

Essay

Touching the Earth: Buddhist (and Kierkegaardian) Reflections on and of the ‘Negative’ Emotions

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Abstract: This article develops the philosophical work of Joanna Macy. It argues that ecological grief is a fitting response to our ecological predicament and that much of the ‘mental ill health’ that we are now seeing is, in fact, a perfectly sane response to our ecological reality. This paper claims that all ecological emotions are grounded in love/compassion. Acceptance of these emotions reveals that everything is fine in the world as it is, providing that we accept our ecological emotions as part of what is ‘in the world’. This is non-dualistic acceptance or ‘fierce’ acceptance. This paper focuses primarily on the revolutionary qualities of ecological grief: a paradoxical revolution, coming as it does from a profound process of acceptance.

Keywords: ecological grief; Buddhism; Joanna Macy; non-dual spirituality

1. Introduction: Buddhism and Environmentalism?

This special issue concerns the Buddhism–environmentalism nexus. In the Global North today, it is sometimes assumed that the great monotheisms are at the root of our ecological dis-ease and dis-location, while the great wisdom traditions in much of India and Southeast Asia are an antidote to this. A case can indeed be made that Buddhism (also Hinduism, Taoism, and perhaps Confucianism and Shintoism) has helped these societies to have some in-built resistance towards those ideologies which are driving the climate crisis and the wider overshoot of planetary boundaries. For instance, this may be true of propertarianism,¹ individualism, growthism,² and neoliberalism. Nevertheless, the sad reality is that these societies have tended to be much less resistant to those ideologies than might have been hoped.

One reason for this rather bitter reality might be that Buddhism itself generally has, or at least exhibits, less ‘environ-mentality’ than is sometimes supposed.

In this article, I look at a creative way in which Buddhism and environmentalism *have* been explicitly brought together, as Buddhism came to the Global North. A lot of the thinking in this piece is due to the influence of Joanna Macy, who has brought Buddhist and ecologicistic thinking, feeling, and practices together in her work. I also analyse connections between Buddhist themes, on the one hand, and Western philosophical (especially, Kierkegaardian) themes on the other. I do all this in a deliberately non-dual spirit, and in a deliberately applied spirit. I am interested in the possibility—which I believe to be increasingly actualised—of a spiritual path that is pragmatic and eco-spiritual, and that finds unity in the wisdom of the best of ‘Western’ philosophy and the best of ‘Eastern’ wisdom traditions. I seek to offer path marks for such a way—and for its importance in the darkness of this time.

2. Non-Dual Acceptance: The Case of Eco-Grief

In 2011, I found an ‘open thread’ conversation starter from *The Guardian*: “The western black rhino has been declared extinct. Does that bother you?” I found myself in a position that I am sure my reader will empathise with, from one cause or another: feeling bothered



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that the somewhat flip expression “Does that bother you?” was employed in this context, and feeling an intense, sudden moment of grief for this subspecies consigned to the history books. I have never interacted with a rhinoceros, nor even seen one in real life. Truth be told, I was not aware of the western black rhino as a distinct subspecies until I read the article. Yet still, I felt my heart pierced. Here was a majestic creature condemned (by humans) never again to walk this Earth. The grief I felt that morning is but a microcosm of the ecological grief many of us contend with as we struggle to come to terms with the reality of dangerous anthropogenic climate change, habitat destruction, and wider ecological breakdown.

In the public imagination, grief is often depicted as debilitating, and not unreasonably so. We can be ‘paralysed by grief’ or ‘overcome with grief’; and so, by and large, we tend to assume that it is something to be feared and perhaps even avoided (if possible), and certainly not to be welcomed.

I mean to show how grief is good. And I mean to show in particular that when living in grief is unavoidable (as with the climate and nature), then it is most definitely best embraced, crucially because such grief can have revolutionary qualities.

Grief is *how love survives loss*. It is a reaction of pain and even outrage against the ripping of someone (or ‘something’) precious out from one’s lived world. More accurately: it is the tearing of the very fabric of that world. From this understanding of the term, we should worry if we *do not* feel intense grief when we lose ‘something’ we love. If we lose a loved one and feel no grief, did we really love them at all?

From this, we can understand that climate grief is a natural response to an honest confrontation with ecology and climate science: with the unfolding reality of our world at this time.³ When we realise just how bad things are and are going to be, grief is the most natural, needful, truly understandable reaction. Likewise, the still-broader phenomenon of eco-grief is equally understandable.⁴ I experienced a certain level of grief for the extinction of a lesser-known subspecies half the world away; so, of course, I am sometimes inclined to feel deep grief, such as when I dwell on the countless more species, plus the millions more people, who will go the same way in the coming decades. Indeed, if grief was *not* part of one’s response, again, we would have cause to worry! Of course, we care when we lose things we care about, and it looks as though we are set to lose almost everything. (And of course “lose” here is a euphemism. These beings are not really ‘lost’, as if they might suddenly turn up again; they are being directly and indirectly destroyed. Here we see an incipient righteous link between grief and anger, and definitely a place for anger; as will unfold below, I disfavour the attempt of some spiritual teachings to denigrate anger and fear).

