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Chapter 2

A Tibetan Buddhist Perspective on Spirit in Nature

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Brothers and sisters, I am very happy to be here with you, to come to this beautiful place once more. I have enjoyed the last few days very much. The speeches from the leaders of the various traditions have been very impressive.

Although I have prepared a speech myself, a large number of people have come here today, and I think you may have different interests. This creates confusion in my mind right now; just what subject should I address to be most helpful to all of you?

The first thing that will relieve my small anxiety is to confess that I am not an expert or a specialist on ecology or the environment. So I will address a broader subject. And if you have come here with some expectation on that score, I can say that, essentially, I have nothing to offer to you. I can simply try to share some of my own views and experiences, and then maybe some of you will find some benefit; or at least some new ideas to think about.

Now, first I will try to explain briefly the Buddhist attitude and approach to the environmental crisis. In dealing with this subject I would like to divide my talk in three stages. First, I will talk about the Buddhist perception of nature and reality. Second, I will discuss what kind of ethical principle an individual should adopt, based on that view of reality and nature. Third, I will talk about what kind of right conduct, what kind of measures individuals and society should take to restore and correct the degradation of nature and the earth, based on such an ethical principle.

When talking about developing a correct understanding or correct view of reality and nature, Buddhism emphasizes the applica-

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tion of reasoning and analysis. It talks about four avenues of reasoning or analysis through which one can develop a correct understanding of reality and nature. These four can be called natural, relational, functional, and logical avenues of reasoning. Reasoning and analysis have to take into account the natural laws of the universe, the interrelationships that exist in the universe, the functional properties of things in reality, and the processes of reason itself, with which it understands the universe.

First one takes into account the fundamental laws of nature, such as the fact that things exist, the fact that matter differs from consciousness, the fact that mind exists in a certain way, and so on. Second, reason takes into account the interdependence between these various entities that exist in the world, the interdependence between causes and conditions, the interdependence between parts that constitute a whole, and so on. Third, reason takes into account the functional properties that we see in reality, the properties which emerge as a consequence of the interaction between multiple factors. Fourth, based on these three levels of understanding nature, Buddhism emphasizes understanding the process of human reasoning and analysis itself. For example, reason can understand how reliable knowledge is generated through inference, either about the probable nature of a cause from the observed nature of its effect, or about a probable future state of affairs from an observed state of its cause. In short, while Buddhism is usually thought of as a religion, it is actually a way of thought that emphasizes the necessity for human reason to be applied to human problems.

When talking about the fundamental nature of reality, one could sum up the entire understanding of that nature in a simple verse: "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form" (The Heart Sutra). This simple line sums up the Buddhist understanding of the fundamental nature of reality. In appearance, we see the world of existence and experience. In essence, all those things are empty of intrinsic reality, of independent existence. Superficially, if we were to look at the words "emptiness" and "form" or "appearance," they might seem to be contradictory. If anything has appearance, how can it be empty? If anything is empty, how can it have a form or appearance? To overcome this contradiction, one must understand the meaning of emptiness to be interdependence. The meaning of interdependence is emptiness of independent existence. Precisely

because things and events exist relatively and appear as having form, they are empty of independent existence.

Events and things come into being as a result of the aggregation of many factors, causes and conditions. But because they lack independent or absolute existence, it is possible for experiences such as our sufferings—which we do not desire—to come to a cessation. And because they lack independent or absolute existence, it is possible for pleasant experiences such as our happiness—which we do desire—to be created within ourselves.

Fundamental to attaining the Buddhist perception of reality, which ultimately is emptiness, is the understanding of relativity, the principle of interdependence. And the meaning of interdependence has three levels. At its subtlest level, it is the interdependence of things with thought and conceptual designations. At its middle level, it is the interdependence of parts and wholes. And at the surface level, it is the interdependence of causes and effects.

I think there is a direct connection between the correct understanding of ecology and the natural environment and the Buddhist principle of interdependence in terms of causes and effects and in terms of parts and wholes, factors and aggregates. But the correct understanding of the subtlest level of interdependence—that of the interdependence of things and conceptual constructions—has more to do with maintaining the balance of the outer and the inner world, and with the purification of the inner world.

I believe that every individual living being, whether animal or human, has an innate sense of self. Stemming from that innate sense of self, there is an innate desire to enjoy happiness and overcome suffering. And this is something which is innate to all beings. I believe it is a natural phenomenon. But if we tried to examine why such innate faculties are there within living beings, I do not think we could ever find a convincing answer. I would rather stop there and say that it is a natural fact. Various different philosophies have tried to examine that nature of living beings. And still, after centuries, this is not yet finally solved. So I think it is better to accept this as something natural, as a reality.

