



# AWAKENING OUR ENERGY:

*A Buddhist Perspective*

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David lectures nationally and internationally on various topics, focusing primarily on the encounter between Buddhism and modernity: what each can learn from the other. He is especially concerned about social and ecological issues, and identifies an important parallel between what Buddhism says about our personal predicament and our collective predicament today in relation to the rest of the biosphere.

**T**oday no issue is more important than climate change, which is the most urgent aspect of an ecological crisis that threatens civilization as we know it, and perhaps even our survival as a species. Reliable scientific research has determined that between two-thirds and four-fifths of the fossil fuels (oil, coal, and natural gas) already available to us cannot be used without catastrophic results. At the recent COP21 Paris conference, governments acknowledged that most of those fuels must remain in the ground, unburned, if we are to avoid global temperature increases that will far exceed the 1.5C limited endorsed by that agreement. As the Bank of England governor, Mark Carney, declared: “the vast majority of reserves are unburnable.” At present, however, most of the energy we consume is produced by fossil fuels, and the powerful corporations that market and use those polluting fuels are working hard to keep it that way.

What does Buddhism offer that might help us understand this situation and respond to it?

Needless to say, global warming is not a topic addressed in traditional Buddhist texts or practices, because Buddhism originated and developed in pre-modern Asian cultures where that was not an issue. Nevertheless, Buddhism includes many teachings that are quite relevant, because they have implications that can be applied to our new predicament. When we understand the basic teachings shared by all Buddhist traditions, we can see how they support the importance and urgency of switching from fossil fuels to renewable sources of energy such as solar, wind, and hydrothermal.

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The most important concept in Buddhism is *dukkha*, usually translated as “suffering.” Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha who lived about 2400 years ago, emphasized that what he had to teach was *dukkha* and how to end it. The earliest Buddhist texts distinguish different types of *dukkha*, but at the core of our suffering is the common delusion that I am separate from other people and from the rest of the world—which implies the further delusion

that my well-being is separate from the well-being of other people and the rest of the world. Thus this teaching also emphasizes our interdependence, that all of us are not only interconnected but actually dependent on each other for our very existence. “We are here to overcome the illusion of our separateness,” according to the influential Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. That means realizing not only our intrinsic relationship with other people, but also our nonduality with the ecosystems of the earth. The biosphere is not just an environment (where we happen to live) but a living organism that we are part of. We are not “in” nature, we *are* nature, one of its many mutually dependent species.

## Institutions such as churches and private schools should not continue to profit from the use of fossil fuels.

This means that we cannot damage the earth’s intricate web of life without injuring ourselves—which is exactly what we are doing. Climate change is only part of a larger ecological challenge that our species is responsible for, including the extinction of many plant and animal species, but it is an essential part of that crisis -- the most urgent aspect of it -- and already causing vast amounts of suffering. To cite only a few examples: increasing carbon in the atmosphere has already melted enough polar ice to swamp low-lying Pacific islands and force their residents to abandon their homes; warmer ocean water is producing more destructive storms, as well as damaging coral reefs; weather patterns are becoming destabilized, causing more extreme droughts and floods. All the world’s coastal cities are threatened by higher sea levels. The number of “climate refugees” is rapidly increasing. . . . And these problems will continue to worsen as long as we remain dependent on fossil fuels.

In Buddhist terms, all of this involves a massive increase in *dukkha*—not only for humanity, but for many other species and ecosystems as well. What do Buddhist teachings say about the causes and the end of suffering? And are those teachings applicable to this burgeoning, now global issue?

In addition to the problem of delusion, mentioned above, the earliest Buddhist texts emphasize the role of *tanha* “craving”—in other words, our desires. Traditionally, these have been understood in individual terms: one’s personal sense of being a separate self, and the insatiable desires of such a self, end up causing suffering. In accordance with this, until quite recently Buddhist institutions and practitioners in Asia seldom engaged in movements for social justice or environmental preservation. This restriction was probably unavoidable: no pre-modern Buddhist society was democratic, and Buddhists had to mind their own business to avoid authoritarian repression. Today, however, the globalization of Buddhism, along with modern developments in many Buddhist nations, have opened up new possibilities for the tradition, and such transformations are consistent with Buddhism’s emphasis that everything (including Buddhism!) is impermanent and change is inevitable. These include the development of a more socially engaged Buddhism that is more aware of what might be called social *dukkha*: the suffering caused not by one’s individual karma but by social institutions. There is no better example of that than the ecological crisis, and most urgently the challenge of climate change.