In the classic account of grief, the first stage is denial (Kubler-Ross 1969).⁵ And here is the interesting thing: such denial is not irrational. When we are experiencing deep grief (or possibly guilt) due to the loss of something we care about, we must change our worldview to accommodate the lack of that loved thing. Denial is an expression of the difficulty of transitioning from one worldview to another.

This can help us understand some climate denialism (when it is not merely contrary, nor dishonest, nor motivated just by self-interest). Denial is a part of grieving, and it is often the first response when confronting devastating truths. But denial is also the path to acceptance. Think just how terrible and avoidable this crisis is; we have, with full knowledge, half-destroyed our planet in the name of individualistic desire–satisfaction and ‘economic growth’. With the tragic absurdity of that fact and its awful consequences, it is no wonder people pine deeply to deny and resist the truth. This huge truth is truly a hard one to reconcile with.

When thought of in this way, denial is not necessarily the foolish enemy that we in the climate movement think it is; it can be the initial part of an understandable unconscious rebellion against the bitter unacceptable reality. It is a manifestation of an urge for the facts of our world to not be true.

This willingness to disbelieve, where it is genuine, should be treated with compassion; those labouring under it are in many cases slowly grasping toward grieving for the same dire future as the rest of us. In time, it is likely they will be able to move through denial and towards acceptance, even if they need a sympathetic hand (or a blunt shock, a lived disaster) to do so. Just as one who loses a loved one may need help to move beyond being unable to accept their loss, to the point sometimes of still seeing them ambivalently as being present,⁶ as in sightings of ghosts. I myself have experienced this: years ago, I ‘saw the ghost’ of my suddenly shockingly deceased beloved young cat, out of the corner of my eye, for some weeks after his death. It made no sense that he had been ripped out of the world, so for a while my nervous system partly reinserted him into it.

The difficulty in coming to terms with what we are losing on the macro scale can thus be read as a tribute to an integrity we wisely attribute to ecosystems.

There is, however, a peculiar and in a sense pernicious quality to climate grief in that we periodically find ourselves engulfed by grief, but the root cause of *this* particular grief is not something that will get easier. Unlike a romantic break-up or the death of a loved one where time becomes the ultimate healer, the passing of time will most likely only make our grief worse as the realities of dangerous climate change become ever more apparent, worse and worse, for some considerable time to come.

Part of the reason why time greatly heals ‘standard’ grief is that we can ‘move on,’ in the sense that a hole that was left in us by the person we have lost can be (in certain respects) eventually filled by other people. Furthermore, we can rationalise our way through things like death, and recognise that it comes for us all. In a way, this inescapability and inevitability can offer a form of comfort, as we find camaraderie in the realisation that we are not the only person who has dealt with these unfortunate but ultimately inescapable situations. Grief is, in most instances, something that we can get through.

These standard elements of grief do not translate to *climate* grief for two reasons: climate grief is collectively self-imposed and, as already noted above, time will almost certainly not help, not heal.

The fact that the collapse of the planet’s weather is caused by our actions makes us all culpable. True, some of us are (much) more culpable than others. It is easy to point the finger at big oil companies or any uncaring conglomerate, and sometimes that is likely what we need to do, perhaps with a rage against injustice. But in the end, if you are reading this, then you are probably from a fairly affluent part of the world, and so your resource use (and your contribution to climate breakdown) is likely to be far greater than the average person in the Global South who will likely suffer the most from climate breakdown. Grief is far harder to come to terms with when it is (collectively) self-imposed. It is as though we have not just lost a loved one, we have killed her.⁷ (And, in this case, one can and should sometimes drop the qualification, “as though”.)

Moreover, as I have suggested, time is at this point not our friend. Far from it. The passing of time will bring with it the coming rise in sea levels, the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events, the insecurity of food production, and a multitude of other signs of climate breakdown. Where one’s grief is usually lessened over time as we personally adapt to the new situation, climate grief will only deepen as the situation worsens. Time will almost certainly not help us. The only eventual way to free ourselves from this grief is to start to really tackle the root: that is, to change the world.

In this context, it is worth looking at the other elements of grief. We have already explored denial and shown it to be natural and understandable, and potentially part of the transition to acceptance. Two of the other stages of grief can be useful too. Bargaining can help us prioritise what we value most in the world, and that can show us that we should/would sacrifice our luxuries and comforts for a more sustainable world. Moreover, anger is an indelible asset to virtually any resistance or rebellion or endeavour for reform, enabling us to fight against injustices from a place of deep love. In fact, even climate depression has a value: it is an honest accounting, a recognition of tragedy triumphant.

The point is only to not get stuck in it but rather, to move through it, and let it move through you. The fear of getting stuck in depression is generally more debilitating than the depression itself. By trying to keep climate depression at arm's length, paradoxically we make it worse and more persistent.⁸

Instead, when we face the 'negative' emotions of grief, well, the emotions stop being so difficult. In a way, they stop being negative at all. This is the great teaching of Joanna Macy. This is what we need to do: to be with our sadness, anger, fear, and more. To let it become what it really is: (congealed) love.

