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## *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*

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# A Review of *Mindfully Facing Climate Change*

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*Mindfully Facing Climate Change*. By Bhikkhu Anālayo. Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, 2019, 206 pp., ISBN 978-1-7067-1988-5 (paperback), \$9.95. Open access e-book: <https://www.buddhistinquiry.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/MindfullyFacingClimateChange.pdf>.

*Mindfully Facing Climate Change* by Bhikkhu Anālayo offers a practical approach to environmental issues that is primarily geared towards Buddhist practitioners rather than academics. The book rests on an extensive study of Buddhist teachings and their applications, through which Anālayo seeks to show how one can change one's non-eco-friendly habits into mindfulness and compassion for the wellbeing of all, including animals, human beings, plants, and the planet. The book aims to put early Buddhist teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths, dependent arising, the four divine abodes, and the five aggregates, into practice in environmental terms (14). Climate change is a challenging problem, and the author proposes different ways an individual can respond to environmental destruction, as well as ways readers can change their habits and lifestyle in a way that benefits the planet.

The relationship between Buddhism and ecology has been studied by a number of scholars, such as Lambert Schmithausen, Ian Harris, P. A.

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Payutto, Padmasiri de Silva, Damien Keown, Simon James, Pragati Sahni, Stephanie Kaza, Kenneth Kraft, and Paul Waldau.<sup>2</sup> As Colette Sciberras has noted (following observations by Ian Harris and Donald Swearer), the approaches these studies take can be sorted into six groups: (1) eco-apologist, which involves an uncritical acceptance of the green credentials of Buddhism; (2) eco-contextualist, referring to descriptions of Asian engaged Buddhist activities that are compelling in their local cultures, but do not resonate well with Western sensibilities; (3) eco-constructivist or eco-traditionalist, works which attempt to build an authentically Buddhist environmental philosophy from canonical texts by delving into theoretical questions; (4) eco-critical, signifying works that deny any possibility of authentic Buddhist environmental ethic whatsoever; (5) eco-spirituality, comprising accounts by Buddhist authors inspired by deep ecology; and (6) eco-ethicist, a category of studies which draw a comparison between Buddhism and ancient Greek virtue ethics (Sciberras, 2010; 3-6). Many of the critically constructive works included in these categories formulate a Buddhist environmental ethics by applying principles from Buddhist philosophy or relying on modern interpretations of Buddhist ethics.

By contrast, Anālayo focuses on Pāli Buddhist teachings and current scientific studies that demonstrate environmental instability in today's world. By adopting a pragmatic approach, he aims to show how Buddhist teachings and meditative practices can be employed in building a new model of environmentalism that serves as a guide for ecological living. For instance, Anālayo argues that the *Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint* (*Mahāhatthipadopama Sutta*, *Majjhima Nikāya* 28) comprehensively demonstrates how one can develop equanimity, a mental attitude that is needed to skillfully face the challenges of climate change, by realizing selflessness (29). Realizing selflessness is Right View, which is the first step in the Eightfold Path and crucial in attaining awakening. Right View not only guides one to choose a levelheaded way of life, but also helps in knowing things as they are. In this way, the *Discourse on the Elephant's Footprint*,

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<sup>2</sup> See Ives, "Buddhist Responses to the Ecological Crisis" for a review of monographs dealing with Buddhism and environmentalism from the past five years.

which clearly expresses the impermanent and interdependent nature of phenomena, inspires an environmental attitude.

The book suggests that the Four Noble Truths can be a model for understanding climate change and appropriate responses to it. On this model, the First Noble Truth, that is, the truth of *dukkha*, refers to environmental suffering; the Second Noble Truth, the truth of the arising of *dukkha* (*dukkha-samudaya*), refers to the causes of environmental suffering; the Third Noble Truth, that is, the truth of the cessation of *dukkha* (*dukkha-nirodha*) refers to the cessation of the environmental crisis; and the Fourth Noble Truth, the truth of the path leading out of *dukkha* (*dukkha-nirodha-gāminipaṭipadā*), refers to the ways of overcoming environmental issues. Anālayo reminds us that the Buddhist teaching of the Four Noble Truths is modeled on an ancient Indian scheme for medical diagnosis, which comprises the disease, the identification of the causes behind the disease, the potential for health recovery, and the prescription for cure. Thus, the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, understood as following the order of diagnosis, prognosis, etiology, and lastly, treatment plan, can be applied to the present ecological crisis.

The book is divided into four chapters, with each chapter centered on one of the Four Noble Truths. The first chapter, “Relating to the Earth,” is solely based on discourses which explain how the human body is related to the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind. The chapter focuses on the dependency of human beings on the earth, and suggests how to contemplate the earth as a mindfulness exercise. It surveys meditative approaches to the earth and investigates how to take the earth as an example for cultivating an attitude of equanimity (17). Referring to the *Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint*, the chapter identifies both internal and external earth elements. Anālayo claims that the discourse establishes a connection between the two. The internal earth element is found inside the body and is responsible for the solidity in bodily tissues and organs, such as the flesh, sinews, bones, or the heart. Connecting the solid parts of the body as internal earth element affirms that “bodily parts are predominantly

solid and thereby suitably illustrate the nature of the internal earth element” (27). The discourse also narrates a story about times in which the external earth element disappears. The external earth element, “which is very great, very clean, and very non-repulsive, is [still] of an impermanent nature, of a nature to cease, of a nature to decline, and of a nature to change” (from the *Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint*, translated by Anālayo, 28). In this way, the discourse simultaneously affirms the impermanent nature of the body and the elements. The body and the earth are similar in their nature, which can inspire a cultivation of equanimity to all.

