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Buddhists Responses to the Moral Imperative of Climate Change

Christopher Schweitzer

The central moral argument to act against climate change is that our failure to take action will harm the well-being of future generations. Despite wide-scale acceptance of this moral imperative, action to prevent harm to future generations has been far less widespread. Given the failure to act even with compelling evidence of harm we should be concerned with the reasons for this inaction. Moral psychologists and philosophers consider the failure to follow through with moral judgements to lie in problems with our moral motivations—the motivational gap between moral commitments and actions.[1] The intergenerational orientation to the moral problem of climate change further complicates the motivation problem making action to prevent harm to future generations more difficult.[2] In addressing the motivation problem, climate ethicists highlight the complexity of climate change, which strains our ethical frameworks and contributes to inaction. Philosopher Steven Gardiner argues that the moral aspects of climate change present a set of problems that together lead to the corruption of moral standards or reasoning.[3] Others describe the motivational gap as a result of selective moral disengagement based in the moral complexity of climate change and the persistence of individual self-interest.[4]

While these philosophers have outlined the problems of climate ethics from the standpoint of Western moral psychology,

[1] Brinbacher, "What Motivates Us," 274–5; Rosati, "Moral Motivation."
[2] Gardiner, *Perfect Moral Storm*, 20.
[3] *Id.*, 47–8.
[4] Peeters, Diependaele, and Sterckx, "Moral Disengagement," 425–6.

considering climate inaction from a Buddhist ethical perspective potentially provides a better understanding of the problem. The introduction of Buddhist ethics to the moral problem of climate change provides important conceptual resources, but it is not without its challenges. Therefore, my purpose in this essay is to investigate, first, what Buddhist resources help explain the Buddhist ethical commitment to climate change and, second, how these resources can help us understand the moral failure to act against climate change.

The Dalai Lama argues that our inaction comes from the "ignorance of our interdependent nature" and that the virtue of compassion should motivate us to protect the well-being of future generations from climate change related harm.[5] The Dalai Lama's declaration of universal responsibility claims that all people, not just Buddhists, have a responsibility to act with compassion towards each other and that this responsibility relies primarily on individuals.[6] Compassionately responding to climate change represents one such responsibility, a response without which "future human generations will inherit a vastly degraded planet."[7] This "degraded planet" implies human suffering, harm that will occur to future generations if we fail to act. While modern Buddhists argue for a Buddhist ethical interpretation of climate change, identifying exactly how Buddhists should respond to the moral problem of climate change is not so clear. This is partially because Buddhist religious texts are silent on moral action regarding the environment. Many Buddhist scholars highlight the relational aspects of Buddhism to provide guidance on moral action in regard to the environment. For instance, Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy appeals to the Buddhist metaphor of Indra's Net, which she describes as a web of causal connection and a multifocal point perspective of sentient life, in contrast to the single, selfish perspective of the individual that dominates Western moral thought.[8] While the interconnectedness of life might help explain our commitments to the earth and a global humanity, it seems that the ignorance of that interdependence,

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[5] Dalai Lama [Tenzin Gyatso], "The Global Community," 3.
[6] *Id.*, 1.
[7] Dalai Lama [Tenzin Gyatso], "Universal Responsibility," 22.
[8] Jones, *Dharma Gaia*, 185–6; Macy, *World as Lover, Self*, 28.

referenced by the Dalai Lama, is not dispelled by simply accepting it as a fact. Philosopher Alan Sponberg argues that Buddhism's developmental aspects provide the path to dissolve that ignorance.[9] While I agree with the conclusions of scholars who focus on the relational aspects of Buddhism, I argue, like Sponberg, that the developmental aspects are crucial for understanding the failure to act in accordance with the moral imperative of climate change.