Therefore, we can say that the purpose of life is happiness, joy, and satisfaction, because life itself, I think, exists on the ground of hope, on the basis of hope. And hope is, of course, for the better, for the happier. That is quite natural, isn't it? In that case, relations with one's fellow human beings—and also, animals, including

insects (even those which sometimes seem quite troublesome)—should be based on the awareness that all of them seek happiness, and none of them want suffering. All have a right to happiness, a right to freedom from suffering. And generally speaking, all beings seem beautiful to us, beautiful birds, beautiful beasts. Their presence gives us some kind of tranquility, some kind of joy; they are like an ornament to our lives really. And then the forest, the plants, and the trees, all these natural things come together to make our surroundings pleasant. All are heavily interdependent in creating our joy and happiness, in removing our sufferings.

Our human ancestors survived by depending on trees, on wood. Their fires depended on the wood. The trees gave them shelter and protection. When a dangerous animal threatened them, they could climb up to safety. Some trees bear beautiful flowers, which are ornaments, which they picked and wore in their hair, something like our modern jewelry. Then, of course, there's the fruit of the trees, and nuts, which are nourishing. And finally, of course, there are sticks made from the branches; when someone attacks, it's a weapon; when you get older, it is a cane, like a reliable friend. Such examples, I think, show the historical basis of human nature. Later, as human culture developed, we made something more beautiful out of it, something poetical. During our ancestors' time, human survival and welfare were very dependent on trees. But as society and culture became more developed and sophisticated, this dependence became less and less, and trees became the subject of poetry.

So, therefore, this shows that our very existence is something heavily dependent on the environment. Now since we are seeking happiness and joy, we must be able to distinguish the different causes and conditions that lead to happiness and joy, causes both immediate and long-term. One finds that, although the ultimate aim of the major world religions is the achievement of the happy life after death, eternal life, they do not encourage their adherents to neglect the well-being of the present life. The expressed aim of Buddhism is the purification and development of the mind through mental training in order to attain supreme liberation. But the meditation manuals place great emphasis on finding an ideal environment for the practice of training the mind because a cleaner environment does have a tremendous impact on one's spiritual progress. The Buddhist literature mentions the sanctity of the environment as inspiring and blessing the practitioner, and in turn the

practitioner's spiritual realization blessing the environment. There is an exchange between human spirit and nature. In tune with such awareness, we find in Buddhist practice specific rituals aimed at regenerating the vitality of the earth, at purifying the environment, wherein certain precious minerals are buried underground, and then consecration rituals are performed.

I think that in ancient time, the human ability to measure the imbalance of nature was very limited, almost none. At that time, there was no need for worry or concern. But today, the human ability to disturb the balance of nature is growing. World population has increased immeasurably. Due to many factors, nature, even the Mother Planet herself, it seems, is showing us a red light. She is saying, "Be careful, you should realize there are limits!"

Taking care of the planet is nothing special, nothing sacred or holy. It's just like taking care of our own house. We have no other planet, no other house, except this one. Even if there are a lot of disturbances and problems, it is our only alternative. We cannot go to any other planet. If the moon is seen from a distance, it appears quite beautiful. But if we go there to stay, I think, it would be horrible. So, our blue planet is much better, much happier. Therefore, we have to take care of our own place. This is not something special or holy. This is just a practical fact!

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Now I will go on to the second part of my talk, the development of an ethical principle based on the Buddhist understanding of reality and nature as emptiness and interdependence.

Essentially, nature's elements have secret ways of adapting. When something is damaged, another element helps out and improves the situation through some kind of evolution. This is nature's way of adjustment. But then, human intervention creates certain changes which do not give nature and its elements time to cope. So the main troublemaker, the major cause of imbalance, is we human beings ourselves. Therefore, the responsibility should be borne by us. We must find some way to restrain our destructive habits. We cause these problems mainly with our modern economy. With different kinds of factories and chemicals, we have a strong negative impact on the balance of nature. The next question is, if that is the case, whether we have to stop all factories, all chemicals.

Of course, we cannot do that. While there are negative side effects, there are also tremendous benefits. True science and technology bring humanity a lot of benefit.

So what to do? We must use our human intelligence. And in some cases, we must have more patience. We must cultivate more contentment. And we must handle new progress and development in a proper way, keeping the side effects to a minimum. At the same time, we must take care of the earth and its basic elements in a more balanced way, no matter how expensive the cost. I think that's the only way.