Anālayo also shows how the existence of the body depends on the existence of the earth. By referencing discourses from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya*, the chapter highlights how, when living conditions are congested and crowded, or when food and nourishment are scarce, practicing the Buddha’s teachings becomes difficult. In this sense, the practitioner’s wellbeing depends on environmental conditions. Thus, in order to secure good environmental conditions, humans should establish a harmonious balance with nature. More precisely, Anālayo argues that the *Discourse on the Elephant’s Footprint* and other textual sources affirm an anthropocentric perspective of environmental ethics, “which comes with a recognition of the moral responsibility of humans toward other sentient beings” (48).

The second chapter, “An Ethics of the Mind,” highlights possible causes for the *dukkha* of climate change and environmental destruction. The chapter provides a detailed overview of the ethical perspective on environmental destruction and relies on the Second Noble Truth to examine the cause of this destruction. The author claims that human destructive behaviors are the cause of environmental suffering. To further explore what causes gradual deterioration of the environment, the chapter focuses on the *Discourse on the World Ruler (Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya 26)*. This discourse affirms that the environmental decline is directly linked to decline in morality. By this, it connects between environmental depletion and human moral conduct in general: human behavior

that is rooted in greed, hatred, and delusion causes environmental problems (72). Specifically, chapter two links the three poisons to common misguided responses to the environmental crisis, which should be counteracted: greed motivates a denial of climate change in those who wish to keep enjoying the pleasures of the world; anger leads to hatred towards people who are considered to be independently guilty of the ecological crisis; and delusion manifests in resignation and a sense of helplessness in the face of the threats posed by the crisis. Anālayo suggests that practicing the foundations of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*) and moral conduct may help in building the noble behaviors that can directly help restore natural beauty and minimize the exploitation of the environment.

In chapter three, “Liberation of the Mind,” the author discusses the Third Noble Truth, which consists in complete liberation of the mind from craving (*taṇhā*) and the ensuing three poisons. To understand this in a communal context, Anālayo introduces the Acrobat Simile, which appears in the *Samyukta Āgama* and its equivalent *Samyutta Nikāya*. In this simile, one acrobat tells another one to make sure that they take care of one another, so that they can perform properly. The other acrobat replies that for that they first need to take care of themselves. The simile suggests that one protect and cultivate one’s mind before protecting others by being compassionate and avoiding causing harm.

Self-protection through mindfulness can help in recognizing the presence of greed, hatred, and delusion, while in the absence of this recognition the three poisons cause great disruption in the mind. Similarly, the mutual protection is of relevance to the growing environmental concern, as it prescribes the protection of non-human elements. According to Anālayo, who references the ideas of Thich Nhat Hanh, protecting humans is all about protecting all the possible non-human elements, and vice versa. Apart from that, chapter three also emphasizes the relevance of the four divine abodes for an appropriate response to the climate change. Out of the four divine abodes—loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity—Anālayo finds that compassion is of particular relevance to the

environmental state. For instance, he writes that loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are not merely depicted as wholesome actions, but they are also suggested in order to overcome defilements such as ill will, cruelty, discontent, and aversion (90). Referring to the *Discourse on the Simile of the Saw* (*Kakacūpama Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya* 21), Anālayo affirms that the practice of loving-kindness not merely leads one to be merciful, but it also counters ill will. In a similar vein, compassion stands for the absence of cruelty and harming (101).

In the fourth and final chapter, “Walking the Path,” the author links the Eightfold Path to the issue of climate change. In this regard, although no environmental destructions were known at the time of the Buddha, a number of the Buddha’s discourses may offer guidance as to how one ought to respond to the environmental crisis. By relating the current ecological situation to progress in the path to awakening, Anālayo claims that a practical way of life, guided by the Eightfold Path, may help in overcoming the challenges of climate change. Right View, for instance, helps in choosing a way of life that is based on non-violence, compassion, equanimity, and similar Buddhist values; in short, in adopting a “mental attitude of equanimity, grounded in a mind that is firmly established in what is wholesome” (95). It enables the recognition of wholesome and unwholesome actions and their roots. At the same time, it helps in seeing things as they really are. The author argues that fundamental knowledge of the Five Aggregates helps one to know that there are no differences between self and others. By investigating the *Discourse on the Seven Suns* (*Sattasūriya Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya* 7.62) and different Buddhist philosophical doctrines, such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, dependent arising, and the four divine abodes, as well as meditation practice, the author argues that these can play a significant role in mitigating ecological repercussions.

One of the book’s great strengths is the manner in which the author simplifies theoretical ideas, such as the concepts of internal and external earth elements, and clarifies Buddhist meditative practices like

mindfulness in a way that is suitable both for experts and non-specialists. The author offers a nuanced and clear explanation of these Buddhist teachings and meditations, and approaches the issue of environmentalism through his pragmatic experiences. By illuminating the different stages of the meditative practice, Anālayo suggests to the reader that a virtuous way of life will help overcome defilements and promote environmentalism. Buddhist virtues and the invitation to cultivate a life based on simplicity, non-violence, self-control, mindfulness, and universal love lead to a particular character building and self-regulation. At the same time, and no less important, the practice of these values serves the environmental cause.

At times, the book suffers from a slight inconsistency in its usage of Pāli terms and their English equivalents, as it oscillates between different terms. However, the book is overall written with clarity. It presents a distinct model of environmental ethics that draws from canonical teachings and meditation practices. In addition, it offers useful suggestions for today's reality. As such, it is a well-researched contribution to the field of Buddhist studies, environmental studies, religion, and environmental activism.

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