

Buddhist Energy Reform: Alternate Responses to an Oil War

Chris Wilson, August 2002

American Buddhists are 'natural' environmentalists who automatically protect the environment to the extent they practice Buddhist mindfulness. So intrinsic is this 'environmentalism' to the practice of Buddhism in their personal lives, that American Buddhists often feel no great need to become politically active on environmental issues. Unfortunately, environmental waste and harm are currently so institutionalized in our economy that the small but growing number of Americans who are living lives of individual restraint and mindfulness are insufficient to prevent great harm in the near term solely by their example.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of America's economic dependence on oil, gas, and coal. This dependence is causing two forms of great harm that require a collective and political, rather than a purely personal, response. The first is the near-term threat of harm posed by the announced policy of our government to use troops to secure its sources of oil supply in the Middle East. The second is the long-term harm caused by the burning of fossil fuels, which is already resulting in the devastation of temperate forests by acid rain, the dying of the Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and the submersion of villages and farmlands in island nations. Both of these great causes of suffering are the effects of well-established economic institutions and the well-funded ideological and political superstructures that have been erected to protect them.

Of these two forms of great harm, the one that will inevitably lead to political engagement and group action by Buddhists is the imminent threat of war. It has been made abundantly clear that the U.S. will use military force to protect our sources of oil in the Middle East. (For a background piece on these questions, see the companion piece, "Oil is Not to Die For").

The current U.S. administration, while openly citing the national security issues involved in our dependence on Middle Eastern oil, refuses to recognize that the national security issues could be addressed non-violently and effectively by lowering our dependence on oil imports. This dependence can be decreased significantly - enough to make the military occupation of foreign oil fields unnecessary for economic reasons - through better conservation and increased use of renewable local energy sources.

Widely respected commentators, including Thomas Friedman of the New York Times, and the environmentalist writer Bill McKibben have commented that our current President deliberately blew an irreplaceable opportunity to call on the American people, in the aftermath of 9/11, to make modest life-style sacrifices to protect our nation and our people from further threats. Instead, they noted, he called on them to show their patriotism by not by sacrificing anything at all, but by in fact stepping up their purchases of goods and services that in many cases increase our worsening dependence on Middle Eastern oil.

In the face of government policies that are worsening our dependence on the Middle East and thus increasing the possibility of war, it is incumbent on Buddhists to support efforts for an overall reform of our national energy policies.

To that end, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship is launching the Buddhist Energy Reform, an initiative that seeks to identify the best non-violent alternatives to our country's current energy policies. BER is meant to provide a resource clearing-house,

discussion forum, and master activity calendar for all potential Buddhist activists on matters of national energy policy. It is essential to this initiative that it have a real chance of success. This means it must not be a sectarian program but one that will elicit widespread popular support. In keeping with that requirement, Buddhist Energy Reform will propose an initial list of priorities for consideration by BPF members and friends. In most cases, these preliminary priorities represent the 'best of breed' approaches to various aspects of our energy dependence, popular initiatives that already show the potential for broad support.

The initial list of priorities includes:

Municipalization of renewable energy. This involves support for The Vote Solar Initiative, a city-by-city campaign by the organizers behind the recent victory of a renewable energy ballot initiative in San Francisco. That ballot measure called for the construction of solar and wind resources to provide 25% of the energy consumption of San Francisco City and County agencies. The construction will be funded by bonds that will be repaid out of monies already budgeted under the City's existing long-term energy contracts, and will require no tax increases. Built over public spaces, the solar panels will in some cases yield additional benefits such as providing shade for cars in parking lots, thus saving some energy that would otherwise be spent running car air-conditioners. Although 25% seems a modest goal, it is enough to make the project the largest solar installation in the U.S. and to lower the costs of solar panels by 10% nationwide. The organizers of the Solar Initiative are next targeting San Diego, where there has been substantial interest in the San Francisco approach. More broadly, the organizers think that ballot initiatives for renewable municipal energy sources can be successful throughout the Southwest and the Sun Belt, as ordinary citizens are very keen to be less dependent on oil from the Middle East, and also to being less vulnerable to price manipulations by non-local corporations. The local initiative approach has the advantage of being an exercise in grass-roots democracy that can reach a critical mass for national energy reform from below, rather than depending on top-down change from a Congress that is itself dependent on energy lobby campaign contributions. The BER would help interested local BPF chapters organize around this issue and reach out to the broader sangha in their region. Anyone who believes that his or her city or county would be an appropriate venue for such an initiative, please contact BER.

Raising State car fleet mileage standards. This approach calls for replicating the recent success of California legislation that constituted a rebuke to the current federal administration's actions on car mileage standards and global warming. Those federal actions have not only done nothing to improve the situation, but have actually relaxed existing guidelines, leading to higher energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. The victory in California made clear that a significant number of state legislatures may be open to increasing mileage requirements for new cars sold in their states. As Bill McKibben points out, the waiting lists for high mileage hybrid cars, those with batteries recharged by a small gas engine while driving, prove that the American people know that higher mileage alternatives are not only potentially available, but are available right now. A significant increase in the number of hybrids, which generally offer twice the mileage of conventional passenger cars, could by itself result in a significant decrease in our strategic dependence on the Middle East. The Buddhist Energy Reform could help interested BPF members coordinate their efforts with groups already working to influence State legislators on this point.

Greater Subsidies for Consumer Conservation and Renewable Energy Investments. This program calls for lobbying corporations, public utilities, and all levels of government, to provide more generous subsidies for the purchase and installation of more efficient electrical and gas appliances and of solar panels and other renewable energy generation devices for homes and businesses. The expected reversal by the current administration of an existing requirement for more efficient air conditioners is

exactly the opposite of what is needed. Manufacturers complained of resulting higher prices and lower sales for more efficient units. Subsidies could raise sale volumes to a point where manufacturing costs declined and vendor profits increased to attractive levels. The same would be true for refrigerators, dishwashers, washing machines and driers. Unlike the other programs listed above, this initiative would likely require a significant outlay of public funds. And unlike the other programs, there is no recent successful public initiative that can be used as a pattern for a national campaign. Nevertheless, it is believed that this is one area in which the general public can be persuaded to consider such subsidies as a valid response to national security concerns, one that might justify transferring funds from the swollen defense budget to these purposes. Again, Buddhist Energy Reform can help support efforts by interested BPF members and friends to get such initiatives off the ground. (Action alert: There is currently a move by California's utilities to put a low ceiling on the buyback of home-generated solar electricity. That buyback is currently one of the largest incentives to home investments in solar panels. Please contact your local representatives to oppose the new ceilings. For further info, contact [The Vote Solar Initiative](#).)

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