In this essay, I outline three aspects about the moral imperative of climate change that are key to applying these Buddhist conceptual resources and understanding the Buddhist commitment to the moral imperative of climate change. First, the basis of the moral imperative lies in the potential suffering of future generations caused by our inaction. This is important because Buddhist moral reasoning—particularly involving the virtue of compassion—is directed toward a much broader conception of suffering than what is typically considered in moral discussions of climate change. Second, since the moral imperative demands sustained action, current actions must not only be in line with the moral imperative but must also lead to future action. The Buddhist program of moral development links current actions with future actions through the concept of karma, where our actions contribute to our future experience of the world and the subsequent response to the moral imperative of climate change. Third, understanding how the interdependence of our actions results in karma allows us to better grasp the consequences of individual moral action. This, in turn, helps explain how the intentions of actions contribute to social movements of climate action or the countermovements of denial. For instance, actions motivated from a developed virtue of compassion, where the impact of negative reactive emotions, like anger or fear, are limited, sustain individual action and agency, while enabling shared karma and sustained social action.

Moral Agency

The first important aspect of the moral imperative of climate change lies in how we explain the harm that results from our inaction. Moral philosophers debating theories of harming make a distinction

[9] Sponberg, "Green Buddhism," 353

between the substantive component and the formal component in their accounts of harming.[10] The formal component explains how an action or event harms, for instance through a comparison between two states or a causal connection. The substantive component explains what is affected by an action or event, for instance a person's well-being or their rights. In this section, I argue that while Buddhist sources use counterfactual or causal explanations of harm similarly to the moral imperative of climate change, the Buddhist concept of suffering utilizes a broader concept of harm than is found in the moral imperative. This also means that the suffering that the Buddhist virtue of compassion, known as *karuṃā*, is concerned with is critical for the Buddhist response to climate inaction.

Not reducing emissions will cause harm to future generations in comparison to the world in which we reduce emissions. In this case, harm is caused by a failure to respond not necessarily to explicit mental or physical suffering but potential suffering that becomes apparent through comparison of future states. This comparison is based on the differences of well-being between these two states. The abstract idea of harm as a comparison of potential future states of the world does not easily align with the Buddhism concept of suffering or *duḥkha*. *Duḥkha* corrupts all experience with a pervasive dissatisfaction cyclically reproduced through mental processes. Suffering arises from the association of the subject of experience with an illusory substantial self. This illusion of a self is perpetuated through negative mental states and the negative actions that follow. In turn, these actions produce more suffering through aversion, delusion, and attachment. *Duḥkha* comes in three forms. First, explicit *duḥkha* which is the mental experience of suffering, the suffering one encounters when they break their leg.[11] Second, is suffering from the loss of a pleasurable experience, as mental states are transitory and impermanent thus attachment to them and their inevitable loss results in *duḥkha*.[12] Third, is suffering from conditions, where suffering comes from the conditioned nature of our experience and lack of stability in our mental states.[13] In the story

[10] Gardner, "What Is Harming?" 381–2.
[11] Harris, "Suffering and Well-Being," 244.
[12] *Id.*, 245.
[13] *Id.*, 250–1.

of the Buddha's first encounter with explicit *duḥkha,* he witnesses suffering in four sights: old age, disease, death and of the peaceful mendicant on a trip outside the palace grounds.[14] This encounter shows *duḥkha* not as counterfactual harm but as an inherent aspect of life. The mendicant seeks peace not simply by choosing a course of action that results in less harm but through freedom from attachment which diminishes the impact of *duḥkha* on future mental states. It is the realization of the pervasiveness of *duḥkha* in the world that motivates one to live the life of a mendicant, since suffering can only be ended through non-attachment to the transient world.

