**The climate problem from a Dharmic perspective:**

*Notes for facilitating a group discussion*

“Together, not alone, we can bend the course of history.” Thanissara

*Health warning: In my experience, discussions on climate change have a risk of becoming rather bleak or focussing on blame, so it is important to be sensitive to the mood of the group, and to cultivate an atmosphere of metta and empowerment.*

I find it helpful to start with some reflections on metta or gratitude, and to emphasise that reflecting on and responding to this issue is a way of expressing metta. Presenting climate change as an opportunity to work together within and across communities and nations can be beneficial too. It may be appropriate to conclude the discussion by transferring merits

**Dharmic context**

Setting discussions for Buddhists in a Dharmic context will probably increase their appeal and impact. Whilst some might already see the ethical implications of climate change, this cannot be taken for granted. Possible contexts include:

* Reading and reflecting on the Karaniya metta sutta, particularly:

**“**And think of every living thing without exception: the weak and the strong, from the smallest to the largest, whether you can see them or not, living nearby or far away, beings living now or yet to arise – may all beings become happy in their heart of hearts!”

* Reflection on the Bodhisattva ideal, perhaps focussing on the myth of Avalokiteshvara

**Key climate information**

Human activities, particularly burning coal, oil and natural gas, are warming the planet by releasing carbon dioxide and other greenhouses gases[[1]](#footnote-1), which trap additional heat in the atmosphere. Average global temperatures have risen approximately 1°C since 1880 and are now rising faster than ever before: Each of the last three decades have been hotter than any preceding decade and 2016 was the hottest year on record. Rising temperatures are causing changes to rainfall patterns, melting of icecaps, rising sea level and increases in severity and frequency of storms and other extreme weather.

The effects on human welfare of continued warming are likely to be overwhelmingly negative: whilst harvests may improve in some areas, the overall supply of food and clean water is likely to irreversibly diminish, especially in poorer countries. Warming will be too rapid for many species to adapt, leading to extinctions and damage to ecosystems.

Decisive global action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions could still limit the rise in temperatures to well below 2°C. Whilst officially agreeing this target, the world’s governments have so far made only non-binding pledges of action, which *if* they are kept to would lead to warming of around 3°C. Warming of 4°C or more is a real possibility.

Between 2030 and 2050 climate change is predicted to kill an additional 250,000 people a year through malnutrition, heat stress and increased spread of tropical diseases. Warming is likely to approach 2°C around 2050: if temperatures continue to rise beyond this point the harm to humans and ecosystems is likely to become dramatically more severe[[2]](#footnote-2) .If food and water resources are greatly reduced in some countries, the risks of famine, migration and war are clear.

Whilst there is enormous cause for concern, recent positive developments include:

* There is a well organised and increasingly effective international citizen movement campaigning to halt climate change, including by discouraging investments in the fossil fuel industry (divestment).
* The signing of the Paris agreement, the first global framework to reduce emissions to include all the major nations.
* Renewable (that is fossil fuel free) energy is growing faster than all other sources of electricity combined.

**Discussion Questions**

Which precepts are relevant to the climate problem?

If the Buddha were around today what might he say about this?

In what ways do our choices contribute to the problem?

What might be the wisest response from Buddhists? *It may be helpful to think in terms of both individual choices and collective actions as a Sangha*

What role has honest communication got to play in responding to this problem? Why might honest communication about on this issue be difficult?

Do Buddhists have anything to offer that could help wider society respond to climate change?

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**Additional resources and sources**

* World Health Organisation: Climate Change and Health Fact Sheet:

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en>

* Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Reports (Executive Summaries)

The Physical Science Basis: <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg1/WG1AR5_SPM_FINAL.pdf>

Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: <http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/ar5_wgII_spm_en.pdf>

* Key points of Paris Climate Deal: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/12/paris-climate-deal-key-points>
* <https://www.nasa.gov/press-release/nasa-noaa-data-show-2016-warmest-year-on-record-globally>
* <https://www.iea.org/newsroom/news/2016/october/iea-raises-its-five-year-renewable-growth-forecast-as-2015-marks-record-year.html>

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1. Animal agriculture is also a significant source of greenhouse gas emissions, contributing around 18% of the total [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Impacts increase dis- proportionally with temperature, so 4°C is not twice as harmful as 2°C, it is many times more harmful. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)