

Saving the Earth



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As this work is not of a scholarly nature, Pali and Sanskrit words have been
transliterated without their diacritical marks.

About the Author

Akuppa (John Wigham) was born and bred on Tyneside in Northern England in 1962. Having been interested in nature from a young age, he studied geography and town planning. He went on to work in local government in Manchester, Sunderland and North Tyneside, with a particular involvement in environmental matters. He has campaigned politically on green issues, especially climate change, for many years. He was ordained into the Western Buddhist Order in 2000, and given his Buddhist name 'Akuppa', which means 'unshakeable'. He teaches meditation and Buddhism at Newcastle Buddhist Centre, and in prisons, where he serves as a Buddhist chaplain.

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1

The Path Starts at Your Feet



BY THE TIME I BEGAN TO FOLLOW THE BUDDHIST PATH, I already had a long-standing personal interest in environmental issues. I had been engaged in them as a planner, local politician, and campaigner. It was clear to me from the outset that there was some affinity between Buddhism and environmental concern. Since then, with the help of others, I have reflected on what that affinity is and on how these two areas of my life might fit together. I thought for a time that Buddhism might need to be changed to accommodate modern environmental concerns. More and more, however, I have come to be convinced that the essence of the Buddha's teachings is timeless. The path of transformation they offer is of immense value to the environmental movement, and, indeed, to any human being in the modern world. It also seems to me that a love for the environment is a natural and even indispensable part of being a Buddhist.

In this book, I explore the valuable gifts that Buddhism has to offer environmentalism, as well as the importance to the

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Buddhist of an environmental perspective. It is my hope, as a traveller on this path, to set out a rough map of the terrain, as much for my own benefit as anyone else's. I hope that, having surveyed it, you will feel inspired to explore further through the many other resources, books and websites on the subject, some of which I list at the end of the book.

The virtue of a path is that it starts right at your feet. Whatever mix of feelings you have at this moment about the state of the environment, that is where we begin. Buddhism is not about gritting one's teeth and suppressing feelings that we might find difficult. Nor is it just another intellectual, political, or even religious position. It is not to be plundered as a source of bland homilies about compassion or the nature of the universe. Its true value lies in the practical path of transformation that it offers, both for us and for the world. To test this, we will need to engage our hearts as well as our minds.

I have to confess that, when I hear a radio programme or see a magazine article about the destruction of the Amazonian rainforest, my immediate reaction is to want to switch channels or turn the page. It's not that I don't care about the rainforest. It's just that the inevitable statistics about the rate of its disappearance (often measured in pieces of land the size of Wales) are simply too depressing. I already know about the issue, I don't buy tropical hardwoods, and there seems to be little else I can do about it. What could I, as one person, possibly do that would make anything more than the most minute difference? Why just make myself miserable?

Such feelings of despair and powerlessness are common reactions to global environmental problems. The complex of conditions that bring them about seems too vast and too distant to exert any influence over whatsoever. This can result in a kind of alienated fatalism: we carry on with our lives, but

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with a dull sense of anxiety and pessimism about the future.

We can always choose to listen only to the more reassuring experts or, indeed, not to listen to any at all. Messengers of doomsday are not, after all, a new thing, but, as yet, no all-consuming apocalypse has overtaken us. Those of us without the benefit of several scientific degrees have to rely on the say-so of experts to judge the nature and extent of the environmental crisis. This can be a bewildering experience. Scientists often disagree about the facts, or they agree about the facts but come up with different interpretations of them. Almost weekly we read of new research findings and new predictions, sometimes alarming, sometimes reassuring, but a substantial majority of scientific opinion is pointing out the catastrophic and irreversible consequences of our actions. Even if the thousands of scientists working for respected organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the International Union for Conservation of Nature might be getting it wrong, the stakes are so high that it would be foolish not to take them seriously. If we waited until the evidence was completely incontrovertible, it would be too late to do anything about it anyway. We can deny the evidence, or we can acknowledge that it matters.

The desire to continue with business as usual, to avoid any implications we don't like, can be very strong. If you think you may have exceeded your overdraft limit, you might be tempted not to open your bank statements, believing, somewhere in the back of your mind, that this will make the problem go away. It doesn't work, I have found, yet this is exactly how we as a society behave with regard to some environmental issues.

Another 'difficult' feeling that we may be starting with is anger. The sense of frustration at the slowness of our collective

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response to climate change, for example, can be overwhelming. It's like watching some terrible, avoidable accident happen in slow motion and not being able to intervene. Despair and anger are not unnatural responses to the situation; they are even understandable. But, somehow, we need to get to the point where we can face up to the problems, work out the implications, and act accordingly. If we are stuck in such negative feelings, we are likely to overlook the very thing that can help us move on. The fact that we have felt despair in the first place indicates that we must have at least some spark of concern about other people, about future generations, about animals, or about the beauty of nature. If we feel anger, that shows that we have a well of energy we can draw upon. It is this capacity to look beyond ourselves that makes a truly human existence possible. This seed of heroism is the most precious part of being human.

The Buddhist path is about being fully human, in the most positive sense. It calls us to be truly happy, even blissful. We may think that we have a choice between personal happiness on the one hand, and being alive to the state of the world on the other. It's true that we need to avoid a gloomy obsession with suffering in the world – that doesn't help anyone. But ultimately, Buddhism says, the way to lead a rich, fulfilling, and, yes, blissful life is to be fully alive to the world around us.

So what would a Buddhist environmentalism be like? What Buddhism and environmentalism share is a desire to end suffering. Perhaps it would be more fruitful then to think not of a Buddhist environmentalism, but Buddhism as environmentalism. It will not be another ideological position, nor a political platform. It will be what it has always been – a path of transformation that involves every part of us – body, heart, and mind. The path is heroic, but it does not

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lead us to sacrifice our deepest longing for happiness. Along the Buddhist path, feelings of despair and powerlessness are merely the seeds of change. They can be cultivated and grown. If we do look beyond ourselves and follow the path, we might be surprised to find that, in a thousand ordinary ways, real change is possible after all.