While suffering is an inherent part of our experience caused by our attachment to impermanence, Buddhist texts do not abandon comparative accounts of harm. For instance, in the Samyutta Nikaya which is part of the early texts in Buddhism, the Buddha reasons that he should return from his retreat in the forest to teach the monks, otherwise the monks may be led astray into harmful beliefs or practices.[15] It is out of compassion and concern of what will otherwise happen that the Buddha returns to teach the monks, thereby protecting the monks from wrong views, bad karma, and perpetuation of suffering. It is worth noting what the compassion motivates the Buddha to do. It is not to directly alleviate any explicit suffering that his followers are experiencing but instead at the type of suffering associated with wrong views about impermanence. Therefore, his teaching is directed at "unskillful thinking" or *moha* which is the root of this suffering.[16] Ignorance or *moha* is an unwholesome mental state that obscures the truth about suffering and results in bad karma. These unwholesome mental states are known as *kleśa*, they hinder us from seeing the truth of the world and perpetuate the cycle of suffering. *Duḥkha* is a much broader concept than counterfactual harm and a Buddhist's commitment to ending suffering and the moral imperative of climate change includes more than avoiding causing harm, it involves protecting from mental states that perpetuate suffering in the world.

These mental obstructions keep one attached to suffering and it is through the removal of these obstructions that one eventually

[14] 84000, "Play in Full," Lal 14.8-14.26.
[15] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses*, SN 22.80.
[16] *Ibid.*

reaches cessation of suffering. The Buddha's decision not to abandon his students and the Mahāyāna tradition's turn towards the *bodhisattva* ideal is directed at the alleviation of suffering through this process motivated by compassion. In those traditions, the *bodhisattva,* who has made a commitment to end all suffering for sentient beings is portrayed as more developed than an *arhat,* who will leave the cycle of suffering and rebirth known as *samsara.*[17] Instead, the *bodhisattva* has vowed to remain and work towards the liberation of all beings. While the compassion of the *bodhisattva* is intergenerational, it is not only relevant to actions that result in explicit harm to future generations.

Since so much of our experience is hindered by these negative mental states, the Buddhist path develops harmonious mental states to counter particularly dangerous reactive emotions like hate, anger, or fear. In a text guiding Buddhist practitioners, Buddhaghosa, a fifth century CE Indian monk, directs the meditator to cultivate the four *brahmavihāra* or divine abidings: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.[18] They are developed through attention of the meditator being directed at successively more challenging but fruitful examples of people. In the case of compassion, one starts with imagining a person explicitly suffering from illness or pain, and then cultivating a feeling of compassion for them.[19] Then one cultivates compassion for someone who causes suffering, such as a criminal. Even if the criminal is currently happy and not explicitly suffering, the criminal is bound to the suffering of impermanence and of conditions. Therefore, the meditator should consider that the criminal's happiness is temporary and, like one about to be executed, will soon be suffering from the loss of that happy state. The objective of cultivating compassion is to learn of the conditions and experiences of the object of the meditations, to see suffering not just as explicit but how it is rooted in mental processes and response to the world out of delusion, aversion, and attachment.

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[17] 84000 and Roberts, "The Ten Bhūmis, i.9, 1.921,"; Harris, *Buddhist Ethics*, 116.
[18] Buddhaghosa. and Ñāṇamoli, *Path of Purification*, xxxii, 291.
[19] *Id.*, 308.

The development of compassion protects against the corrupting influence of negative reactive emotions that prevent contemplation and the dissolving of ignorance. These emotions tend to dominate the mind, crowding out the reflection necessary for moral action. Replacing hate and anger with loving-kindness and compassion interrupts the cycle of these reactive emotions. This development of compassion and its instrumental role highlights a key difference between the Buddhist concept *karuṃā* and compassion. It serves as the motivation for action, a social emotion of learning, and a mental capacity to develop moral agency.

Another Buddhist thinker who provides advice for meditators on negative mental states is Tsongkhapa, a fourteenth century CE Tibetan monk.[20] Buddhist scholar Emily McRae interprets Tsongkhapa as saying that to intervene in the perpetuation of negative emotions, we should reflect on the conditions of the person that our negative reactive emotions are aimed at.[21] The target of these emotions is often someone who has wronged us, perhaps someone who was careless or intentionally harming us. Upon closer examination, considering the third type of *duḥkha,* where suffering comes from the condition nature of our experience, we should then find that they were unable to exercise self-control. In finding that they lacked moral agency to be considered proper objects for our anger or hatred, our own delusions about causation are resolved. Śāntideva, an eighth century CE Indian monk, also encourages meditators to consider the conditions of those who do wrong, since in doing wrong demonstrate that they are unable to do otherwise. Śāntideva compares those who inflict harm on others as dominated by reactive emotions and without agency, like a fire "which hast the nature of burning."[22] So too is the nature of a mind dominated by *kleśa* —unsettled and directed by ignorance.

