

What about other energy-producing materials like tar sands?

Tar sands are actually bituminous sands that are a natural mixture of sand, water, and bitumen. The largest reserves are in the oil sands in Canada and the tar sands in

Venezuela, with smaller reserves in the United States, Russia, and the Middle East. These oil sands are not viscous like oil, thus they must be mined. This process takes much water and large amounts of energy to extract and process. This heavy crude oil is in turn expensive to process into gasoline, diesel fuel, and other products.

Currently, the government of Alberta, Canada has approved the extraction of the petroleum from the sands even though environmentalist say this complex process will create an environmental nightmare and thus hasten global climate change. The oil companies keep exploiting our fragile planet just to prolong the comfort of the wealthy who do not want to give up their personal comfort and consumptive lifestyles.

What about natural gas?

The United States is now a net importer of natural gas. North American discoveries have been on a general decline since the early 1980s. Europe also hit the high of its natural gas discoveries about the same time. Dr. Ali Samsam Bakhtiari, former senior adviser to the National Iranian Oil Company in Tehran, reported to the Australian Senate in 2006 that natural gas would peak worldwide about 2008 or 2009. He also felt that Russia had already peaked, which in turn directly affected European imports.

Unlike oil, which can be easily transported in tankers, gas has to be used onsite, or transported through pipelines or in special tankers. So moving it around is more problematic than oil.

What about coal?

The World Coal Institute has been saying for many years that there are enough coal reserves to last for another 150 years. But the Energy Watch Group, working with more recently updated reserve numbers and factoring in the increasing rate of extraction due to increasing demand, has calculated that the coal peak will occur somewhere between 2020 and 2030. China, the largest consumer of coal is predicted to peak sooner.

Environmentally, coal is even more damaging than oil or natural gas, as well as being far less efficient. The United States has the world's largest coal reserves, but what has been extracted is the higher grade anthracite coal, with a higher energy density than the lower grade lignite coal by a factor of five or six. Now, much of the remaining coal reserves are lignite not anthracite. So while coal production is increasing in the United States because of the lower quality of lignite, the energy output derived from this coal peaked around 1999. Consequently, the United States is now a net coal importer.

What about new technologies? Surely people are working on a solution. Won't something be invented that will provide for our energy needs far into the future?

Yes, we are now seeing developments in technologies like solar and wind but these currently provide just a fraction of one percent of our current energy supply. It will take time to increase both demand and supply. Richard Heinberg, author and peak oil educator, has said that it would take

fifteen years for people to gradually replace their current petroleum-powered vehicles. So there is no quick transition even when we develop other technologies. Also, these technologies have their own environmental impact as solar voltaic arrays, windmills, and the other necessary equipment need to be produced and shipped. Then we face the “not in my backyard” syndrome. Everyone wants the new technology in place, but they do not want to have to look at it.

Also, for the size of what we are talking about, we need a national and even international energy distribution infrastructure. We do not have a magic fuel that we can simply plug into existing distribution systems. It will take national and regional government action to build a new energy grid. This will enable individuals and companies who produce more energy than they require to be shared with others.

Before a new technology can be produced and used, national governments need to do studies of the technology. Politicians need to poll their constituents, listen to special interest groups, and vote. If a bill is passed, funding needs to be found, and finally building needs to be done. Then, as we get closer to real production, we have a chicken-and-egg problem. Before companies will commit to participating in this new distribution system, they will want to see customers ready to use the new form of energy. But before customers install the commercial and residential systems to use the new technology, they will want to be sure the companies will supply the new form of energy. So which comes first—supply or demand? The chicken or the egg?

As with any new technology, prices will be high to begin with. As production methods improve and more people purchase the item, the per unit cost will gradually be reduced and thus the new technology will become more affordable to a larger number of people. But even with lower costs, many people will want to wait for the old technology to wear out before replacing it with the new.

## **Hurdles to Overcome**

We have to view the whole picture. Climate change, peak energy, aquifer depletion, soil degradation, and overpopulation—everything—is interrelated. In nature, if you tinker with one aspect, all the others are also impacted. We cannot ignore any of these other “elephants,” for to do so will put at risk whatever good we might do regarding the others.

If we are going to have any positive influence on climate change and peak energy, we have to recognize these other eventual crises as well and incorporate solutions for all of them as we quickly adapt to our new reality. As the Buddha said, everything is interconnected; nothing exists on its own.

## **Cognitive dissonance**

When faced with information that is drastically different from what one believes to be true, the tension has to be resolved through choosing either the familiar belief or the proposed new one. Most people will go with the belief they are familiar with.

