

Tibetan Buddhist leader the Karmapa discusses climate change and Tibet Third Pole during first visit to UK

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Lord Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, welcomes the Karmapa to his home at Cambridge University for the roundtable on climate change organized by ICT and Inspire Dialogue Foundation.

During his first visit to the UK from May 17 to 28, 2017, the Karmapa, a prominent Tibetan Buddhist leader, joined former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Rowan Williams together with scientists, scholars and cultural figures for a dialogue on the environment hosted by the International Campaign for Tibet and Inspire Dialogue Foundation.

The round table discussion, held on May 24, 2017, was intended to bring together perspectives “between disciplines and generations” as the beginning of an ongoing exchange, according to Lord Williams, Master of Magdalen College and a noted poet and theologian. It involved figures from the arts and sciences, including Jude Kelly, Artistic Director of the Southbank Centre in London; James Thornton, the founding CEO of ClientEarth; Dame Fiona Reynolds, former Director-General of the National Trust; Dr Bhaskar Vira, Director, University of Cambridge Conservation Research Institute; Tracey Seaward, film producer whose credits include the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony, professors, students and Tibetan scholars.

The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, head of the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism and the only Tibetan reincarnate lama to be acknowledged by both the Chinese government and the Dalai Lama, escaped into exile in India in 2000. He traces his interest in the environment to being born and brought up in a nomadic family in eastern Tibet, and is the founder of Khoryug, an association of more than 55 Buddhist monasteries and nunneries across the Himalayas.



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During his visit to the UK, the Karmapa, 31, gave a two-day teachings to thousands of Buddhists and others in Battersea, London; held a private meeting with HRH Prince Charles, known for his passionate concern for the environment and Tibet; visited a Hindu temple; presided over a ceremony at the Tibetan Peace Garden in the grounds of the Imperial War Museum, blessed thousands of Nepalese and Indians at a ceremony organized by the Buddhist Community Center UK, and addressed the Tibetan community in Britain. He also spoke at a launch of his book, 'Interconnected: Embracing Life in Our Global Society', second in a series based on exchanges between the Karmapa and young people. (See his [official website for a full account of the visit.](#))

During his visit, the Karmapa spoke about Tibet's critical environmental significance as the earth's Third Pole, and on the importance of the stewardship of the Tibetan environment by Tibetan people: "When it comes to protecting the environment of Tibet, one of the best sources to consult is the Tibetan people themselves, as they have related to it for thousands of years. Knowing it inside and out, they naturally understand how to create a sustainable environment. Their whole hearts and minds are invested there. The Tibetans' traditional approach to the environment sees it as a sacred field inhabited by gods and spirits. Their outlook has great sincerity and respect for their natural world."

At the dialogue in Cambridge, held at the home of Lord Rowan Williams in the University, ICT gave a presentation on Chinese policies of nomad settlement and the implications of China creating nature reserves on the Tibetan plateau.

Cambridge climate change dialogue with the Karmapa

International Campaign for Tibet



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In hosting the event, Lord Williams and the Inspire Dialogue Foundation aimed to build new relationships with people who might not have otherwise met and establish plans for future collaborative action on the issue of a shared environmental future.

Lord Rowan Williams opened the conversation by urging participants: "To consider some of the issues that arise from the ethics of the environment, broadly called the life of the spirit," saying that within spiritual communities there were deeply rooted disciplines to teach people who we are in relation to the environment.

The Karmapa observed that: "We are at a really interesting moment in time. Previously, science and religion were two separate dialogues and now science and spirituality at least are coming together and contributing more to each other. Knowledge needs to work together with our hearts and minds."

Dr Cameron Taylor of Inspire Dialogue Foundation, said: "It is notable that the dialogue was held on the same day as the Pope presented President Trump, who has previously attributed climate change to a 'Chinese conspiracy' with his climate change encyclical, highlighting the importance of the engagement of religious leaders with this pressing global issue. Faith leaders have an important role in shifting hearts in terms of our relationship to the environment, so I am really grateful that the Karmapa and Lord Williams are joining together to advocate for the necessary cultural shifts that will align our minds with the reality of our global climate situation."

Dr Bhaskar Vira gave an outline of the work of his institute at Cambridge University, set up to explore relationships and interconnectedness of issues such as climate change, food security. He spoke about one of the key areas of the institute's work, which is the role of the natural landscape in maintaining water systems, the dangers of potential conflict over water, specifically mentioning Tibet as the source of water for billions of people. Dr Vira said that knowledge of Tibet as the earth's Third Pole is gaining ground in scientific circles; previously attention was focused mainly on the North and South Poles.

Dame Fiona Reynolds, who was awarded an OBE for services to heritage and conservation,^[1] said: "Whilst we are dependent on scientists and academics to explain relationships and connections, we are also dependent on people to make decisions and adapt their behavior and to help us think about the values we share for the future. I am more and more convinced that people are not persuaded by fear or material matters alone, but we are persuaded and inspired by beauty - by the intangible phenomenon of our

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spiritual relationship with the landscape. If we are to deal with climate change, we need to inspire people to act in the belief that there is a better future that is not solely dependent on material things. It is harder these days to talk about spirituality, but we perhaps need to adopt spiritual values and language to inspire people.”

