

Hothouse Zen: Practicing Zen in a Time of Climate and Ecological Crises

Myong An Sunim JDPS

Some months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Zen Master Seung Sahn sat with some of his students, discussing the world's situation. He said, "In the future, there will be much suffering, much fighting; some places will have too much water, some places not enough water; some places will not have enough food. There will be many natural disasters and disease. Then society will have a big problem, many people will die."

One student became very alarmed upon hearing this and asked him, "Sir, when that happens, where can we hide?"

Zen Master Seung Sahn replied, "Hide under the Path."

His words teach us that in the face of adversity, we can take refuge in the path of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. This means seeing and accepting the truth of things

as they are: strengthening our Zen practice with faith and sincerity, drawing upon the support of our practicing community to help us regain our clarity and centredness and returning to our don't-know mind. Approaching the situation and our practice with a sense of openness and kindness, we can take the opportunity to help others caught up in the same circumstances through the compassionate expression of our bodhisattva vow.

Our daily lived experiences are visions of normality, its mundanity giving us a sense of familiar comfort. However, it is a veil over the prevailing climate and ecological crisis threatening our planet. The story of climate change is our story, the metastasizing of our planet's long presumed stable climate to a much hotter uncertain one. The rumblings of climate change are a portent of an unimaginable impact on our lives if we continue with our business-as-usual lifestyles.

These are no longer normal times. Yet, when viewed through the universal lens of cause and effect, things are nothing but normal. The causes of our present climate crisis are not complicated; the seeds were planted by our headlong rush to industrialize in the nineteenth century, burning fossil fuels to power our pursuit of never-ending economic growth. These actions resulted in the release of increasing amounts of planet-heating CO₂ into the atmosphere.

In less time than is required to traverse a single human milestone of birth, old age, sickness, and death, we managed to so fracture our environment and ecology that we now threaten our global habitat. It is perhaps unsurprising that we have reached this point in history, where the cascading impact of climate and ecological breakdown imperils all species, including ours. It is just the precise and dispassionate manifestation of our global cause and effect.

We reap what we sow; cause and effect is clear—that much we understand. Yet, the causes of this crisis and others like it go much deeper; they are rooted in our individual and collective afflictions of anger, desire and ignorance. They originate from our mistaken idea of "I, my, me" as a separate and independent self. Our unending efforts to try to satisfy the insatiable "I want" mind lead clearly to consequences we see in the climate crisis.

Perceiving these truths clearly helps us take a first step toward unshackling ourselves from victimhood and blame; knowing the causes of our current predicament, we can come to realize that the remedy is to be found within each one of us.

The first of the four great vows—"Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all"—acts as a guide for our actions. It points to helping those who are suffering

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now, those who are in harm's way, those who are unable to protect themselves from future hurt. Beginning with those who we care about most, we can think about what we need to do to ensure that they have all the opportunities to live a life as rich as ours. If we look around us, we can see examples of many people who are taking action, doing their part to help at both an individual and group level. If enough of us act positively, we can make the impact needed so that we can set ourselves on a path to a cleaner, sustainable, brighter future for ourselves, our children and our grandchildren. Sometimes the challenge and effort needed can feel out of reach, but if we just try, we may well find that it is within our abilities.

"Just do it" is one of our primary teachings; it counsels unselfish action. Our great teacher Zen Master Seung Sahn exemplified this teaching through his countless selfless acts of courage, wisdom and compassion, a source of inspiration for our own actions. Each and every one of our choices and actions do matter because they have an impact; it is the clear functioning of cause and effect. We have to decide what is important and the kind of impact that we want to have. Then we have to act; we have to do it.

We have learned about the temporary nature of all things from the Buddha's teachings. The fragility of our impermanence has mostly been a theoretical construct that we have rarely had to confront as an imminent and distinct possibility. Most of us want the assurance that we can continue to enjoy walking along beaches, through forests and parks with our loved ones, breathing in clean fresh air and appreciating nature's beauty. When that assumption is rudely yanked away from us, it can stir up emotions that are difficult to deal with.

Many who have acquired a good knowledge of the cli-

mate science have reported experiencing grief, anxiety, anger and despair. In certain cases, the symptoms are similar to those experiencing PTSD. These emotions are difficult to face but are a natural response to an overwhelming existential threat to our way of life and all who we care about. With the support of our community and our practice, I think that we can find a way through to accept and deal with them. It may mean learning to have hard conversations about difficult things—loss, powerlessness, sadness without getting mired in despair but turning to hope and optimism by talking about how we can engage in helpful mitigating action. It is often said that action is the antidote to despair.

