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Towards ICCS 2022

Religious Communities and Climate Change: Four Ways to Coherence

By Venerable Chang Ji

SYNOPSIS

Recent reports show that humanity is facing an impending environmental crisis of our own making, and resources within religious communities may point to ways we can respond.

COMMENTARY

THERE IS a strong rallying cry at the recent UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) for us to come together in solidarity to save the planet. Some of the changes and shifts we experience from unprecedented anthropocentric – or simply put, humanity-centred – climate changes are already ‘irreversible’ for centuries to millennia according to the recent [IPCC report](#) put up by the UN’s Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change.

The UN Secretary-General António Guterres calls the findings of this report "[a code red for humanity](#)". The current options open to us are narrower and more limited than they have ever been. This enormous stress and anxiety have stirred up conflicts all over the world, aggravating and complicating the already complex existential crisis caused by climate change.

Religion’s Role: A Buddhist Paradigm

I believe part of our role as religious people is to create a counterbalance to that. We must accept and adapt to the colossal challenge of societal collapse and an uninhabitable Earth. I would like to offer an approach that could act as one antidote to

which we can create coherence. This approach is part of the Fivefold Spiritual Renaissance developed by our founder, [Master Sheng Yen](#).

The “Four Ways for Handling a Problem” is a framework that invites us into a deeply adaptive space to search for intelligent and compassionate ways to respond to this code red and social unravelling. It brings together all religious practices for us to be present and to engage this moment sourced from compassion instead of checking out or becoming a highly antagonistic species.

Face It

When faced with challenges, we are more inclined to engage our ‘shadow dimension’ – antagonism, avoidance, villainising, othering. This is problematic because when we go into primitive adaptation, we tend to become more reactive, and compassion of our fellow human is the last thought in our minds.

Facing it is to recognise both our shadow and light and to square ourselves with the reality of what is happening. Religions have practices for all of us to be present and to engage this moment instead of becoming antagonistic and resistant. This is so that we could show up with love and authenticity while performing various acts that allows us to survive and thrive.

Accept It

When we are willing to face the threat of imminent societal collapse because of climate change and the forces we have unleashed on Earth, then we will find ways to adapt and respond to the new reality that we have created. *Accepting it* allows us to rise to the water's surface instead of sinking. This is resilience.

Resilience is the awareness and acceptance of change. We do not want to fall into our animalistic reactions. We want to stand up and self-actualise. If you are thinking that it is always going to be the same or that the tried and true is going to continue to function, resilience is going to be really difficult.

Deal With It

Embodying the values of authenticity and resilience through facing it and accepting it, we are now in a position of openness and inquiry sourced from love and compassion to *deal with it*. We come together with an openness and unbiased inquiry. We then enter the space where we reflect on the things that we have been a part of that we are not proud of with openness and equanimity. This is the invitation into the work of reconciliation.

To love a place is not enough, we must find ways to heal it and move into a space of wanting to prevent future extinctions and endangerment of all species. This means relinquishment in terms of the way we must live with the challenges of climate change that requires us to willingly surrender things that we desire and even things we may need, for the good of ourselves, others and the Earth itself.

Let It Go

The recognition of the sacred interdependence is the spirit of support and reciprocity. Master Sheng Yen appealed that acts which destroy nature in the name of social and economic benefits, ideology or science will have devastating planetary consequences. Therefore, we should recognise that human well-being is bound to flourishing ecosystems and the foundations of all life on earth, of which humanity is only a part.

However, a lot of our conversation has been anthropocentric. We are talking about ourselves. We are talking about humans. We are talking about what we need. But it is not just one species, one system, one group, one family or just my point of view. This calamity is multi-dimensional and involves all Earth's multi-species community.

By embracing openness and respecting differences, we grow into holism that speaks to multiple cultures and contexts that is synergistic and includes all sentient beings. We can work together and take advantage of our differences to increase our overall strength. It is not 'either-or', it is 'both-and'.

That would be *letting go* of our own expectations and points of view. Whatever the outcome is, it is not a failure but a work in progress of a chaotic interconnected and interdependent whole.

Communities in Action

According to the IPCC report, it is too late to let everything be. We do, however, have the power to keep it from getting as bad as it might be. While I have presented a Buddhist viewpoint, we must work alongside other religious and non-religious communities towards a common aim in this situation.

But a distinctive Buddhist contribution to the discussion concerns building up our own inner capacity so we can withstand challenges instead of letting our confusion and distress intensify the crisis.

As such, while we must act as a community, all individuals have essential roles to play in the liberation of our minds, the openness of our hearts, and the unification of our spirits toward a future that will require us to embrace change, weather our despair, and to act with love – without the guarantee of success.

Venerable Chang Ji served as the International Affairs Special Assistant to the late Chan Master Sheng Yen. As Dharma Drum Mountain Buddhist Association's representative to the United Nations, she has participated in the World Economic Forum, World Bank, as well as meetings on climate change. This is part of a series leading up to the International Conference on Cohesive Societies 2022.
