Waste and karma

A young British Buddhist visits a landfill site to see the consequences of just throwing things away.

Cara is a young Buddhist from Manchester, UK. She and her friend Luke are recycling co-ordinators at their school. Visiting a landfill site, they witness the consequences of people throwing away things which could have been recycled or re-used - or perhaps never bought at all.

Things to look out for in the video

- How many people, machines and how much energy it takes to transport and process our waste
- Any harmful side effects of storing waste like this
- Alternatives to throwing things away

Watch the video (4 mins)

https://youtu.be/waWCdlNvccI

Reflect and discuss

- Where does your waste go after it is collected?
- What might it be like if you lived next to your waste?
- What will we do when we run out of space to bury waste?

Some relevant Buddhist teachings

- Karma/kamma
- Dependent arising/conditionality
- The Three Marks of conditioned existence (lakkhanas/lakshanas)
- The Five Precepts

Karma

The word karma/kamma (Sanskrit/Pali) simply means "action." It's found in several religious traditions of India. The Buddha's teaching of karma was that everything we do, think and say has consequences, for us, for others and for the world. This would include what we do with our waste. For more information about karma see the notes Karma and dependent arising.

Pilsworth Landfill

A landfill site is a large hole used for burying waste. This one is a sand quarry. As the sand is dug out (to use for building), the hole is divided into cells which are lined with heavy plastic so that gas and liquid cannot seep out and cause pollution as the material rots down. It takes up to a year to fill and seal each cell, which is finished off with soil, grass and trees.

Pipes collect the liquid and gas from the decomposing waste. The liquid goes to a treatment plant where air is bubbled through it to activate bacteria to digest and purify the wastewater. Once the water is clean enough it is released into the sewerage system and is treated again, like the wastewater from your house.

The gas is drawn to a power plant. Here, seven large engines burn the methane to create enough electricity for 7,000 homes. While this may be good, it still generates harmful gases – and burying waste takes up a lot of land. It would

be much better if none of it were buried in the ground at all.

Other ways of disposing of waste

It would be even better if we produced less waste anyway. Across Europe, 100 million tonnes of waste are dumped in landfill every year. However, many countries now burn waste in specially constructed power plants. In Sweden it has been illegal to bury waste in the ground since 2002. Instead, waste is burned to create electricity. This provides heat to over 800,000 people in the capital, Stockholm.

"Engaged Buddhism"

This is a modern term sometimes used by Buddhists who believe that Buddhists should put their beliefs and values into practice by looking after the environment, other people and animals, for example through political activity, or in social projects such as caring for the homeless or people recovering from drug addiction.

Some other Buddhists think that this kind of ethical activity should be a normal part of Buddhist life anyway, so there is no need to give it a special name.

Impermanence and change

Buddhism says change and impermanence are quite normal. Everything is always changing. That's how life is. The climate has changed many times over millions of years and the earth will not last for ever, even if we recycle everything and stop using cars. However, climate change is now happening very fast – because of human ignorance and greed – and there is a lot we can do about that. As the Buddha said, suffering is caused by greed, but we can learn to be less greedy and more thoughtful.

Joanna Macy is an American Buddhist and systems analyst who has spent her life helping people to understand the power they have to affect the environment for the better, through the way they behave. This is an expression of the Buddha's teaching of karma/kamma.
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Why take care of the Earth?

Sometimes people talk about "stewardship" of the Earth. Traditionally a "steward" is someone who takes care of land and property on behalf of its owner. People who believe in God may believe God has created the Earth and therefore owns it and has entrusted humans with the practical task of taking care of it.

However, Buddhism does not involve belief in a creator God. This means that stewardship is not really a Buddhist concept. Still, Buddhists have other important teachings that encourage us to take care of our Earth.

Some Buddhist reasons to take care of the Earth

Buddhism teaches that everything depends on other things. This is the teaching of conditionality or dependent arising. We live in a complex network of people, animals and plants, and all of these depend in various ways on a healthy planet.

The first of the Buddha's five ethical precepts is to avoid causing harm and cultivate kindness. It's an act of kindness to look after the Earth so that people and other living things (and those who come after us) can benefit from a healthy planet.

When we care for things, we become kinder, less greedy, wiser people, expressing awareness, generosity and respect. We cause less suffering to other living things. We become happier!

Changing ourselves in this way and benefiting others helps us develop the perfect wisdom and compassion of Enlightenment.

Reflect and discuss

- Does anybody own the earth?
- Who is responsible for it?
- Do you only take care of things which belong to you?
- Do you take care of your street?

Student activities

1. Where do your rubbish and recycling go? Find out and give a presentation to your class or school assembly, with suggestions for how you or your school could do things better.

2. Choose two Buddhist teachings which relate to this topic. Consider similarities and differences between Buddhist reasons for recycling and those of people of another faith – or no faith.

Many thanks to Viridor Pilsworth Landfill, Lancashire, UK.

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