When people, hearing about global warming and peak oil, look around and see that everything looks normal and feel that their lives are not that much affected, they tend to dismiss the new perspective. Yes, the price of gas and food has increased but surely that's just due to increased demand and corporate price gouging. Yes, the weather is unusual but that is normal. Yes, the ice is melting in Greenland, the Arctic, and in high-mountain glaciers but that could just be a temporary occurrence.

It is like putting a frog in an uncovered pot of water, placing the pot on the stove, and turning up the heat. Because the temperature increase is gradual, the frog keeps adapting to the increasing heat until it is too late, and the frog is boiled to death.

### **Economic Decline and Citizen Panic**

When governments see their financial markets falling and imminent economic downturn, they will want to give in to corporate special interests and panicked voters. Shortsighted leaders will do as they have done for several decades: look for the quick fix. They will divert money from long-range plans to combat global warming and spend it on short-term economic injections of capital into the economy. But appeasing immediate demands to stop the pain will only insure even more terrible pain in the future.

### **Special Interest Groups**

There are special interest groups who have funded organizations specifically set up to convince people that

climate change is a hoax. Throughout history business has had close ties to those in power and today is no different. There are companies and individuals who are caught up in their craving for power and wealth. To onlookers, it seems amazing that these corporate giants and government officials seem to be completely disconnected from reality. Their children and grandchildren will have to live in the world they create. What on earth are they thinking? Whatever their reasons, these special interest groups make it difficult for people to learn the truth about global warming and deny them the time to make necessary changes.

## **What Can Governments Do?**

Some things can only be done on a national or local government level. For example, to ensure equity and to slow down depletion, rationing systems for resources like gasoline, heating oil, and natural gas will need to be instituted. New energy policies and international treaties as well as large infrastructures to move energy more efficiently need to be done at the national and international level. New technologies need to be shared with developing countries. We also need national farm policies that will encourage backyard gardens and small farms. Large farms will need to grow more varied food in a sustainable way.

We need more flexible building codes and financial incentives for property owners and renters who install the efficient new-energy systems, improve the insulation in their homes and businesses, and incorporate ways to reduce their energy consumption.

Local communities need to focus on food availability and conservation measures. For example, in the United Kingdom and Australia, transition towns are planning to move away from reliance on existing energy sources into renewables. They are looking at how to support more efficient ways of manufacturing, provide more public transportation, use more efficient ways to heat and cool, and provide more secure food supplies that are much closer to home.

## **What Can Individuals Do?**

### **Understanding of causality**

If we live just for our own satisfaction and flawed perception of happiness, we will have little reason to make the sacrifices that we must make for humanity and all beings to allow them to survive in the future. Our only concern will be for “me” and “mine,” meaning our immediate family and close friends. As resources become increasingly scarce, and thus increasingly costly, we will become even more self-centered and selfish. The more the fear sets in, the more self-centered will we become. Unless our depth of understanding is profound and deep-rooted, we will be overcome by our fear and we will fight to survive, at any cost.

Those who truly understand causality know the importance of every thought, word, and action. Our every decision will have consequences. Whenever we take more than our fair share, we are taking from another being. The suffering we cause others will come back to us.

We will pay the terrible cost for our indulgence.

As George Monbiot wrote in *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning*, "...the connection between cause and effect seems so improbable. By turning on the lights, filling the kettle, taking the children to school, driving to the shops, we are condemning people to death. We never choose to do this. We do not see ourselves as killers. We perform these acts without passion or intent."<sup>3</sup>

## **Behavior Change**

Our parents worked very hard with the hope that our lives would be better than theirs. For many of us, our lives would appear better because we have more "stuff" and enjoy a broader range of experiences. But it is not enough for us. We are locked into behavior we seem unable to change. It is as if we are wearing blinders as we forge ahead determined to have one last final orgy of self-indulgence.

We have grown so used to our comforts that the thought of having to wash our clothes by hand, of walking more, of growing and then cooking—from scratch!—our own food seems like a return to the dark ages. Our expectations have far outrun the ability of our finite planet's resources to supply but we seem unwilling or unable to adjust to this reality.

The truth is that we have unthinkingly made many wasteful decisions regarding electricity production, transportation, and housing. George Monbiot calculated that the developed world needs to cut carbon emissions by 90 percent. Using the United Kingdom as an example, he shows how this is not impossible. Not knowing whether we will be able to make a difference by cutting back, we still need to try.

