The Dharma And The Environment

Decades ago, I read “Diet For A Small Planet” and was convinced that eating meat was wasteful of resources and threatening to the environment; this was years before I started studying Buddhist principles and practices. One of the primary commitments of early Buddhism involved deciding to avoid choices that would intentionally cause harm to other sentient beings. Early in the 1970’s I gave up eating red meat or fowl and was a vegan for about 10 years. In the early 1980’s, when I began my Buddhist path I had resumed eating eggs, milk products and fish in order to assure enough protein is in my diet. My choice about the food I eat is not for purely and directly related to ahimsa, the commitment to non-harm; rather it involves a growing concern about the impact of industrial-level agriculture on the environment.

Recently I watched some documentaries that describe the predicament that contemporary life presents to us environmentally as this focus continues the exploration of how industrialization and consumerism are causing dukkha, distress and confusion, not only for humanity, but for perhaps tens of thousands of flora and fauna species that are woven into the fabric of the world’s ecology.

Because of the industrial revolution of a few centuries ago, the human population of the planet has tripled in numbers; there are estimates that between 1950 and 2050 the population will triple from nearly 3 billion to 9 billion. This represents an almost vertical graphing of population growth! This is putting enormous strain on the environment in multiple areas and with converging consequences:

* Due to irrigation, the amount of water in major rivers of the world have only about 10% of their volume remaining by the time they empty into the oceans. Most of that water is for irrigating industrial level farms and the most drastic drawdown is for raising cattle.
* Most of the fires that are radically diminishing the Amazonian rain forest and other large tracts of forested wilderness are dedicated to industrial farming; in Brazil and Argentina this land is largely dedicated to cattle ranches.
* The amounts of fertilizer used for industrial farming is flowing into the tributaries of large rivers and the fish and plant life in those rivers and the oceans that receive the water are polluted with the resulting microscopic plant life that deprives the oceans of oxygen, killing off unknown sections of sea life.
* The processing of agricultural products into food and the transporting of that food to various, mostly wealthy, cultures is pouring CO2 into the atmosphere, and the amount of electricity that is necessary for these processes is quite large. The food is often treated with pesticides, antibiotics and preservatives that are having an unknown effect on humans, especially children, around the world.

The amount of food necessary to feed the additional numbers of people between now and 2050 is huge; what can be done about this? What does the principles and practices of Buddhism have to offer in addressing these issues that will seriously affect the children being born today?

Some weeks ago I talked about voluntary simplicity, referring to a book by that name that I read decades ago. Whether we like it or not, significant changes will be imposed upon our culture over the next decades and we will be impacted by this in ways that are barely imaginable today. I don’t think it necessarily will bring an apocalyptic outcome, but it will confront us with choices about how we respond to the scarcity of resources such as water and food, not to mention electricity and the ability to move about on the planet.

One of the key principles of Buddhism is renunciation, the ability to regulate the experience of craving and clinging we are all subject to. Renunciation goes beyond the ability to disregard the urgent impulsivity of the hindrances; it can also be applied to how we make our choices regarding the food we eat, how much we eat and how we get it. I hope we can discuss this in ways that support our human capacity for creative and appropriate adaptation, because this will be required of all of us who can’t afford to hide away in guarded estates for protection (a practice already in place in some otherwise impoverished areas of the world).

Here are some options to consider:

* What different choices can you make that will reduce your “footprint” on the planet ecologically?
* What changes in the ways you procure and consume food can be helpful?
* Do you really need to eat meat?
* Can you grow some of your own food—fruiting trees, vegetable gardens?
* Can you compost your yard and kitchen waste?
* What other options are available for you that will be compassionate responses to the ecological dukkha that you see in the world?