## Today, however, the globalization of Buddhism has opened up new possibilities, including what might be called *social dukkha*: the suffering caused not by one’s individual karma but by social institutions. There is no better example of that than the ecological crisis, and most urgently the challenge of climate change.

An increasing number of Buddhist teachers now acknowledge that delusion and craving also function collectively, and have even become institutionalized. Our species has created a global civilization that feels

increasingly separate from the natural world, treating it as little more than a collection of resources to be exploited for our own benefit. Craving, in particular, has been institutionalized into a ravenous consumerism where individuals never consume enough, and the economy is never big enough. Why is more and more always better, if it can never be *enough*? From a Buddhist perspective, these are the root of the ecological crisis, as well as at the heart of modern discontent and anxiety. But these issues cannot be addressed without finding ways to alleviate the most urgent issue of all: the still-increasing levels of carbon in the atmosphere, largely due to the continued use of fossil fuels.

**It is essential to emphasize that this disinvestment is a crucial moral issue as well as an economic one, in order to “delegitimize” continued reliance on polluting sources of energy.**

Given these basic Buddhist principles, it is not difficult to derive perspectives on energy conversion that can be translated into policy recommendations. The following suggestions are not the only ones possible, but they are consistent with the broad Buddhist concern to *minimize the suffering* of individuals, groups, and the other species of our interdependent biosphere:

Due to the various types of suffering caused by the present use of fossil fuels, and the vast increase in suffering that will occur if we continue to burn them, we must convert to clean, renewable sources of energy, as quickly as possible.

Amazingly, the governments of many nations, including the United States, still subsidize the extraction of fossil fuels, despite the fact that fossil fuel corporations are among the most profitable in human history. Such benefits should be immediately repealed, and in their place subsidies should be provided to aid our transformation to an economy that runs on clean energy.

A study released in June 2015 by Stanford engineering professor Mark

Jacobson demonstrated that we already have the technologies needed to completely convert all 50 of the United States to 80% renewable energy by 2030, and to 100% by 2050. Since atmospheric carbon levels are already very high—the highest they have been since at least 800,000 years ago -- it is important that this conversion become one of our highest priorities, and be fully completed by 2050.

As an important intermediary to support this transformation, governments should impose a carbon tax, which could be gradually increased as cleaner sources of energy become more readily available. Fossil fuels should be taxed at source, and, to minimize the burden that this would impose on working-class and middle-class families, tax refunds should be provided to families that earn below a certain threshold.

Although the issue of how much global temperatures should be allowed to rise is controversial, the 2015 Paris Agreement acknowledges that a 2 degree C. increase (since 1951–1980) is too high, given the disastrous effects of the smaller increases that have already happened. Participating nations agreed to aim at a maximum increase of 1.5 degrees C—which may soon be impossible, given the amount of carbon already in the atmosphere—and it is important to support efforts that aim at that limit.

There is also the issue of employment losses that will occur with the conversion to clean energy. New policies should take account of this by providing job retraining and other programs to improve economic conditions for those who may be adversely affected.

Historically, modern developed nations such as the US and Western Europe have emitted the most carbon into the atmosphere, and in the process have benefited the most economically. Ironically, poorer nations in Africa and south Asia have emitted the least carbon, but some of them are presently suffering more from climate change, and stringent limits on their future emissions threaten the economic development that their populations naturally seek. This means that wealthier nations such as the United States have a responsibility to aid them, financially and technologically, not only to help them achieve carbon-emission limits, but also to assist in development projects that promote their health and well-being—and, not incidentally, the well-being of their ecosystems.

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To promote these changes, institutions such as churches and private schools should divest themselves from all investments in fossil fuel corporations, and invest instead in clean energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydrothermal. The fossil fuel industry remains extremely profitable and extraordinarily powerful; its ability to influence our political institutions is enormous, and we cannot naively expect that the usual political channels available to concerned citizens—for example, voting, writing letters to elected representatives, and so forth—will be sufficient to bring about the change of direction that is needed. It is essential to emphasize that this disinvestment is a crucial moral issue as well as an economic one, in order to “delegitimize” continued reliance on polluting sources of energy. Institutions such as churches and private schools should not continue to profit from the use of fossil fuels. Whether or not this has much effect on the share prices of such companies, it is important as part of an educational process that focuses on how crucial the issue of energy conversion is.

Other nonviolent measures may become necessary and, in my opinion, they are compatible with Buddhist teachings: for example, resistance movements such as that against the Keystone pipeline, and more recently the Standing Rock encampment protesting the Dakota pipeline.

In such ways, the primary concern of Buddhist teachings and practice—to understand and alleviate *dukkha* suffering—can be applied to understand and respond to the greatest challenge of our time.



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