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A Matter of Great Consequence

by Stephanie Kaza

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The Earth Charter is a call to awaken, a bell ringing out in the big sky– -listen! listen! The earth is calling to the people—attend! attend! This is a matter of great consequence— wake up now!

The wake-up call is the heart of Buddhist teaching, the primary motivation for spiritual practice. Many texts from many eras have reiterated the Buddha's basic teaching –wake up! Follow the path to enlightenment! According to the Four Noble Truths, one first must acknowledge the inescapable existence of suffering. The Earth Charter articulates this suffering for the environment and for human relations with the environment, marked strongly now by violence and abuse. Given the pervasive nature of suffering, the human spiritual task is to develop compassion and act out of kindness rather than self-centeredness. The

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Earth Charter invites the people of the world to take up this task by protecting and restoring the integrity of this place we call home.

Much of the Earth Charter lines up with traditional Buddhist values and texts. The earliest precepts in the Vinaya, or monk's code, teach proper ways to maintain clean water and air. Later Chinese texts develop the nature of interdependence, lighting the way for the science of ecology, study of relationality. Zen Buddhist sutras encourage direct experience of the natural world—no separation! Yet much is also new in the Charter, for this is a work in progress at the turn of the twenty-first century.

How can Buddhists use this declaration? What value does it contribute for Buddhist practice at this time? There are at least four ways Buddhists around the world can use this Earth Charter for awakening and liberation. The first is to study the nature of the suffering that extends throughout the globe at this time. Buddhists today are called to look deeply at the wide-ranging, large scale effects of the human inclination for greed, hate, and ignorance. Greed for survival leads to hoarding and overuse, not just for the individual level, but also for corporate bodies—nation states, transnational corporations. Hate arises in conflict over resource use—will loggers or hikers win the forests? Will farmers or hydroelectric power take the waters? Ignorance of species and ecosystems excuses a wake of destruction from human activities, unprecedented in scale. Those who aspire to follow the Buddha's way can look not only at how their own actions and the actions of their communities contribute to this suffering, but also at the global implications of these choices. This kind of study is a modern way to practice with the deep, all-pervading First Noble Truth.

Through contacting this suffering, being willing to be present with it, the Buddhist practitioner cultivates deep compassion. This is a second way to work with the Earth Charter. The Charter calls especially for compassionate action on behalf of indigenous people, plants, and animals who have suffered great loss at the hands of unkind people and governments. The Charter urges equal participation by women and young people in developing compassionate practices which can sustain life. This means caring for both what is suffering now and also engaging in practices of compassion for the lives of future generations.

The Fourth Noble Truth offers a way to enlightenment that reorders one's priorities away from self-centeredness and toward service and recognition of others. The Eight-fold Path presents endless opportunities to experience the interconnecting, interdepending nature of the universe. Keeping the Earth Charter as a guide, a follower of the Buddha's way can investigate these paths to find everyday practices which protect the Earth. For example, to choose Right Livelihood would mean committing one's work energy to earth-harmonious activity--restoring damaged rivers, growing organic food, building bluebird boxes. To choose Right Action would mean to scrupulously review one's own actions as well as one's community or nation-state—which actions perpetuate harm? which generate and nourish life? To choose Right Speech would mean to find ways to speak up on behalf of trees and deserts where they are threatened and where they are beloved.

The Earth Charter also can be used in the study of karma, or the law of cause and effect. When one looks deeply into the current global situation, it becomes clear that many seeds of all scales of karma are ripening. These fruits are both wholesome (the grassroots resistance movement, for example) and unwholesome (the rapacious plunder of tropical forests). Individuals in the web of interdependence are choosing consciously or unconsciously how they will live with and affect the Earth. Of perhaps even greater significance are the choices of corporate bodies—universities, government agencies, business, and industry. What is the karma of replacing native forests with massive paper plantations? What actions flow from philosophies of life and nature taught in universities? What are the ecological consequences of transnational corporation labor and resource use practices? To study the karma of violence, poverty, and suffering outlined in the Earth Charter is to engage the structural agents which harm many members of the web of life. The Earth Charter is a call for karmic responsibility, for generating awareness around the consequences of individual and corporate actions.

This draft of the Earth Charter represents the thoughtful reflection of many people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. Already many hours of discussion have gone into choosing the wording of each section, and for this I am grateful. These efforts have provided us with a place to begin. Now the wider community

can help shape the final document for nation by nation commitment. So what might still be missing from the Charter? From a Buddhist perspective, I suggest three elements which could strengthen the message of the Charter.

The first of these is a fuller recognition of what is harmful to the Earth. The Charter speaks of the destruction of the diversity of life and the need for precautionary action to prevent harm. These phrases refer to the impact of harmful human *actions*. But Buddhist practice also calls for examining the harm generated by human *speech* and *thought*. The first of the three pure precepts is "Do no harm." Learning to reduce the suffering generated by one's own thoughts, words, and actions is a primary challenge in Buddhist spiritual practice.