The tendency for negative reactive emotions to lead to suffering—for both the experiencer and the object of those emotions—binds the subject to a course of events not of their choosing. McRae argues that, for Tsongkhapa, a mind inoculated

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[20] McRae, "Emotions, Ethics and Choice," 344.
[21] *Id.*, 362–3.
[22] Śāntideva, *Bodhisattva Way of Life*, 60.

against ignorance and thoughtlessness by mindfulness and knowledge is unhindered by negative reactive emotions.[23] McRae argues that we are unable to avoid experiences that trigger these negative reactive emotions and instead we "choose them" through reflection and moral development.[24] Working with Buddhaghosa, Buddhist scholar Maria Heim argues that moral agency is found not in a fully autonomous, independent, deliberating agent but in an agent that works through motivations, emotional dispositions, and conditioned behavior. She claims that, by developing the mental habits of mindfulness and the four divine abidings moral agency is developed.[25] "Genuine moral freedom," she says, "lies in peeling away layers of greed, hatred, and delusion," turning to the liberating qualities of wholesome mental states.[26] This understanding of moral agency as indirect, rather than direct, is the foundation of a Buddhist account of well-being. Compassion is like an armor for the possessor. Having developed compassion, negative emotions like ignorance, anger, pride, attachment, and envy fail to take hold. Likewise, acting out of compassion for others diminishes the potential for negative reactive emotions to propagate.

In our response to the moral imperative of climate change, those that accept and act in accordance with it often express anger or exasperation with the inaction that will ultimately harm future generations. However, the capacity for moral action should not be taken for granted and lies in the development of moral agency conditioned and protected by wholesome mental states. The motivation problem arises not because we do not have motivations for acting to protect future generations from climate related harm, but because the ability to act relies on this moral agency.

Sustained action

The second aspect of the moral imperative of climate change is that it implies sustained action rather than a single deliberate action. This sustained action against climate change is needed both over the

[23] McRae, "Emotions, Ethics and Choice," 364.
[24] *Id.*, 359.
[25] Heim, *Forerunner of All Things*, 221.
[26] *Id.*, 222.

course of one's life and across generations. The problem is that the conditions that might motivate single actions fail to motivate the sustained action that the moral imperative demands. Part of the problem with sustained action is that it requires recognizing how or when the moral imperative applies to a given situation. The Buddhist program of moral development provides key insights for moral agents to appropriately apply the moral imperative. The other part of the problem of sustained action, discussed in the previous section, is the impact of negative reactive emotions on moral agency. These negative reactive emotions disrupt the moral motivations needed for sustained action.

The problem of sustained action is directly connected to the problem as to why metaphysical knowledge of interdependence does not result in action in accordance with that knowledge. The Buddhist sources discussed in the previous section demonstrate that our actions come out of the preconditioned mind, conditioned by previous actions, intentions, or mental states. For these sources, we are the inheritors of karma, our past actions planted a karmic seed that ripens giving the mind its preconditioned nature.[27] This presents a problem for sustaining moral action since previous actions impact those in the future, our actions do not only need to be in line with a moral imperative they must also support further action.

In discussing intergenerational justice, philosopher Dieter Brinbacher argues a central concern of intergenerational justice is why moral motivations do not seem to reliably motivate action. He argues that for any normative ethical position an additional factor is necessary for us to act in accordance with that position. Brinbacher splits these potential motivations into three non-exclusive groups. There are the moral motivations in which a moral act performed because it is moral, which he calls moral motives. Quasi-moral motives are done in the service of a conditioned virtue independent of "the adoption of a particular system of morality."[28] Non-moral motives are done in one's self-interest which happen to coincide with the moral position. Again, these motivations are not exclusive

[27] Heim, *Forerunner of All Things*, 48.
[28] Brinbacher, "What Motivates Us," 281.

and our motivations for following any rule could include all three of them.

