

Caring for our only home

Colin was one of only three Australians on the International Organising Committee (IOC) for the 6th United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) celebrations, held 13-18 May 2008, in Hanoi, Vietnam. The theme of the gathering was Buddhist Contribution to Building a Just, Democratic and Civil Society. There were eight workshops, including one Colin helped organise and chair called Care for our Environment: Buddhist Response to Climate Change.

This one-day workshop attracted over 100 people and 12 speakers from Vietnam, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Australia, Canada, Sweden, the U.K. and the U.S.A. Following is an edited report which Colin gave to over 1,000 participants from about 80 countries on the last day of the meeting. For further information, please visit <http://vesakday2008.com>

Climate change & environment workshop

Venerables, distinguished guests, friends in the dharma,

Thank you to the organisers of this meeting for the chance to speak with you. Our workshop was about climate change and the need to care for the environment. This is the first time that these issues have been so prominent at a UNDV meeting, and in particular I want to thank Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh for his recognition of these problems and his influence in having them placed on the agenda. The other reason that climate change and the need to care for the environment is on the agenda is because the problems are now so large and increasingly obvious.

The Buddha taught about impermanence and dukkha, or suffering. Nature has always caused storms, earthquakes and epidemics. But in the last two weeks, two events have clearly shown an extra human dimension to Nature: the cyclone Nargis in Myanmar and the earthquake near Chengdu, China. The cyclone was made worse by sea level rise, caused by climate change, in turn caused by human actions. It was also made worse by the excessive clearing of the coastal mangroves for shrimp farms and firewood. These forests, if left intact, would have provided some protection against the storm surge that penetrated so far inland. The earthquake was made worse because it caused a large crack in one of the 40,000 large dams in China. Two thousand troops are now trying to repair it.

Collectively, humans are now a force of nature, but we do not yet have the wisdom to use that power well. Our group made five recommendations (see box).

From Vietnam Colin travelled to Geneva, Switzerland, where he had several meetings, including with UNAIDS and the World Health Organisation (WHO). In part this was to work on a UN position paper on climate change and HIV/AIDS, prepared jointly for UNAIDS and the UNEP (the UN Environment Programme). Following is the part of a preamble Colin wrote for a working group within WHO that will examine the relationship between emerging environmental factors and infectious diseases.

Sanitary revolution or new Dark Age?

Understanding of the relationship between local environmental factors and infectious diseases, such as dirty water and diarrhoea, flooding and malaria, and air pollution and bronchitis continues to develop, albeit at a much slower pace now than in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Meanwhile, a newer generation of influences on disease risks, particularly infectious diseases, is emerging at much larger, often global, scale. As human actions change and disturb environments, whole ecosystems and components of the Earth system (especially the global climate), additional forces are contributing to the emergence, re-emergence and spread of infectious diseases. Because limits to growth are denied, humanity is endangering human well-being on a global scale. Mechanisms of this endangerment include growing oil and food scarcity, climate change, deforestation and the loss of fertile soil and potable water.

Rather than the microscope, technologies for the new basic science relevant to this field include satellites, atmospheric and oceanographic monitors and computer models. Instead of theories of contagion, the new paradigm draws on concepts and terms such as 'anthropocene', 'Earth system', 'ecosystem services' and 'eco-social interactions'. These new researchers communicate by the Internet rather than the telegraph and printing press. Instead of coal, gas and electricity driven by falling water, we are developing solar thermal systems and fuel efficient transport, housing and lighting. Instead of guano and the synthesis of ammonia, we are hoping to develop effective gene technology. While there are many legitimate reasons for anxiety, these new tools are an extremely powerful lever with which to forestall global collapse. In the process, we might even spread the 1840s technology of self-scouring sewers (with egg-shaped cross sections) throughout the world.

5 recommendations for the environment ...

... made by the UNDV workshop in Hanoi.

1. That Buddhists of all ranks and in all places observe Earth Day each April 22, and try to make every day an Earth Care Day.
2. That Buddhists educate themselves about environmental problems and climate change, especially to prepare for the adverse changes which are inevitable and which are already occurring, for example by studying and embracing the principles of the Buddhist influenced Earth Charter. This is available in many Asian languages, including Vietnamese, Bangla, Burmese, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Nepali, Newari and Thai. Its website is <http://www.earthcharter.org>.
3. That Buddhists in all countries develop environmental leadership such as following the example of the late Thai monk, Buddhadasa. Buddhadasa rejected costly temples, preferring simple places to gather, such as under trees.
4. That Buddhists at the most senior level raise the issue of environmental care and climate change at the World Council of Religions where they seek to promote and participate in global spiritual and physical preparedness and response to these issues.
5. Finally, that these environmental issues be placed on the agenda for all future UNDV meetings and indeed for as many Buddhist meetings and gatherings as possible in as many countries and places as possible.

This unfolding paradigm has two essential components. One is of the interdependence of the global eco-social system. The other is its recognition of limits to economic growth (as that term is defined by the slowly waning but still dominant paradigm). The concept 'anthropocene' refers to this current era in which the scale and technological force of humanity rivals many natural processes. Humans are now a force of nature but as yet we lack the wisdom to use that power well.

We either stand at the onset of a modern analogue of the sanitary revolution — in which humanity as a whole recognises and greatly reduces the fouling and despoiling of its only home, our planet — or we may face in this century a Malthusian crisis of heightened mortality (initially, at least, experienced very unevenly between populations). The more extreme prospect — that such a crisis could cause the death of hundreds of millions of additional people this century, perhaps even ushering in a new dark age — renders the choice compelling.

An understanding of these contemporary issues and of the requisite new paradigm is now shared by tens of millions of people. However, for the moment it remains fanciful or unknown to most of humanity, including many experts. If the emerging global environmental situation is not as foreboding as appears, then the current state of global infectious diseases may not alter much. Even so, research into fundamental science of the kind here proposed will still yield valuable insight. But if those espousing the new paradigm centred around ecological and social sustainability are right, then the situation is urgent and this proposed work vital.