Greta Thunberg, a diminutive sixteen-year-old Swedish schoolgirl diagnosed with Asperger's, OCD, and selective mutism, became depressed and stopped talking when she was eleven after learning about the climate crisis. In August 2018, when she was fifteen, she felt she had to do something about it, so she got out of bed, skipped school, went straight to the Swedish parliament and sat outside in solo protest. Her depression lifted. From her one simple, unselfish act, she was unexpectedly transformed into a shining icon of hope and inspiration to millions of schoolchildren worldwide who, like her, want concrete action to avert the climate crisis.

In Chinese, the word for crisis is *wéijī* and comprises two characters: *wéi*, meaning danger, and *jī*, meaning opportunity. Despite the many dangers in a crisis, it points to the hope that we can find opportunities within for redemption. The challenge of our climate change is therefore a reason for hope and optimism, not for the dimming of our light. The past is set and bound, but the future is yet unwritten. We are both the authors and actors of this climatic saga; the power to script each unfolding chapter firmly is in our hands.

This is without doubt the single greatest opportunity of our generation to pull ourselves out of our kamikaze dive. We know exactly why our earth is getting hotter. We also know the many solutions that are available. It is only us, we adults, who have the power and resources to craft a healing world for all of our existence. Our young do not; it will be far too late for them by the time they reach adulthood.

Jacques Cousteau, noted explorer and oceanographer, said, "We protect what we love." But we cannot love what we do not know. Most of us live in modern towns and cities, hermetically insulated from the natural world, accentuating our sense of separation from nature. Meditation helps us dissolve the wall of false duality, the habitual opposites thinking that we are all used to; and in becoming one with this world, we can also come to intimately know and love it.

Each and every one of us can be a cli-

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Photo: Haeng Won Zen Centre

mate and ecology bodhisattva.

Practicing Zen in a crisis is no different from practicing at any other time, except that in this case, the urgency and gravity with which we should apply ourselves is many orders of magnitude greater. We need to remind and motivate ourselves to practice with courage, clarity of direction, constancy of purpose; to embrace living with uncertainty and don't-know; to wake up to the reality of our oneness with nature and this world.

At the same time, we also need to realize that the ways we live and behave have a direct impact in shaping our planet and environment. What we are seeing now with extreme weather, firestorms, and extinction of countless species are the results of our collective life choices and actions. We can choose to live in ways that preserve and heal our habitat instead of destroying it. It will take great courage and the willingness to welcome radical changes to our lives. The karmic calculus of cause, action and result are clear and inescapable—we cannot continue to live in the same way and expect a different outcome.

So, it really does matter, now more than ever, that we try, that we make an effort with our whole heart, to learn to live in harmonious sustainability with this planet. In this way we can heal and nurture the planet for our children and the entirety of all species, and leave it richly habitable for them. ♦

Further Explorations

Read

Berners-Lee, Mike. *There Is No Planet B*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Thunberg, Greta. *No One Is Too Small to Make a Difference*. London: Penguin Books, 2019.

Vince, Gaia. "The Heat Is On Over the Climate Crisis. Only Radical Measures Will Work." *Guardian*, UK, May 18, 2019.

Wallace-Wells, David. *The Uninhabitable Earth*. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2019.

Watch

Connors, Leila, dir. *Ice on Fire*. West Hollywood, CA: Appian Way, 2019.

Davies, Serena, dir. *Climate Change: The Facts*. London: BBC Studios, 2019.

Gameau, Damon, dir. *2040*. Hawthorn, Victoria, Australia: Good Thing Productions, 2019.

Stevens, Fisher, dir. *Before the Flood*. West Hollywood, CA: Appian Way, 2016.

Listen

McPherson, Guy. *Nature Bats Last*.

<https://naturebatslast.podbean.com>.

Figueres, Christiana, Tom Rivett-Carnac, and Paul Dickinson. *Outrage and Optimism*.

<http://globaloptimism.com/podcast>.

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Winter Kyol Che 2020

** Meditation Retreats **



Warsaw, Wubongsa, Poland

Teachers: Jeong Hye, Zen Master - and others

Dates: February 09 - March 08

Sales de Llierca, Borisa, Catalonia (Spain)

Teacher: Bon Shim, Zen Master

Dates: January 03 - February 02

Vražné, Seonmunsa, Czech Republic

Dates: January 04 to April 03

January 04 - February 15:

George Hazlbauer, JDPSN

February 15 - February 29:

Gu Ja, Zen Master

February 29 - March 21:

Alma Potter, JDPSN

March 22 - April 03:

Bogumila Malinowska, JDPSN

For more information please visit:

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