Referencing the Karmapa’s nomad heritage, Kate Saunders of the International Campaign for Tibet outlined new plans by China to turn vast tracts of Tibet into nature reserves. While on the surface this appears to be a useful approach of preserving the landscape, what few realize is that it is contingent upon the removal of nomads from their pastures. Beijing bureaucrats talk of ‘contradiction of grass and animals’, although for many generations, Tibetan nomads like the Karmapa’s family have made skilful use of the landscape of the world’s highest and largest plateau, co-existing peacefully with wildlife and protecting the land and its species. In these new nature reserves, grazing of yaks is illegal and so is the gathering of medicinal herbs.

Kate Saunders also referred to an emerging dialogue in China in which many Chinese scientists are calling for strengthened participation of science-based conservation with Tibetan stewardship of the land. These perspectives are little-known outside but drawing attention to them honors the Karmapa’s nomadic heritage. And as China seeks to gain endorsement from governments and international institutions for its new nature reserves, there is a need to challenge official China’s narrative on the nomads.

Ringu Tulku said that in Tibet before 1959, people looked at the environment with a very personal connection that could be called spiritual, and that remains the case today. He spoke about a Wechat conversation with Tibetans in Tibet who understood the issue through two perspectives: one was the outside environment, the “container” in Buddhism, and the other was the inside environment, relating to how people react to each other and live together. The group decided that all the monasteries and communities should come together and pledged to protect the environment.

In response to thinking about transforming concepts of ownership, Lord Williams recalled the Hebrew Scriptures, stating that we do not own the land; rather it is lent to us for a time. Another participant remarked that changing our relationship to the earth also involved changing other power structures such as that between men and women, different races and castes. This shift also relates to the need to feel secure. We would be more able to resolve environmental issues from a position of security, allowing people to see the mutual benefits of everyone being responsible for each other.

The Karmapa traces his interest in the environment to planting a tree at the age of around four, when there was a severe drought in his home area of eastern Tibet. He was born and brought up into a drogpa or nomad family. He was asked to plant a sapling at the source of a spring, and led prayers with the aspiration that the tree would provide water for all living beings nearby.^[2]

The Karmapa said: “Our association with place and homeland is made stronger if there is some memory of nature associated with it. Fondness for this home space is strongest in rural areas. In Tibet, these memories and images are burnt into our minds, and this promotes a strong desire to protect our landscape. I also agree with notion of security as being important. Our habitual tendency is to put ourselves at the center, and maybe a better approach is to put others at the forefront and see the safety of others as contributing to our own safety. This is very clear in issues such as food security and water supply.” To illustrate his point, he related the story of an eagle with one body and two heads. They did not get along with each other, so one head tried to get rid of the other and in so doing killed them both. The Karmapa commented that it is critical to remember that environments have no borders.^[3]

James Thornton, founder and CEO of Client Earth, said: “We are in desperate need of a new story [on climate change]; for instance in medieval Europe Christianity was the most compelling story and anything that didn’t fit was left out. Today it’s an economic story - models of ownership and material value. A new story could promote beauty and connection and not promote ownership. Environmentalists have historically told angry negative stories - we need to tell positive, solution-based stories. We need to create an ecological civilisation (post-industrial) with all the changes that would entail - renewable energy and so on.” James Thornton, whose firm succeeded in a lengthy legal battle with the UK government over atmospheric pollution earlier this month, forcing an admission that it would publish its strategy to improve air quality in Britain, added that he had been working in the PRC and that interest in the idea of an ‘ecological civilisation’ as mooted by Xi Jinping appeared genuine; he raised the question of how we could contribute to this?^[4]

Various speakers raised the importance of ensuring access to nature to a digital generation, acknowledging that many habits are formed by the age of 12, as well as the solace that nature can bring under extreme circumstances. Producer Tracey Seaward spoke about a meeting with a Syrian family at a refugee camp in Athens; the father was growing plants in a desolate scrubby patch of land, which was attracting children and bringing them together to plant seeds and nurture the flowers.

In his concluding remarks, the Karmapa said: “With regard to the stories that we create, one image that illustrates the relationship with the world that was mentioned by Ringu Tulku, is water in a glass. Water is the content and the vitality, which the glass as a container holds. This picture shows mutual dependence, as a container without anything in it, is not functioning as a container (or not being what it is), and water needs something to hold it. So they depend on each other in a relationship that is mutually

beneficial.”

Footnotes:

[1] The full title is Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Fiona Reynolds is also author of 'The Fight for Beauty: Our Path to a Better Future'.

[2] Article by the Karmapa in Conservation Biology, Vol 25, No 6, 2011

[3] See account on the Karmapa Foundation website, posted on May 26, 2017, <http://karmapafoundation.eu/spirit-protecting-environment/>

[4] 'Air pollution: the battle to save Britain from suffocation, The Guardian, May 7, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/07/air-pollution-clientearth-james-thornton-court-victory>