

***Statement by His Holiness, the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa
Ogyen Trinley Dorje, Head of the Karma Kagyu School of
Tibetan Buddhism, Against the Illegal Trade in Ivory***

The discoveries of modern science have shown us that humans are simply one of many millions of species who share this planet. Whether we acknowledge it or not, it has become self-evident that we are part of an interdependent web of life whose parts work together to mutually support each other. Each ecosystem is comprised of myriad life-forms intricately interconnected and together they form the biosphere in which we are able to exist; if the balance is disturbed in any way, the consequences impact every species.

During the Cultural Revolution in China, farmers were encouraged by the authorities to kill the sparrows because the perception at that time was that the birds ate the seed and thus damaged the crops. Once the sparrows were gone, insects multiplied unchecked and devoured the crops that everyone was trying to protect. In the end, the loss and suffering were much greater. We presume that we are more intelligent and wiser than other species and yet we are unable to predict the consequences of species loss. It seems a matter of common sense to preserve biodiversity, irrespective of our beliefs or philosophies, yet many people fail to understand this basic principle of inter-connectedness. Instead, we humans irresponsibly follow our own desires, unable or unwilling to differentiate between what we want and what we need.

I recently learned that several thousand African elephants were killed last year in cruel and horrific ways, simply to feed the insatiable greed for ivory. Some argue that the use of ivory and other animal parts to make religious artifacts, decorative objects or medicine is an intrinsic part of their cultural tradition. This may be true but the historical use of ivory in former times had a limited impact on the species involved. Nowadays, the organized nature of wildlife killing and trade however means that the use of modern firearms and technology creates immense damage and great suffering and ancient cultural values have been lost and replaced by big business and profit.

As a Buddhist, I am familiar with one of the Jataka tales which tells how Sakyamuni Buddha was once born as a pure white elephant. Moreover, the Buddha's mother, Queen Mayawati had a dream that a white elephant with six tusks pierced her womb, thus heralding his birth. These are just two examples of how elephants are used as a metaphor for Lord Buddha in Buddhist tradition. Elephants are therefore precious to us and should be treated with special affection. As Buddhists, we should do everything we can to protect this species, not least because elephants clearly demonstrate compassion and caring to one another.

From an ethical standpoint, it seems to me that every sentient being has the right to

be happy and to be free from suffering. I believe that in the depths of our hearts each of us has the capacity for natural compassion: when we see other sentient beings suffer, we empathize, and we recognize the wish of other sentient beings to be happy and to avoid suffering. I humbly request you, therefore, not to act thoughtlessly. Do not cause the deaths of elephants, or indeed other wild animals such as rhinos, and tigers, in order to satisfy your own desires, and please avoid the use of illegal wildlife products in any form.