

# Simple and Practical Steps toward Mitigating Climate Change

## Introduction

Current discourse on climate change among “progressives” often pivots around two themes, depending on where they stand on the spectrum:

1. **Spiritual progressives** (including many Buddhist teachers) say that to stop climate change we need a “spiritual awakening of humanity,” “the enlightenment of all beings,” the “emergence of a divine humanity.”
2. **Political progressives** say that we need to change the whole political economy, to replace capitalism with a new social and economic system.

Granted that both these goals are desirable, **are they realistic solutions** to the immediate climate crisis? This seems improbable:

1. Humanity is **unlikely to undergo a dramatic spiritual rebirth** in the short time left to us, while ever more nations seek to embark on the path of economic development by burning fossil fuels.
2. **Transformations** in our social and economic system **are likely to occur gradually** and to require a long stretch of time for their impact to be felt.

However, we face a situation of **utmost urgency**:

1. Urgent because of **what is at stake**: mass extinctions; famines, droughts floods, and epidemics; traumatic ethnic, religious, and cross-border strife; the loss of human civilization.
2. Urgent because **the window of opportunity** is closing: we have *at best* only 20 or 30 years left to reduce carbon emissions by 80 percent; even better to arrive at 100 percent reduction by 2040. And we are moving in that direction far too slowly, if at all.

To emerge intact, **we've got to get real**. Spiritual people and progressives in particular have got to be practical and realistic. So what can we do that is **simple, practical, and realistic**—though by no means easy?

## I. To abstain from all evil (application of the stick)

1. **Rescind subsidies** to fossil fuel corporations<sup>1</sup>
2. **Impose a carbon tax** to ensure environmental costs are built into the market price of carbon<sup>2</sup>
3. **Reject trade agreements** that allow corporations to prevail over sovereign governments<sup>3</sup>
4. **Reject Keystone XL pipeline** and other mega-oil pipelines
5. **Prohibit oil trains** (“train bombs”), a danger to communities along the routes
6. **Shift away from model of industrial agriculture** responsible for 30–32% of global emissions<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As of July 2014, Oil Change International estimates the total value of U.S. subsidies to the fossil fuel industry at [\\$37.5 billion annually](http://priceofoil.org/fossil-fuel-subsidies/), including international finance. This does not include military, health, climate, or local pollution costs. These subsidies have increased dramatically as U.S. oil and gas production has increased. (<http://priceofoil.org/fossil-fuel-subsidies/>)

<sup>2</sup> Fossil fuel companies are benefitting from global subsidies of \$5.3 trillion a year, equivalent to \$10m a minute every day, according to a startling [new estimate by the International Monetary Fund](#). The vast sum is largely due to polluters not paying the costs imposed on governments by the burning of coal, oil and gas. These include the harm caused to local populations by air pollution as well as to people across the globe affected by the floods, droughts and storms being driven by climate change. Nicholas Stern of London School of Economics said that even the IMF’s vast subsidy figure was a significant underestimate: “A more complete estimate of the costs due to climate change would show the implicit subsidies for fossil fuels are much bigger even than this report suggests.” (*The Guardian*, 18 May 2015)

<sup>3</sup> “The Trans-Pacific Partnership would offer new rights to big polluters, including the right to sue governments in private trade courts over laws and policies that corporations allege reduce their profits.” (Ilana Solomon, Sierra Club’s Responsible Trade Program). For more on TPP see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNsHAHQh4Es>.

<sup>4</sup> The most potentially devastating impacts of industrial modes of agricultural production stem from their contribution to increased greenhouse gas emissions. Together, field-level practices represent about 15% of total human-made greenhouse gas emissions. Other processes requiring considerable amounts of energy result in an additional 15-17% of total man-made GGEs attributable to food systems. Hence agriculture is responsible for 30–32% of GGEs. (UN Report: *The Transformative Potential of the Right to Food*)

## II. To cultivate the good (offering carrots)

1. **Provide subsidies** and low-interest loans **to clean, renewable energy** projects
2. Finance **refurbishing of old buildings** to make them energy-efficient
3. Promote mass production of **electric and hybrid cars**
4. Develop **more and better public transit** to replace private cars
5. Promote **agro-ecological models** to replace industrial agriculture<sup>5</sup>
6. Shift to more **climate friendly diets** (plant-based over meats)<sup>6</sup>

## III. To purify one's own mind

1. Develop **contentment**, the basis for a steady-state economy based on the principle of sufficiency, dedicated to qualitative growth rather than endless production and consumption.<sup>7</sup>
2. Utilize **wisdom**, to understand the long-range and long-term consequences of our actions, rooted in the subtle interconnections of diverse chains of causality.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The Rodale Institute in Pennsylvania found that agroecological modes of cultivation “could sequester (capture) up to 2,000 lb of carbon per acre per year from the atmosphere. By contrast, fields relying on chemical fertilizers lost atmosphere almost 300 lb of carbon per acre per year.” According to the publication GRAIN, “if traditional systems of mixed farming were adopted throughout the world, about two thirds of the current excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would be captured in 50 years.”

