

REEXAMINING OUR APPROACH TO THE ENVIRONMENT

The following article was written by SGI President Daisaku Ikeda as the foreword for Buddhist Perspectives on the Earth Charter, published by the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century, November 1997.

Since the shocking report *The Limits to Growth* was published [1972] by The Club of Rome,¹ people's interest in environmental issues has continued to increase. However, the magnitude of environmental destruction that has expanded on a global scale today still surpasses efforts to respond to the crisis, starting with the United Nations conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972.

The threat posed by environmental destruction may not be as obvious as that posed by nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. And yet, in terms of the urgency of the crisis confronting humanity, I would contend that the environment cannot be accorded any lesser priority. It is an extremely serious threat, with potentially fatal results to human dignity and the natural environment. We indeed face the dire prospect of "sickness unto death"² if we continue to stand by idly.

Underlying the contemporary situation is a civilization that, in several centuries since the industrial revolution, has stimulated and encouraged the limitless expansion of the human appetite for consumption. We have seen the relentless pursuit of the values of affluence, convenience, comfort, and efficiency during this time. I believe that the first step toward rectifying this state of things requires a fundamental reexamination of the views of and approach to nature, the human being, and the world that until now, sustained modern material civilization. These are the core values that have at once enabled the giant strides of science and technology while at the same time unleashing an infinitude of human desires.

It is important that this process of reflection be conducted in such a way as to bring forth the light of wisdom from each of the cultural and spiritual traditions that human beings have given rise to on earth. For it is from these various sources of wisdom that we draw forth the direction and energy to transform the course of contemporary civilization and lay the foundations for a true global civilization.

In April, 1996, in a statement issued prior to Earth Day, the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) warned that the global environment is in crisis, and that unless there is a major change in direction, there will be little meaning in celebrating Earth Day. There have been numerous statistics released that support this grim assessment, and it is becoming increasingly clear that the global environmental crisis cannot be resolved by the mere continuation of the means and measures that have been used to date. In this respect, we are beset with the overwhelming sense that without a major change in direction, a fundamental reassessment and restructuring of the modes and meaning of civilization itself, we will be unable to avoid a truly catastrophic outcome.

Needless to say, the global environmental crisis is not confined to the political, economic, or scientific and technological dimensions, involving only the wise and appropriate allocation and utilization of resources and wealth. It is imperative that we probe such core issues as the relationship between humans and nature, humans and society, as well as between humans and humans, which includes how we perceive nature, our system of val-

ues that prescribe our civilization. Humanity is being urged to transform civilization so that it would establish dignity of life in the true sense of the word at the very basis of every possible system of values. I cannot help feeling that a fundamental change in each of our outlooks is being called for at this moment.

It is hoped that the Earth Charter, which is being drafted and moved toward adoption, will provide a shared ethical basis, common norms of human behavior, that will guide people's efforts to break out of the present crisis. As one who has continued to ponder and work toward the resolution of these problems, I would like to suggest that Eastern thought, in particular Buddhism, is rich in ideas that can provide a philosophical basis for the formulation of such norms.

Central to Buddhist thinking is the concept of "dependent origination," which describes the coexistence and interdependence of humanity, the natural world and indeed the cosmos. This theory posits a symbiotic order in which the microcosm of the individual is unified with the macrocosm of the universe as a single living entity. As such, it overturns the mechanistic understanding of the universe that underlies modern scientific thinking and which positions humans as separate and isolated from the rest of existence. It is, rather, an organic view of the universe. What I wish to stress in particular is that in the Buddhist view, this cosmic interdependence is not static, but is filled with the creative dynamism of life.

In the Buddhist scriptures we find the following passage that describes this dynamism: "without life, there is no environment; and life is created and supported by its environment." "Life" (Jp *shoho*) here means the subject or self which carries on its life activities; "environment" (Jp *eho*) the world or environment that surrounds that self. The important point here is the close interrelation between the two, as the self and the environment are two integral expressions of the same ultimate reality or true entity of life; this is not confined to a static relationship of inseparability. Hence, the first and the latter phrases of this expression are not simply placed in a parallel; nor can their order be inverted. The oneness of life and its environment means that even though life is shaped by the environment, and the influence of the environment on life must be reckoned with, it is life, in particular human life, that is the transforming protagonist without which the environment could not exist. The role of the human will is thus central to this dynamic interrelationship.

In recent years, the idea of coexistence, or symbiosis, has gained considerable currency. It is my contention that "symbiosis" in the true sense is to be found in the delicate and exquisite balance between a strong and responsible will to transformation and a warm and loving embrace of the environment. True symbiosis is found in the dynamic interpenetration of these two aspects.

It is hard to overstate the significance of the Earth Charter, which is being undertaken through the united efforts of concerned people throughout the world from all national and cultural backgrounds. The noble motives and efforts towards drafting and adopting this "people's treaty" indeed merit our approbation as an important challenge in human history.

I offer my heartfelt prayers for the rewarding and successful civil society consultations involved in the drafting process. For it is by bringing together the wisdom and courage of all people on Earth toward a Charter that truly represents the general will of humankind that we will move from an era of sounding warnings, to one of action based on solidarity. It is the solidarity of humanity united in a common struggle that will bring forth a third millennium that shines with the light of hope. As one who shares the aspirations and

dreams of this undertaking, I wish to express my sincere respect for all whose efforts and involvement have brought this project to its present state of fruition.

I take this opportunity to reiterate my heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to all those involved in this undertaking and pledge myself to continue my own efforts, as one Buddhist, toward the creative resolution of the issues that have inspired it.

—*Daisaku Ikeda*

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1. The Club of Rome: A research center and think tank founded in 1968, comprising scientists, economists and businessmen, and former and current heads of state from five continents who believe that the future of humankind is not pre-determined and that each individual can contribute to the improvement of world societies.
2. “Sickness Unto Death”: From the title of a book by Danish theologian and existentialist philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55).

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