Not only can multiple motivations coincide, Brinbacher argues that purely moral motivations are often too weak to promote action on the part of moral agents, which means that moral motivations often must align with quasi-moral and non-moral motivations.[29] This presents a problem for acting for the normative ethical position that we should act to reduce our emissions because of climate change, since quasi-moral motives are often altruistic and more easily form between people who actually interact. The moral calculation that we are doing irreversible and undue harm to future generations through our actions might be irrefutable but the motivation to actually do something is missing since we do not interact with future generations.

The often paradoxically nature of directly trying to resolve issues that harm future generations suggest that looking towards current and near future problems might indirectly reach the same goals as our direct approaches aspired to. Direct motivations are motivations to act on a normative position, that fulfill the demands of that position. In contrast, indirect motivations are motivations that fulfill a narrower normative position yet when fulfilled provide secondary benefits that achieve what the direct motivations aimed at. In relationship to future generations, compassion is a quasi-moral and indirect motive to care for distant future generations.[30]

To see how this approach might play out we will consider the ethical position that we should reduce our emissions for the good of future generations. Instead of considering harm to future abstract generations, we should consider harm done to the generation of our children or grandchildren. The benefit of this reframing is that we have a readily comparable state at hand. Rather than approaching the problems of intergenerational justice directly through agreement on a rule that we have little motivation to follow through on, we instead care for future generations indirectly by caring for others in the present. This approach might avoid the problem of non-interaction with future generations by motivating us to act out of a

[29] *Id.*, 282.
[30] *Id.*, 285.

desire to reduce harm to the current or next generation. This proposal is referenced by Brinbacher as the "chain of love" and is a strong proposal in its own right.[31] For Buddhists, *karuṃā* functions not just as a social emotion it plays an important role in the liberation of the mind. Seen in this way it also provides increasing clarity and ability to act morally in addition to its indirect care for future people.

This indirect approach described by Brinbacher is similar to Heim's construction of Buddhist moral agency. Part of the problem with direct approaches is that we imagine that the moral agent is simply choosing the course of action based on their motivations alone. But we neglect that even if they have motivations to act on a particular moral stance their actions are restricted by interdependent social and personal conditions. The agency we have in the acceptance, adoption, application, and action of an ethical position is a qualified one. The motivations to move from acceptance to action are not always apparent.

In Heim's understanding of Buddhist moral agency, the focus is not on making decisions that result in a particular outcome. Instead, the focus is on directing the attention to the conditions, motivations, and state of mind that have a strong influence on those decisions.[32] Brinbacher argues that one reason we find it so difficult to follow through on moral principles is because of our "insufficiently developed capacity to identify situations for which these beliefs are relevant," a capacity that is explicitly developed through Buddhist practice.[33] The Buddhist concept of compassion is key to the development of this capacity for moral action. In developing compassion for others, we consider their conditions leading to a deeper understanding of interdependence and protection from the negative reactive emotions that prevent us from exercising moral agency.

Interdependence and Karma in Joint Action

The third aspect of the moral imperative of climate change is that it does not just apply to individuals. As mentioned earlier, while the Dalai Lama stresses individual and universal responsibility, the

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[31] *Id.*, 286.
[32] Heim, *Forerunner of All Things*, 221.
[33] Brinbacher, "What Motivates Us," 275.

possibility of preventing harm to future generations relies on joint action and on the actions of institutions. However, it is not entirely clear how the moral motivations of individuals translate into the joint action needed to address the moral problems of climate change. In fact, many scholars argue that the problem of climate change is primarily a collective action problem.[34] While there are several formulations of collective action problems related to climate change, the general shape of the problem is that, collectively, our actions or the results of our actions are not what we intended them to be. These formulations focus on the dissymmetry between rational self-interest versus what is rationally optimal for the group. In a simple formulation of the collective action problem of climate change, while reducing emissions to avoid the harmful effects of climate change is the optimal choice, each actor acting in their self-interest ultimately does not reduce emissions. While collective action on climate change is clearly affected by this problem, it only explains our inaction through the conflict between group morality and self-interest.

