

About Outer and Inner Environment

I bow down to our Guru Lama Karma Thinley Rinpoche.

Today I want to share with you some thoughts about 'outer and inner environment'.

The dictionary defines 'environment' as 'surroundings' and 'all the conditions etc. surrounding and affecting the development of an organism'. So a person would be at the center of a surrounding – be it an area, circumstance, experience, state of mind, or whatever. This environment would be different for each one of us, and would change from moment to moment as we moved from one place or situation to another, one mental state to another, etc.

-- But generally when we think of 'environment' we think of the eco-system of our planet Earth which supports and sustains us and all of existence.

When I was a child terms like 'saving the environment, climate change, global village' and so on were unheard of, and technology was just in its infant stage. Things were – or at least seemed - quite straightforward then. The seasons passed and followed each other in more or less predictable patterns. News arrived in their own good time via radio and newspaper. We walked, rode bicycles or streetcars, or for a longer distance the train. Every morning the milkman came by with his horse-drawn wagon, bringing fresh yogurt, cream and butter, and ladling milk into our jugs from large metal containers. We gave him the peels of vegetables and fruits we had saved for his pigs. And relying on and helping each other in these simple ways translated into many other areas of daily life as well. It was around the time of the Second World War - food was scarce and everything was rationed; I think therefore nothing was wasted. So this was the general environment in which I grew up.

A special environment for me was my grandmother's garden, with its wooded areas, lawns, rock gardens, flower beds circled by pathways, trees for climbing and fruit trees and berry bushes of every kind. It was the playground where my sister and I spent much of our days, living our fairy tales, using our imagination where we lacked in actual toys. In my memories this garden still feels like some kind of paradise, a sacred space untouched by worries or by what happened beyond it.

Then I clearly remember the moment, and the disbelief and sadness I felt when one day my Mom told me that due to a new regulation the milkman could no longer accept fruit and vegetable peels. Too many farm animals had died because some people – either carelessly or maliciously – had put needles and other sharp objects into the food scraps... I think this was the moment that took away my childlike innocence but also opened my eyes to a wider environment than I had known.

Since those days – as all of us do while going along the paths of our lives - I created many different personal environments which changed according to interest and circumstance while at the same time, the global environment, our life giving and life preserving environment also went through many phases and changes on various levels.

As one example, technology developed to the point where instant communication is at our fingertips and the World truly has become the "Global Village". We are able to connect with anyone we wish, anytime, anywhere in the World. We get instant news the moment something

happens. Also, wonderful advances in science are bringing amazing benefits in many different fields.

However, as we know all scientific knowledge is not always applied to benefit, but also to harm and to exploit. For example, great damage has been done to the ecosystem due to greed for economic growth, comfort and so on, and due to the devastation caused by terrible wars. Now it feels like the environment is responding to all this abuse; unseasonable weather is causing an increase of floods, droughts, earthquakes, tsunamis, and so on, creating unimaginable suffering for many millions of people.

As urban development replaces more and more farmland and natural wilderness areas and the human population continues to grow in number, many other species are losing their environment and becoming extinct. Some plants and animals are protected in national parks and other sanctuaries, but some animals now only survive in zoos. Our big challenge now is to save and protect flora and fauna and their habitat, their natural environment, this delicate and at the same time responsive bionetwork which is indispensable not just for them, but also for our survival.

Many good practices such as reducing pollution, planting trees, recycling, and so on have been implemented and are becoming more and more popular. I hope with all of us participating it will be possible to counterbalance the devastation that is happening and prevent a disastrous climate change. No matter how safe our own environment may seem to be, we can no longer afford to sit back in comfort, doing as we wish and taking what we have for granted, while solely relying on someone else to act, or on some innovative technologies and methods to solve the big challenges our world is facing.

As if in agreement with my thinking, on both sides of a reusable Safeway carrying bag which I happened to buy just today I noticed this message:

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world” – Mahatma Gandhi

What an interesting coincidence!

It seems that many people are experiencing more anxiety and stress these days. Recently I heard that mental conditions have drastically increased over the last decades - that according to the statistics even among young people one out of five now has mental health issues. Maybe a cause for this is our hectic lifestyle, which in one way is very exciting, but in another way seems to put a lot of pressure on people and in a sense even isolate them. Another cause may be denial - not doing what we know we need to do, starting from our own life situation up to the global environment. I think staying in denial for too long can create imbalance and tension in the mind.

Our mind is our inner environment. The Buddha said that everything is created by mind. Without mind there would be nothing, not even the notion of environment. And while a single person may not be able to change the outer, global environment in a very drastic way, each of us is always the ruler of our own inner environment, our mind. So mind is very important and it is very important that we take good care of this mind. It is the environment that is with us, always, everywhere - nobody can take it away.

The Buddha has taught many wonderful methods of how to peel away our misconceptions with regard to reality, and to arrive at the true nature of reality. For example, there are many methods of shamatha that help us settle and relax into a simple, clear and peaceful state during meditation that will lead to discovery of the true nature of our mind, as well as the true nature of phenomena. This wisdom is our birthright, it is always with us, no matter how fast and busy our life may be, no matter where we are, who we are. We just do not notice it because of having allowed ourselves to be carried away by the fast pace, excitement, and dazzle of our outer environments and fixating on them alone. So I think it is very good to sit down for a few minutes each day, and settle into the simplicity and serenity of the nature of our mind. As we become more familiar with this spacious state of mind, we can then even recollect it in the midst of being busy, or upset.

In concluding I want to share with you a short story that points so charmingly at the foibles of us sentient beings. I have a habit of putting tormas and other foods out in my backyard to feed the squirrels and birds. In the fall and winter it is mainly magpies that come to this ‘birdie restaurant’ as my grandson calls it. Sometimes there is too much food for them to eat on the spot, and they hide some of it under loose leaves and so on. When I shared this with Rinpoche, his answer was: ‘Yes, magpies are very clever birds. The only problem is that to mark the place where they have hidden the food they look up to the clouds for a signpost!’

By Rigdzin Khandro