The Earth Charter could ennumerate some of the particular thought-forms which commonly justify destruction and violence to the earth community. Dualistic thinking, for example, promotes polarization of issues and enemy-making, thus blocking the way to shared solutions. Treating plants and animals, soil and water as objects for human use (objectification) prevents sympathetic communion with life forms as beings in themselves. Stereotyping of cultures and places overrides the true complexity of each situation, causing mistaken assumptions about what is appropriate. Understanding a system through examining its parts (reductionism) underemphasizes the nature of the relationships between the parts. The ingrained tendency to view the natural world from a human perspective (anthropocentrism) ignores the experiences, needs, and perspectives of all the other 10,000 beings. The list of dangerous views goes on: racism, sexism, classism—these views perpetuate domination of people and rationalize domination of nature. Fanaticism and intolerance too are harmful thought forms which cause violence and block dialogue. The Earth Charter could be explicit in naming the strong connection between thought and action which generates so much of the serious harm to the planet. Then by offering an alternative vision, the Charter helps articulate the paradigm shift in human actions toward the earth.

The second element I suggest is recognition of the need for *restraint*. The five prohibitory precepts (or ten in Mahayana traditions) derive from the first pure precept. Buddhists take vows to

practice restraint from killing, lying, stealing, abusing sexuality, and abusing delusion-causing substances. These are the primary ways in which human thought, speech, and action can generate suffering—not only to one's self and others, but to the earth. Practices of restaint are central to most religious and cultural traditions—from hunting taboos to respect for home territories. It is painfully clear, as the Charter points out, that the Earth is under assault by people's unrestrained actions. Unrestrained consumption by some, unrestrained reproduction by others, unrestrained hoarding of resources by still others. The net effect is more than the system can bear.

Religious traditions, including Buddhism, have much to offer a world disintegrating from human excess. Stories, parables, and commentaries on the precepts carry forward the wisdom of those who have come before us. Their struggles with restraint have yielded priceless insight into the realm of human nature. We can call on the world's religious traditions to offer teachings in restraint for today. The living elders and historic teachers of the past can help people find spiritual practices of restraint so badly needed now. The stability of time-honored teachings is a tremendous gift in a world wrenched with chaos and deterioration.

A third way to strengthen the Charter would be to include application of the Buddhist law of cause and effect. At the root of many environmental crises lies misunderstanding of the full complexity of causes and conditions that have become manifest. A forest is cut down for the lumber in the trees, ignoring the birds and monkeys which depend on the canopy for shelter. A river is dammed, blocking the flow of water across the flood plain. Extreme actions lead to extreme consequences. Add to this the politics involved in exploitation and resistance, and the causes and conditons multiply further. But it is not enough simply to recognize the complexity.

To work with the law of cause and effect means to work with agency and accountability. Not all people are equally responsible for all enviromental problems. To lay blame at the feet of "humankind" blurs important distinctions between those responsible for very different kinds and scales of impact. For example, those involved in weapons production create great human and ecological suffering from civil war, nuclear waste, land mines, and assault guns. Three other top eco-karma agents are the paper and mining indus-

tries as well as the manufacturing of toxic chemicals (for solvents, pesticides, preservatives, lubricants, etc.) And what about those who promote westernization through ads and stereotypes, pushing materialism and high rates of consumption? Big projects like Three Gorges Dam in China or oil fields in Nigeria cause many related effects, one after another, suffering upon suffering.

Without falling into patterns of blaming and enemy-ism, one can still hold others accountable for the consequences of their actions. Without preaching or prescribing one's own environmental dogma, there is still room for pointing out the effects of specific people's specific choices. The Earth Charter can strengthen the call for human responsibility by helping make explicit the range and scale of karmic choices.

The Earth Charter calls for people's best intentions in taking steps to serve all beings. It is a brave and encouraging statement, holding to a vision of a livable future. In its compelling clarity lies the hidden shadow of human imperfection. Each attempt to meet these proclaimed goals will inevitably fall short of what can be envisioned. How do we live with falling short? How do we contain the fears that if we don't act effectively, we may suffer grave consequences? This very impossibility is the poignant place of spiritual practice. The precepts guiding human thought, speech, and action likewise can never be fully met. But it is possible to choose these guidelines as a committed *path*, as a way to face into the wind of complex choices. Sharing this commitment, we can help each other find ways to practice kindness with the Earth, even as we err and stumble in our efforts. The Earth Charter can help the world's peoples become a spiritual community practicing together, each person lighting the way for another.

Will it require an international legal framework to enforce these principles? I'm not sure. The call for a convention to frame environment and development policy may be an extra burden on the Earth Charter principles. There may be many ways to call forth the best earth-loving practices from people and societies around the globe. Why not encourage this creativity to flourish? Legalistic principles offer one mode of enforcing accountability, but they can be limited in dimension and tend to the authoritarian. Many other forms of social reinforcement have evolved from shunning to ceremony to silent witness. I believe the world's religious traditions, including Buddhism, could play a much more active and energized role in promoting environmental ethics. It would seem more congruent to me for the Earth Charter to close with a call to the world's wisdom traditions to take a leadership role in establishing earth ethics principles. Let those who carry the rich inheritance of human spiritual practice come forward and encourage the others by example. Let these voices challenge the religion of the marketplace; let these voices inspire the convocation of celebration and gratitude.

The Earth Charter is a gift to the world, timely and helpful in the frightening rush toward destruction of so many places. Bowing, bowing, head to the earth, body alive, energy moving. In this spirit of gratefulness and also dialogue, the Buddhist community can fully enter into the earth practices offered here. Wake up! Wake up! The earth is calling. Attend! Attend! This is a matter of *great* consequence, worthy of our full attention.