

Saving the Planet by Expanding Our Sense of Self

Sensei Alex Kakuyo offered this talk as part of Buddhistdoor Global's conference, Buddhist Voices in the Climate Crisis. See all videos in the series [here](#).

Whenever the topic of climate change or the climate crisis comes up, I always ask people: what do you think is the root cause of this problem? How did we end up here with the ocean level rising and world temperatures increasing and the weather becoming ever more dangerous? Why do we poison the air we breathe and the water we drink? Why are we working so hard to kill the soil that grows our food? And normally people give me symptoms of the problem. They talk about corporate greed or they talk about a lack of understanding of natural processes. And all of these are important. They all need to be taken care of. But that's not the root cause. It's my position that the root cause, not just of all human suffering, but specifically the suffering that comes from the climate crisis, the reason we ended up in this position in the first place, is the illusion of a separate self. Let me explain.

There's a meditation that I like to do – we have many of them in Buddhism – it's called the search for self. And it's very simple. We simply sit on the cushion with our legs crossed, straighten our back, chin slightly tucked, eyes pointed at the ground, 45 degree angle, and we breathe, in and out through the nose, expanding our belly on every inhale, relaxing on every exhale. We do this for several minutes and once we're settled into our seats, we begin searching for the self, meaning we try to find the place in the body where "I" reside. The thing that's speaking to you right now, is it in my feet, in the heel and the sole and my toenails? No, it's not there. So maybe I try my hands. Does Alex reside in the palm, in one of my fingers or my thumb, in the back of my hand? No, it's not me either. And we continue this exercise until we get to my brain. And I imagine if I were to chop my brain up into an infinite number of pieces, would something that looks like "me" fall out of that mess, like a marble rolling across the floor? Probably not. And what this meditation is meant to teach us is that there is no separate, permanently abiding self. We, you, I, everything in existence exists as an aggregate of things. I am my brain and my skin and my blood and my bones and the bacteria in my gut all coming together to create this thing, this individual that in this moment is giving this dharma talk.

Now, sometimes this teaching is misunderstood and people will say that there is no self, but this is incorrect or, at the very least, misleading. I'm definitely here talking right now. You're definitely there listening. My chickens and rabbits are outside sleeping in their



enclosure. My cats are stalking around the meditation center. My self, your self, their selves all exist. What's in question, however, is the nature of that existence. Again, we exist as an aggregate of things. I am this physical body. I'm also the shirt and robes I'm wearing. I am the food I ate for breakfast. I am the air circulating in my lungs, the sun that caressed my skin earlier today. All of that, from the Buddhist perspective, is me. Why? Because I, this physical body, could not exist without these things. I am constantly interacting with them and being acted upon by them at the same time. Any separation between them and me is illusory. To look at this another way, we can look at our family relationships. Maybe we've been told in the past that we have our mother's eyes or our father's chin. Maybe we walk just like our favorite uncle. These are all characteristics that we inherited from our family through our bloodline. And they come together, they aggregate, in us. Thus, we exist simultaneously as individuals with our own bodies and names and we exist as part of a larger whole called a family.

When Buddhists talk about expanding our sense of self, we simply mean that we take that sense of family that we have for our parents and our siblings and our cousins and our aunts and uncles, and we expand it to include all living things. Now, to understand why this teaching is so important and how it relates to the climate crisis, we must look at the three poisons of Buddhism, which are greed, anger, and ignorance. All human suffering, all of it, can be tracked back to one of these three things or a combination of them. In fact, it's a very interesting thought experiment to look at the suffering in your own life and figure out which one of the poisons it tracks back to. A coworker gets promoted at work and we feel jealousy because we wanted that promotion, status, and the money that came with it. So we experience greed and maybe because we're feeling so greedy, we denigrate our coworker or even sabotage their work. This is the office politics we're always hearing about. Maybe we get home from work and we find a house that looks like a tornado ran through it. The dishes haven't been done, the carpet hasn't been vacuumed. Our partner said they would get to it, but they clearly didn't. So now we experience anger. Perhaps this leads to an argument. And all of this greed and anger comes from ignorance, which is a misunderstanding of the nature of reality and, by extension, the nature of self.