The pervasiveness of *duḥkha* in our experience of the world is similar to the pervasiveness of emitting greenhouse gases. All our activity—commerce, agriculture, cultural exchange, and even breathing; essentially, our entire existence—is based, directly or indirectly, on CO_2 emissions.[35] Furthermore, the well-being of current people often relies on industries that are heavy emitters, while future well-being is threatened by these same industries. Some whole economies are based on heavily emitting industries, economies whose communities are especially vulnerable to the future effects of climate change. For instance, the island Republic of Maldives relies on tourism income to provide for its people. Without that income it would support a much smaller population, or a large portion of the island would be destitute. Tourism with private and commercial air travel is a heavy emitter of greenhouse gas, an activity that threatens their further existence on the island. One result of such a situation is fatalism about the future of the

[34] Gardiner, "Perfect Moral Storm," 400; Moellendorf, *Mobilizing Hope*, 92.
[35] Gardiner, "Perfect Moral Storm," 21.

island.[36] This fatalism is reinforced by missing emission targets and broken promises of international agreements. The impact of climate change is not limited to only the environment: it effects the way we view moral problems. Buddhism is both a potential response to climate fatalism, but it also is vulnerable to becoming fatalistic practice itself, re-enforcing patterns of thought and behavior in society that result in environmental injustice.[37]

While the moral imperative of climate change clearly requires collective action, perhaps more important is the ability to break away from conditioned responses and social patterns that lead to fatalism, denial, and ultimately inaction, in the face of the moral imperative of climate change. Socially engaged Buddhists have been especially concerned with descriptions of karma as cosmic justice, which places those that experience injustice as deserving of any suffering in light of past deeds they must be responsible for in a past life.[38] Instead, they argue for an interpretation of karma in which the world is from moment to moment created through the results of actions. This includes actions which condition social patterns of behavior as well as mental factors that influence individual responses. For socially engaged Buddhists, this has enabled reflection on the reproduction of social injustice. From this perspective, collective action problems are not due to any necessary relationship between self-interest and concern for others. Instead, they are rooted in the duality that comes out of the ignorance of our interdependent nature.

The Buddhist concept of moral agency focuses not on a person's natural state uninfluenced by others but on freedom beyond the confines of both the social and the self. People left to their own devices will not be free, but trapped by desire and suffering, seeking permanence but finding only impermanence. The freedom to act is not given, it is earned through virtuous action and meditative practice. Escape from this cycle is not granted through estrangement from the social world alone, as an ascetic. Buddhists seek this freedom through the penetration and disillusion of the subject of life, the self. To obtain this freedom it is recognized that

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[36] Shakeela and Becken, "Tourism Leaders' Perceptions," 277–8.
[37] Watts, *Rethinking Karma,* 30.
[38] *Id.,* vii, 24.

the self is partly constituted by social bonds, which is why the Buddhist is encouraged to denounce those bonds as impermanent and transient. The shedding of social bonds strips away parts of and further exposes the self. But this path is not a denial of our moral responsibility to others or to future generations. Interestingly, the Mahāyāna tradition's emphasis on the compassionate bodhisattva as the spiritual and moral exemplar is not achieved through isolation or by breaking contact with others, but through compassion and the recognition of others as beings also trapped in cycles of suffering and rebirth. Relationships are contaminated with *duḥkha*, dominated by reactive emotions, and self-centered. Through *karuṃā*, contaminated social bonds are replaced with a tranquil equanimity. Harmonious relationships with people are the method to transcendence, not only the goal.