Here I have come to the third part of my talk. Based on a practical ethic of caring for our home, grounded in our understanding of interdependence, what kind of measures can we take to correct these imbalances in nature? Generally speaking, crises emerge as a consequence of certain causes or conditions. Principal among them is ignorance of the real situation. In order to overcome that, the most effective means is to develop knowledge and understanding. Presently, older people like myself are speaking out about these dangers—but I think that is very limited in effect. The greater responsibility, I feel, lies with the scientists, especially those who are trained in this field. Through their research, with their experimental data, they should make clear the real long-term consequences of certain negative practices and positive measures. Scientists and environmental experts should prepare a very specific and detailed global study of the long-term dangers and benefits our society will face in the future. Materials based on such studies should then be thoroughly learned by young students in school right from the start. Young children should take the environment into account when they study about geography, economics, or history. I feel it's very important to introduce ecology into the school curriculum, pointing out the environmental problems that the world currently faces. Even at a very early age, children should be exposed to the understanding and knowledge of the planetary environmental crisis. The various media—newspapers, television—all should be responsible for communicating the reality of this threatening situation.

In some cases, we might be able to overcome ignorance, understand reality, and reach the situation where everyone knows what is going on. But still we do not act to prevent disaster. Such a lack of will to act—in spite of having the knowledge and understanding—

stems, I think, either from negligence (becoming totally oblivious to the crisis) or from discouragement (the feeling that "I have no ability, I simply cannot do anything").

I firmly believe that the most important factor is our attitude and human motivation. Genuine human love, human kindness, and human affection. This is the key thing. That will help us to develop human determination also. Genuine love or compassion is not a feeling of lofty pity, sympathy tinged with contempt toward the other, a looking down on them; it is not like that. True love or compassion is actually a special sense of responsibility. A strong sense of care and concern for the happiness of the other, that is genuine love. Such true love automatically becomes a sense of responsibility.

So, how should we develop compassion? How should we expand our love? First, it is very important to know that within the meaning of "love" there are various emotions. What is commonly called "love" is often merely blind love, or blind attachment. In many cases, it involves unconscious projections on the other, possessiveness, and desire; it is usually not at all good. There is a second level of love or compassion, which is a kind of condescending pity. But that is not really positive compassion. We feel genuine compassion and love not just for beings close to us, but for all persons and animals. Such true compassion develops from the recognition that everyone does not want suffering and does want happiness, just like us. When we really feel that, we feel that they have every right to be happy and every right to overcome suffering. Realizing that, we naturally develop a genuine concern for their suffering and their right to be free from it.

We can feel this kind of genuine love for others no matter what their attitude toward us. That love is steady; so long as any person or being suffers, we feel responsible, even if he or she is our enemy. Love mixed with attachment makes us concerned only for beings close to us. That kind of love is biased and always narrow and limited. But genuine love is much wider and stronger. And it can be developed. If we analyze the situation in various ways, we can develop a firm conviction about the need for such a mental attitude, even out of self-interest. In our daily life, it is the energy of genuine love and compassion that is the source of hope, the source of happiness, the source of joy, and the source of inner strength. When we have that kind of love with its strong sense of responsibility, we will never lose our hope or our determination. The more

we are challenged by negative forces, the more determination we will develop. So it is really the source of every success. That is what I always feel.

In our daily lives, we love smiles. I especially love a genuine smile, not a sarcastic smile, or a diplomatic smile, which sometimes even increases suspicion. But I consider the genuine smile something really precious. It is the great bridge of communication. Whether you know the same language or not, whether you are from the same culture, or nation, or race all that is secondary. The basic thing is to realize that the other is a human being, a gentle human being who wants happiness and does not want suffering, just like ourselves. At that basic level, we just smile—we can exchange smiles. Then immediately the barrier is broken and we feel close.

After all, a human being is a social animal. I often tell my friends that there is no need to study philosophy or other complicated subjects. Just look at those innocent insects, like ants or bees. I am very fond of honey so I am always exploiting the bees' hard work. Therefore, I have a special interest in the lives of bees. I learned many things about them and developed a special relationship with them. They amaze me. They have no religion, no constitution, and no police force, but their natural law of existence requires harmony, and they have a natural sense of responsibility. They follow nature's system.

So what is wrong with us, we human beings? We have such a great intelligence, our human intelligence, our human wisdom. But I think we often use our human intelligence in the wrong way, we turn it in the wrong direction. As a result, in a way we are doing certain actions which are essentially contrary to our basic human nature. And here I always feel that basic human nature is compassion or affection. This is quite simple. If we look closely at the beginning of human life, at the conception of a child, we see that sexual relations and the forming of a family are connected with real love. From the biological perspective, according to natural law, the main purpose is reproduction. And I think that the beneficial kind of love—even of sexual love—is love with a sense of care and responsibility. Mad love is not lasting, I think, if it lacks a sense of responsibility.

Look at those beautiful wild birds. When two birds come together, it is to build a nest and raise their young. When they have chicks, the male and the female both assume the same responsi-

bility to feed the little ones. Sometimes mad love is just wild, just like dogs, completely careless about the consequences. I think it is not very good for people. If that was all there was to it, there would be no use for marriage. And yet look how people consider the marriage ceremony something very important. If we really consider it important, then we should have the love that is a sense of responsibility. If we did develop that, I think there would be fewer divorces, wouldn't there? Marriages would last longer—I think until death.