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<sup>3</sup> *Heat: How to Stop the Planet Burning*, George Monbiot, pg. 22

## Changing Perceptions

“[M]uch of what is required...is simply coming to terms with the notion that a radical change in your way of life is not the same thing as the end of the world. I think many people tend to associate the two—we have always been wealthy and comfortable and lucky here in the west, and the loss of some or all of those things seems like a disaster of unimaginable proportions. But it doesn’t have to be—that’s a way of thinking we can choose to discard, recognizing that those who live less comfortable lives often value them equally.”<sup>4</sup>

## Relocalization

In the United States, food travels an average of 1500 miles to reach the consumer. On average, supermarkets keep only a three-day supply of food in stock. Small, locally owned stores have gone out of business, unable to compete with the Walmarts of the world. With globalization, manufacturing jobs have left the developed countries and gone overseas where labor is cheap, often because workers do not receive health or other benefits. In many countries, small farmers have gone out of business, unable to compete with government-subsidized agribusiness.

As energy prices continue to climb, the distribution of food over long distances will break down. There will be no guarantee that when we go to the supermarket there will be enough food for everyone. The solution is relocalization. Not only is it an economic solution, this is also a lifestyle solution.

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<sup>4</sup> “Casaubon’s Book”, Sharon Astyk, March 22

Agribusiness may be good for the companies but it is not good for consumers. Food transported 1500 miles loses much of its nutrition. But food that was picked yesterday and bought today at the local farmer's market is nutritious and so much better tasting. Organically grown and sustainably raised, it is good for the consumer, the farmer, and the environment.

Energy also needs to be provided on a local basis. Moving energy over long distances requires many resources. Peak energy means we will have much less access to the fuels we thought would last forever, or at least as long as we want them. But as resources dwindle, we will need to focus our lives much closer to home. Soon, our personal sphere of existence will be very small if we are to combat global warming by reducing carbon emissions. The fleeting concept of the global village will become a memory as our new priority becomes energy conservation. Long-range travel and cheap energy will soon be a thing of the past.

The upside is that we will build community as we get to know our neighbors, do business with local people, and grow much of our own food to provide food security. We only have to think back to the images of the people in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina to know that we need to depend on ourselves and our community.

## **Accepting Responsibility with Honor**

In his book, *On Hallowing One's Diminishments*, the Quaker writer John Yungblut wrote,

*“One might say with the Buddhists, that this [hallowing] is an important form of ‘mindfulness’ and try and cultivate the inner posture in which such consciousness can be relatively sustained. Consulting the dictionary I find that for the word ‘hallowing’ the following definitions are offered: ‘make holy or set apart for holy use, consecrate; to respect greatly; venerate.’ It was a new and most encouraging idea to me - that one’s diminishments could be ‘made holy,’ ‘consecrated,’ ‘respected greatly,’ even ‘venerated.’*

*I saw that the first step for me in learning to ‘hallow’ the progressive diminishments in store for me was deep-going acceptance. But the acceptance would have to be positive, not a negative one, if it were to be a real hallowing. I must learn to do something creative with it.”*

We do not know whether we have enough time to alter future events that have been put into motion by so many people for so long. But we need to do everything we possibly can to try. We hear so often about intention. Our intention in hallowing our diminishments of global warming and energy depletion is to accept responsibility for what lies in our future. As Sharon Astyk, a peak oil educator, wrote on her blog “Casaubon’s Book,” “[W]e can come to recognize that sometimes, the point is not whether we can alter events, but how we face them. We can find meaning, even when we cannot change things, in our ability to shape the meaning of things - to do right, even when the right thing is not enough,

to face even very hard times with courage and honor, even though it won't make the hard times go away to do so."

We can fight and rail against the things in life that feel so unfair. We can slip into pretending they do not exist. We can give up in despair. Or we can turn around to face that horror and work to understand why it is so terrifying. We can learn to face it with honor and thus, manage our fear.

What we are now facing are the consequences of our own past actions and decisions. Initially, we were unaware of what was happening, but now we know. We have been using up our natural resources and now they are running out. We have exported our style of living through movies, television, and other media. Now people around the world want to live like Americans do. But the reality is that Americans can no longer live as Americans have lived. The longer those of us who enjoy the privileges of wealth delay making the necessary changes, the harder it will be for all of us to face them later.

Previously, we did not think of what we were doing. Now we have come up against the reality of our actions. We can postpone what needs to be done or just make token efforts at making some changes. But if we fail to make the big changes—life-altering changes—our children and grandchildren will be forced to inhabit a world terribly different from the one we have been so privileged to enjoy.

If we can hallow our diminishments, we will find some benefits—a stronger sense of community and family, the knowledge that we tried to do the right thing when we

realized that we had done some of the worst.

The Buddha taught about impermanence, how everything is continuously changing. Each of us has changed from who we were just a minute ago. Some cells have died, others have replaced them. These are minor changes, not even noticeable. We still function as we did a minute ago even though we have changed.

