

This Time, Don't Let Heat Kill You

Moran Chaimovitz

Humanity is being hit with a giant climate Zen stick. Droughts, floods, and storms have always been part of the natural cycle, but this time there's clear scientific evidence that the extreme conditions are happening more frequently because of human actions. These actions come out of our corporate, government, and social ignorance and greed. Everyone is polluting the planet firsthand somehow, while we depend on and support the system that does the heaviest pollution. This is the impact of our civilization's economic norms over the last century, and we're running out of time to prevent a tipping point that will destroy nature's equilibrium.

I am a worried parent of two children living in Israel. Life in Israel was always turbulent, but as the predictions state, past religious and territorial wars over this small piece of land are nothing compared to what's coming to the Middle East region. I am writing this out of fear for all our children's future, but with no intention to seed despair. I want to state the situation as it is explained by science, so we can perceive the correct situation, relationship, and function with our future challenges and their solutions.

As implicated in Dong Sahn's "No Hot or Cold" kong-an, there is really no place to hide and avoid the climate crisis implications. The whole ecosystem will be affected, and extreme weather conditions will catch us, our children, and our grandchildren.

Adding to ignorance and greed, I think you can also include hate toward indigenous cultures, their lands, and their ways of life, which don't seem compatible with growing the Western lifestyle. Our way of living has distanced itself from nature and become ignorant to the fact that we are part of nature. No wonder we call hate, greed, and ignorance the three poisons. We've seen the poisonous results in full global scale during recent years: increased wildfires, hurricanes, floods, droughts, and waves of immigration.

No one really knows what will happen. There are optimistic predictions and pessimistic predictions, which depend on how fast we will change our economic course in the next ten to thirty years. We truly don't know if we will succeed, or how long would it take to stabilize the climate and natural habitats. But as Zen Master Seung Sahn said, we need to try, try, try for ten thousand years, for our future and our children and all sentient beings. We can't run away from this karmic debt.

Zen Master Seung Sahn begins the introduction to *The Compass of Zen* with a very ecological statement:

Human beings not only make each other suffer. Nowadays, we bring much more suffering to all of the other beings in this world. We hurt the air, the water, the grass, the trees, everything. Human

beings cut down whole forests, and take away the green belt. We pollute the water, the air, and the ground. Human beings always say they want freedom, but actually they are the number one dictators in this world. So nowadays it is very important that human beings wake up.

I feel that nothing really changed since the book was published in 1997. As a child growing up in the late 1980s, I clearly remember the campaigns to save the ozone layer, the Amazon forest, recycling, acid rain, oil spills, and animals on the verge of extinction. It's all still happening. So, what can we do?

When Buddha saw the sick, old, and dying people and realized the impermanence of our human condition, he understood it was inevitable. But there's a compassionate way to care for the sick and old, and we can hold ceremonies for the dead. These natural transitions create our society's care work in hospitals, clinics, hospices, and so on. This means that although we might need to live through a scary ecological transformation, there's still a need to prepare for it and to make it as painless as possible in the worst scenario. In the best scenario, that's not all we can do.

At this time we have a choice. We have between ten and thirty years to fix the situation. This is enough time for us to grow old and for our children to become adults. We have enough time to slow down and maybe even prevent total catastrophe.

Clear action comes from clear discernment. Without clear discernment, there is no wisdom. From clear discernment, compassionate and wise action can emerge. How, then, does that connect with Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching of correct situation, correct relationship, and correct function?

We need to attain the correct situation—understand that the climate predictions of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are real and valid. We can already see more fires in California, Brazil, Australia, and Siberia. More hurricanes, typhoons, and floods. The ocean's acidity levels are rising, and fish stocks are declining. The climate predictions are now coming to realization more rapidly, because humanity is actually increasing its damaging activities as the world's population and economies grow. Our actions so far haven't been enough, and our goals to decrease carbon emissions have been too low.

Correct relationship—understand these extreme changes are caused by human activity and decisions: our "normal" way of life. It's not about taking the blame. It's about taking responsibility as beings who are part of nature but not the owners of nature. We need to change the story of humanity as nature's conqueror, which is the

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dominant story in Western and Western-influenced societies. We need to wake up to the fact that we are indeed destroying nature, and if we destroy nature, we destroy ourselves. Sending a team to populate Mars won't help save our planet. We can't cut out the lungs and boil the heart while pretending to save the brain.

Correct function—like the eightfold path, we have numerous ways to fix our economy and habits. We can change our view on nature, our livelihoods, our efforts to make a change, our focus on sustainable economy, our actions to stop carbon emissions, our speech and the stories we keep telling as a culture. We can start talking about the scientific facts; we can demand that our media, politicians, and education systems include these facts in their plans, programs, and policies. These facts cannot stay with the scientific community and the environmental groups alone. The climate facts need to be as universal as $1+1=2$.

We can demand that our elected officials plan and execute clean energy reforms before 2030. COVID-19 proved we can take quick action when needed. We can divert our pensions, savings, and financial holdings away from polluting corporations' stocks and bonds. We can work to install solar panels on our roofs and the roofs of public buildings. Drive electric cars. Buy locally to reduce the dependency of polluting international shipping.

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Plant trees to absorb the carbon in the city air. Move to a plant-based diet and drastically reduce the consumption of industrially produced meat and fish. There are many other aspects that have bigger or smaller effects on the overall balance, but the major ones are burning fossil fuels for industry, transportation, household electricity, and industrial farming of animals for food.

We still have time. It's not too late to use our ten thousand bodhisattva hands and create a sustainable economy. One in which our way of life doesn't exploit land, people, and natural resources for profit while ignoring its effects on nature. A system that uses renewable energy sources and plant-based products. Both can create healthier societies and reduce diseases and mortality rates caused by heart issues, cancer, obesity, pollution, malnourishment, and lack of clean water. This can save billions in healthcare costs, which we can invest in making our technologies green. These new industries and their development can create jobs for millions. The system can educate and empower people to create sustainable lifestyles and organizations. It can emphasize values that transcend our destructive lifestyle.

So, a monk asked Zen Master Dong Sahn, "When cold or hot come, how can we avoid them?" "Why don't you go to the place where there is no cold or hot?" Dong Sahn replied. The monk said, "What is the place where there is no cold or hot?" Then Dong Sahn said, "When cold, cold kills you; when hot, heat kills you."

I say, this time, don't let heat kill you. ♦

Moran Chaimovitz is a dharma-teacher-in-training at the Tel Aviv Zen Center, father of two by day and sleep deprived by night, Israeli-born, married, marketer, spiritual practitioner, and none of the above as well.

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