At any rate, we can see that human life begins with affection, with love, a sense of responsibility and care. We are in the mother's womb for many months. During this time the mother's mental calmness is said to be a very important factor for the healthy development of the unborn child. And after birth, according to some neurobiologists, the first few weeks are the most important period for the healthy development of the child's brain. And they say that, during that time, the mother's actual physical touch is a crucial factor. This does not come from religious scripture or ideology. It is from scientific observation. Therefore, I believe that this human body itself very much appreciates affection. The first action of the child is the sucking of the mother's milk. And the mother, in spite of pain or exhaustion, is very willing to give milk to her child. So milk is a profound symbol of affection. Without mother's milk we cannot survive. That is human nature.

During the process of education, it is quite easy to notice how much better we learn from a teacher who not only teaches us but also shows a real concern for our welfare, who cares about our future. The lessons of such a teacher go much deeper in our mind than lessons received from a teacher who just explains about the subject without any human affection. This again shows the power of affection in nature.

The art of medicine is another good example. During this trip, I visited a hospital in New York about a problem in my left nostril. The doctor who examined me and removed the blockage was so gentle and careful, in addition to having a beautiful machine. His face was full of life—and he had a genuine smile. In spite of some pain from that small operation, I felt very fresh, quite happy and confident. In some cases when we visit doctors, they may be very professional, but if they show no human affection, we feel anxious, suspicious, and unsure how it will turn out. Haven't we all noticed that?

In our old age we again reach a stage where we come to depend heavily on others' affection. We appreciate even the slightest affection and concern. And even when we face death, on our last day, even though all efforts are now exhausted, though there is no hope, still, if some genuine friend is there at our bedside, we feel much happier. Although there is no more time to do anything, we still feel much happier—because of human nature. So, from the beginning of human life to the end of human life, during all those years, it is clear that human affection is the key for human happiness, human survival, and human success. What do you think? This is how I feel.

Therefore, affection, love, and compassion—they are not a matter of religion. Various religions do teach us the importance of love and compassion because the basic aim of religions is the support and benefit of human beings. Since human nature is love, since genuine love and compassion are so important for life, every religion, in spite of different philosophies, traditions, and ideologies, teaches us about love and compassion. But human affection as essential for human nature is something deeper than matters of religious belief or institutional affairs. It is even more basic for human survival and success than any particular religion. Therefore, I always used to tell people that whether they are believers or nonbelievers, that's up to them. From a certain point of view, religion is a little bit of a luxury. If you have religion, that's very good. But even without religion, you can survive, you can manage to live and even sometimes succeed. But not without human affection; without love, we cannot survive. Therefore, affection, love, and compassion, they are the deepest aspect of human nature.

Some of you here may doubt this. You may feel that anger and hatred are also part of human nature. Yes, of course anger is a human habit. But if we carefully investigate, I think we will find the dominant force of the human mind is affection. As I mentioned earlier, when we are first born, if the mother feels the agitation of resentment or anger toward the child, then her milk may not flow freely. I noticed when I visited Ladakh that sometimes when people milk their cow, the cow's calf is brought in the front of the cow first. This way they cheat the cow; in her mind, she is giving milk to her own baby. So that shows that there is a natural condition where without a tender loving feeling of closeness, the milk may not come. So milk is the result of affection and is blocked by anger.

Again I have another reason, if we look carefully at daily life. When something happens which horrifies our minds, a murder case or terrorist attack, it is immediately reported in all the news because an event like this makes such a forceful impression in the mind. And yet every day thousands and millions of undernourished children are given food; they are nourished and they survive another day. But no one reports that because it is something normal; it should be a routine happening. We take it for granted. These facts also demonstrate our human nature and that affection is something normal. Killing, and other actions born of anger and hatred are unusual for us. And so such unfortunate events strike our minds more forcefully. The basic human nature is gentle. And so I feel that there is a real possibility to promote and develop human affection on the global level. It is not unrealistic, because it is the most important part of human nature.

Each of us is an individual, naturally a part of humanity. So human effort must begin with our individual initiatives. Each of us should have a strong sense of the responsibility to create our own small part of a positive atmosphere. At the same time, we have more powerful social methods today with which to channel individual human insight and inspiration and thus to have a wider impact. There are different organizations on the national and international levels, governments, and United Nations organizations. These are powerful channels through which to implement new insights, to mobilize new inspirations.

This kind of conference is very helpful to such an end, though it would be unrealistic to expect that a few conferences could achieve any sort of complete solution. That's expecting too much. But, the constant effort of deep thought and broad discussion is very useful and worthwhile.

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