But climate change? No more cheap oil and, eventually, no oil at any price? Not enough natural gas? Not enough water? These are terrifying. When we come face-to-face with the changes that we feel are overwhelming and more than we can handle, we initially react from our fear. We say it cannot possibly be true. We say those who suffer from inadequate resources and natural disasters suffer due to their karma. Or we look for ways to disprove what people are saying. Or we choose to do nothing as we abruptly shut the door in the messenger's face.

As a commenter wrote on Astyk's blog "I think cognitive dissonance has much to do with our collective denial of responsibility. We're unwilling to sacrifice a standard of living that cannot be sustained without exploiting others. So instead of changing, we find ways to minimize the truth and blame our victims for their troubles. People shut out clear, rational arguments that don't fit with their world view and self-concept. Our self-esteem is totally wrapped up with consumption. We have been told since we were children that having lots of stuff is what makes us 'winners' in life. We don't want to give anything up—it would be giving up a part of ourselves that we've worked hard to create and nourish.

That's why people get so completely defensive and pissed off when you bring up this subject—you're messing with their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. I'm not just pointing the finger at others. I also plead guilty."

So there is a lot going on in people's reactions to words like global warming and resource depletion. The reactions revolve around change. We usually do not like it. The Buddha taught that change permeates life. That just as our minds are continuously changing, phenomena are also continuously changing. Everything is manifested by the mind and altered by the consciousness and thus, with our thoughts we change the world. And yet, we still believe that we can keep living as we have been doing. We doubt, debate, and deny. But doubting, debating, and denying will not help us fix this new, frightening world of ours.

Nor will what we have been told to do for the past sixty years—go shopping—solve this problem. We believe buying things will make us happy. But studies show people were happier in the 1950s. Yes they had less—less stuff. But they had time for their children, they worked fewer hours, and they felt more secure. It was safe for children to walk to school. People could leave their doors unlocked. But then, we were told to buy more, that by doing so we would be really happy.

We have seen the results of looking for happiness in consuming. It does not work. This is hardly news since the Buddha taught over 2500 years ago that happiness does not lie in new things or experiences. Happiness is to be found within ourselves, it lies in what we tell ourselves. Happiness is a mental state, not a physical state.

The earlier we realize happiness does not lie in consumption, the earlier we will realize we cannot consume ourselves out of what is now happening. It is going to take more than changing light bulbs and carrying canvas shopping bags. These are of course an excellent start, but that is all—a beginning.

We need to make changes in our lives, in every aspect of our lives. What we tell ourselves about those changes will determine how we feel. We can make the changes, or we can doubt, debate, and deny. We can complain, or we can hallow those changes by honoring them and accept responsibility for what we have done. We can learn to live with the changes, understanding that doing so is, as Astyk says, “not an unjust cruelty, but simply what is asked of us, our share of the burden.”

Peak oil, water depletion, and climate change are some of the most destructive conditions that could happen to society and this planet we live on. But they are what we have created. Very simply, they are cause and effect. Initially, we acted out of ignorance. At some level, we knew there was only so much oil and natural gas, but we figured some clever person would come along and fix things for us. They would find a new form of energy or invent a better technology. It was not anything we needed to be concerned about.

Ignorance is one of the three poisons the Buddha so often warned about. The other two poisons? Greed and anger. Indeed, with our thoughts we create the world. So not only from the everyday standpoint, but from the karmic standpoint, we have created and are currently creating the world we will be living in. The environmental changes we are

now beginning to experience are not an unjust punishment inflicted on us. We have recklessly exploited our planet and now we will be paying for our actions. How will we justify what we have done when our children and grandchildren inherit the world from us? When they realize how we have lived, they will wonder what we were thinking. Why did we not change when we learned of the immense harm we were doing? How could we have cared so little? For the world's children? For our own?

It is up to us to face our diminishment now, when we still have a choice. To do so when we are forced to would be irresponsible, and largely futile. Now at least, we still have some time to change the way we do things.

And this is where the hallowing comes in, for there are benefits to be had if we just recognize and honor them. We will have more time with family and neighbors, benefit from healthier lifestyles, learn more about ourselves, and maybe, just maybe, help save the future for our children and our planet.

Life in forty, twenty, even ten years will be very different from what it is now. We need to come together and learn what to do, both on a community level and as responsible individuals. We live in a universe that adheres to the law of cause and consequence. The consequences are not within our control. But our current karmas, our current actions, are. Honoring and respecting resource depletion and climate change are within our control and ability.

We need to do everything within our power to hallow these diminishment, for they are ours.



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