<sup>6</sup> The FAO estimated that the livestock sector was responsible for 18% of greenhouse gas emissions measured in CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent— a larger share than transport. Once livestock respiration and the loss of greenhouse gas reductions from photosynthesis that are foregone by using large areas of land for grazing or feedcrops are taken into account, livestock is found to be responsible for 51% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions.

<sup>7</sup> Numerous studies have shown that once a certain standard of material well-being is reached, increased consumption does not significantly contribute to happiness. Real happiness comes from human relationships, a sense of connection with other people and the cosmos, a sense of meaning, and aesthetic and spiritual fulfillment. Yet the modern economy, predicated on the premise that constant innovation, production, and consumption are the keys to happiness, perpetuates the conditions that portend eventual societal collapse.

<sup>8</sup> “Long-range consequences” means that the results of higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions extend far beyond our immediate neighborhood. Causality is not restricted locally. All

3. Arouse a heart of **compassion**, extend loving concern to all people everywhere, based on deep inner identification and affirmation of human dignity.<sup>9</sup>
4. Advocate for **justice**, to establish social, economic, and political institutions and laws, enabling everyone to unfold their potentials and realize their aspirations.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. Benefit all sentient beings. How?

1. **Vote**: Though the political system is badly flawed, elections can make a difference. Vote only for candidates who admit human-caused climate change and are willing to act against it.
2. **Write and sign**: Write letters to your representatives, senators, and others. Call their offices and sign petitions and appeals to be sent to them. Local action may be most effective.
3. **MOM & POP**: Move our money, protect our planet: divestment from fossil fuel corporations & related firms.

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regions in the world are intimately and intricately interconnected. Burning coal in China can be a causal factor behind droughts in Africa, floods in Texas, failed monsoons in India. Cattle cultivation in Texas contributes to the melting of the Arctic ice, the collapse of ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica. “Long-term consequences” means that the impact of carbon emissions persists for generations. It is said that it takes 30-40 years—a generation—for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions to unfold their full potential, and increased emissions are cumulative.

<sup>9</sup> “I would be a good doctor to the sick, a guide to those who have strayed from the right path. I would be a light to those who wander in darkness. I would enable those in poverty to discover hidden treasure. A bodhisattva should thus benefit all beings with equal treatment, and bestow loving care on all beings alike. And why? Because if a bodhisattva serves all beings, that is equal to serving the Buddhas dutifully. To hold all beings in high esteem and render them respectful services, that is equal to revering and serving the Tathagatas.” (The Vows of Samantabhadra)

<sup>10</sup> “Climate justice is a social justice issue. Climate Justice is working at the intersections of environmental degradation and the racial, social, and economic inequities it perpetuates. As the climate falls apart, families, communities, and lives are falling with it. Advocacy on behalf of the climate is advocacy on behalf of the billions of people whose lives depend on a healthy planet. Fixing an interconnected world demands interconnected movement; anyone who believes that all individuals deserve basic human and civil rights should see the climate crisis as an imminent threat.” (See <http://www.peacefuluprising.org/what-is-climate-justice>; see too Mary Robinson Foundation Climate Justice, <http://www.mrfcj.org/>).

4. **Get moving:** participate in marches and demonstrations to convey a message to those in power. **Get moving in another way:** join a movement to protect the climate: BCAN, 350, Climate Mobilization, Greenpeace, The Next System Project.
5. **Take direct action:** to block climate-destroying projects, such as oil rigs, pipe lines, fracking sites, etc. Beware of risks: long prison terms, large fines.

(Prepared by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi)

## For further reading

Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed: *A User's Guide to the Crisis of Civilization*

Lester R. Brown: *Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity*

Lester R. Brown: *Plan B 4.0*

Lester R. Brown: *The Great Transition*

Richard Heinberg: *The End of Growth*

Naomi Klein: *This Changes Everything*

Bill McKibben: *Eaarth*

John McMurtry: *Value Wars: The Life Economy vs the Money Economy*

John McMurtry: *Winning the War of the World* ([www.globalresearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca))

James Gustave Speth: *The Bridge at the End of the World*

James Gustave Speth: *America the Possible*

## Websites

Climate Progress

Desmog Blog

Inside Climate News

Climate Central

Climate Nexus

Climate Psychologist

Climate Disruption Dispatches,  
with Dahr Jamail (Truthout)