Like the development of *karuṃā* and the moral agency described in the first section, the results of group action are not just the physical outcome of that action. In discussing the fourth century CE Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu and shared agency, Oren Hanner argues that, for Vasubandhu, what "matters in action is the long-term psychological effect on an agent's mind"[39] and that "joint action shapes our psychology and experiences" which in-turn bring "us together with like-minded agents, in whose company the cycle of joint action begins once again."[40] This shifts the moral responsibility for joint action back on the individual, whom also inherit the results of group action. But through the development of moral agency, one is able to disengage from a group action, avoiding the cycle of karma associated with the actions of the group.

The reason that individuals need not separate themselves from the rest of society, as an ascetic, in order to avoid the bad karma from joint actions is that with a sufficiently developed moral agency, individuals can avoid sharing the intentions of a joint action. In turn, it is this distinction that shapes future experiences of the world. As Hanner says, this enables those under coercion to not share in the negative karma associated with an act like murder.[41] On the other hand, it does not protect one from failure of action due to

[39] Hanner, "Not Do With Others," 13.
[40] *Id.*, 22.
[41] Id., 13.

resignation to the inevitable nor from the willful ignorance of denial. This outlook recognizes that we are often forced to participate in actions that we have moral objections to and uncovers the third reason why we fail to act in accordance with the moral imperative of climate change. The social bonds that enable us to engage in joint actions are the same bonds that also obstruct action.

The shared karma generated from responses to the moral imperative of climate change impact how agents respond to it in the future. Action taken in response to the moral imperative saturated with *kleśa* or the negative reactive emotions mentioned in the first section bring the experiencers closer together. It is not that all our actions together ultimately result in ineffective joint action, like in collective action problems, but that action motivated from unwholesome roots fail to sustain the moral agency needed break away from the inertia of harmful group actions.

Conclusion

In the first section, I discussed the claim that we harm future generations through inaction in the face of climate change. However, Future generations do not exist, they have no identity, and they do not interact with people now living therefore attributing rights, duties, harm, and well-being to them is a serious challenge in conceiving of justice for future generations.[42] Harm based approaches to these challenges assert that we can talk about future generations in terms of rights, duties, and harm and I argued that while Buddhists accept this reasoning, *duḥkha* includes important aspects of well-being that these accounts leave out, namely moral agency. In understanding our commitment to future generations beyond comparative or causal accounts of harm we are able to understand how our actions not only impact future generations through environmental cause and effect but also through their impact on our ability to act for moral reasons. The Buddhist conception of well-being is a state untrammeled by *kleśa* and free to act towards the enlightenment and alleviation of the suffering of all beings.[43] This enables us to think of environmental harm as a harm not only

[42] Moellendorf, *Mobilizing Hope*, 59.
[43] Harris, "Suffering and Well-Being," 254–5.

because of damage to the environment and by extension human well-being but a harm because it is a failure of moral agency. We do not want to disrupt the environment, yet our activity does anyway. There is a disconnect between what we want and what actually occurs. And between what we might take as a good moral reason for an action and following through on the action itself.

Buddhist principles of intergenerational justice would take interdependence as not just referring to the interconnectedness between people but also to our actions. A moral agent described in this way is not necessarily freed by interdependence, rather it acts as a hinderance on moral agency.[44] The Buddhist concept of interdependence tells us what sort of agents we are—trapped—unable to be free yet connected to each other intimately. While the Buddhist concept of compassion or *karuṃā* tells us what sort of agents we should be. It is *karuṃā* that enables our karma to be more than just the action of cause and effect. In considering the moral imperative of climate change, we should recognize that our actions in regard to climate change result in far more than average temperatures in the future, they impact our moral agency and our ability to respond to the moral imperative itself. This agency also allows us to resist the inertia of harmful joint actions allowing moral agents to avoid the harmful karma that will infiltrate future experiences of generations. The root of the social movement against climate action may very well be found in how we carry out climate action, which leads to inaction, fatalism, and eventually to denial of moral imperative of climate change.

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