When we succumb to greed, anger, and ignorance, it creates a sense of separation between us and the world around us. All those connections I talked about earlier with our family and friends, with our coworkers – cut off. Any connection we might feel with the natural world around us, with the soil, with the trees, with the sunlight – gone. I am here and you're over there. And because we're separate, that means by necessity there is a hierarchy. And if there's a hierarchy, I'm going to make sure that I'm on top. So I'm going to do everything in my power to put you in your place, beneath me. Thus again, we take on a dominator posture towards the world around us, constantly feeling like we're being pushed up or pushed down based on our experiences. This has been the story of humanity for as long as there have been humans, people fighting to rise up that hierarchy. And



when we understand the illusion of a separate self, when we understand the human need to climb up the ladder that's created by that illusion, we understand the climate crisis. We understand why we as humans have such a penchant to poison the water we drink, to cut down the forests that create the oxygen we breathe, to kill the animals that balance out our ecosystems: because we see them as being separate from us. And because they're separate, we do everything we can to dominate and control them.

We need these things to live, but we don't care. We kill the planet that gives us life so that we can remain at the top. We put the trees, the air, and the animals in their proper place, not realizing that this is no different than being at war with our skin or our eyes or our feet. Thus, in order to counteract this illusion of a separate self and the problems that come with it, we must expand our selves to include those things, so that when we look at the trees, when we look at the clouds, when we look at the water, we look at them the same way we look at our own hands. And we care for them like we care for our hands. If my hands are cold, let's say, I don't hesitate. I put them in gloves or I put them in my pocket. I do everything I can to keep them warm because I see them as part of me. And if we are going to make any progress in terms of healing the damage we've dumped on the planet, we must learn to see the planet, again, in the same way we see our hands, not hesitating to care for it because we realize there is no "it," there is no "me," there's only "us," interconnected in ways we will never fully understand.

When we look at the world this way, we shift our thinking from a dominator mentality to a servant mentality. We don't often think of it this way, but we serve our bodies in a number of ways. If we're hungry, we don't hesitate to eat. When we're tired, we don't hesitate to sleep. When we're dirty, we bathe ourselves, without question. What would happen if we took that same posture to the natural world? It's my position that we'd pick up garbage if we saw it lying in the grass. We'd be mindful of the chemicals we put into our soil and the air and we'd be much more careful about the way we treat wildlife, in the same way that we're careful about how we allow people to treat us. So how do we do this? How do we expand our sense of self to include the planet? How do we trade this dominator mentality for a servant one? Now, Buddhism offers a variety of tools in this regard, but one thing I personally enjoy is gratitude meditations. And this can be done with any object, but it's probably easiest to start with a plate of food.

As we sit down, we look at the food and we think about the nourishment our body is going to receive, how hungry we are, how good it's going to feel to fill our stomach up with this nutritious meal. And we say, "thank you," but we don't stop there. Next, we look at each individual piece of food on the plate: the corn, the green beans, the radishes (I'm thinking about what I had for dinner earlier today) and we think about the lives those individual plants lived and what allowed them to live those lives. The sun that shined down on them, the soil that fed them nutrients, where necessary the bees that pollinated



them. And we say, "thank you" to each of those things, understanding that we can't live without them in the same way we can't live without our heart or our lungs. And then we go farther than that. We go down into the soil and we think about all the individuals that live there, the bacteria, the worms, the insects that enrich the soil with their own nutrients in various ways, aerating it by moving through it so that roots can grow.

We think about how necessary they are for our food and how our food is necessary for us, and how our physical body wouldn't exist without their help. And again, we say, "thank you." And then maybe we go out and we think about the farmers that grew our food, that toiled in the hot sun, that pulled the weeds and planted the seeds that created our food. And we say, "thank you" to them too. And we go on like this for as long as our imagination will last or until our stomach begins to grumble a little more than we like. And as we continue to express gratitude for the things that made that food possible, that nourish our body, we gain a connection to them because we realize, again, that they are an extension of us, the same way that our mother or our father, the same way that our siblings are also an extension of us. We expand our sense of family, our sense of self to include all those things. And we very naturally start to care for them. We serve them like we serve our own human body. Thus we have the motivation and the wisdom we need to end the climate crisis. *Amitabha.*