Grief, in short, is not to be avoided. It manifests itself transitionally through denial, and then productively through bargaining and anger (and depression). Every stage of grief is an aspect of acceptance, which itself is part of wise resistance. For when we accept everything, including our profound love for the world, then we are determined to change that world too. This is *non-dual* acceptance, not the form of acceptance characteristic of resignation, which too often has characterised Buddhism when it has been a religion of selective abnegation and fatalism in the face of power. Rather, it is the spirit of an *engaged* Buddhism, which does not seek to *suppress* difficult emotions but embraces them. Our grief is, in the end, quite simply an expression of our love. And love yearns for expression, for actualisation, for an activated being.

Truly accepting everything, including our profound love for the world and for each other, non-dual spirituality issues one into action to seek to love and protect vulnerable beings (not excluding ourselves).

The possibility of non-dual engaged spirituality is in my view nothing less than the most profound gift that Buddhism can offer the world at this time.

For then, all emotions are welcome to the table as we pass through the fires—metaphorical and literal—of climate breakdown. But grief might just be the most important of the lot. Eco-grief is emotionally our final frontier: it is the place we get to that neighbours depression and despair, which can be hard to get out from; it is the place where the logic of love most magnificently manifests. The thing about climate grief/eco-grief that I stressed above is that it just keeps on coming, keeps on hitting us, with each new insult to the planet and to our fellow beings. But it is also, and in fact, thereby, the ultimate energy that can supercharge us to find a way through and out of the immense vale of tears we have co-created.

Here, then, is the essence of my claim: Climate grief is our last best hope for mass, sufficient climate/eco action. When we are profoundly touched, then a great potential energy becomes available. The beauty of this planet is so deeply touching, moving. Earth and its beings *touch* us; we touch the Earth in response, in lighter and finer and more protective ways. We rise, we move to meet the vast challenge that has fomented the grief in us, or other 'difficult' but essential emotions. These *move* us.

Now let us turn to look more deeply at how and why exactly this is so. In the next section, I build on what I have outlined above, to analyse and critique alternative visions, and to suggest properly the connection between Buddhism⁹ and 'Western' thought.

3. From Climate Grief to Mass Action: A Natural Development

The climate disasters of today are of a profoundly *unnatural* character. They are the product of pumping the atmosphere full of carbon dioxide, methane, and a litany of other greenhouse gases, alongside a more general lack of care for our planetary home, driven in large part by relentless commoditisation.

The rising tide of climate disasters can be well likened to an athlete on drugs rather than running on natural inputs alone.

This is your atmosphere on drugs.

The wildfires, droughts and flash flooding we have seen in the past few years are only a taste of things to come. The frightening, unprecedented leap in ocean and land temperatures at the time of writing (2023) sketches a frankly terrifying trajectory—unless our course shifts very significantly.

Though note well: Even if *per impossibile* our economic system were to decarbonise overnight, the time lags between the production of emissions and their effects on the global climate, combined with some dangerous climate feedbacks probably having already been initiated, mean that we would very likely still experience more frequent and severe disasters than we are seeing today for some considerable time.

When confronted with this sobering reality of climate breakdown, it is tempting to give in to one of two impulses.

On the one side, there is the allure of wishful thinking, which in the climate movement can take the form of an increasingly desperate ‘stubborn optimism’. Some advocates of this ideology (influential in the climate movement, and in ‘elite’ climate circles) call for us to imagine and act on best-case scenarios, and suggest that our believing in them strongly enough will help to realise them. Perhaps, they say or imply, contrary to current trends, those climate models that predict less bad impacts will eventually be vindicated. Or perhaps technological innovation will deliver us a panacea that reverses most of the harm of climate breakdown. Or perhaps an upsurge in activism is about to lead to a worldwide eco-socialist revolution. Yeah, right.

Philosophically speaking, an important feature of such ‘stubborn optimism’ is precisely its *desperate* nature. Stubborn optimists, still trying to claim that we can, for instance, stay below 1.5 °C of average global over-heat even as it becomes starkly obvious that that ship has sailed, will often say things like “We mustn’t despair!” Rather than embracing their emotions in the manner that I outlined in the previous section, they are engaged in a . . . desperate effort to keep their emotions at arm’s length. They are desperately trying to keep despair at bay. But you see where I am going with this: in their desperation to keep it at bay, they are already *in* despair. This is what Søren Kierkegaard taught us to see: That the precise character of true despair is a persistent denial that one is in despair. True despair is necessarily unconscious. As soon as one makes it conscious, as soon as one admits that one is profoundly tempted by despair, then its spell is already partly broken. Then, one is on the kind of path of acceptance outlined in the previous section. One is *en route* to not being mastered by despair (Kierkegaard 1980, *passim*).

Letting despair in, paradoxically, is the key to not being overawed by it. Whereas the terrible irony of the stubborn optimists is that, in their constant mantra of “Don’t despair!”, *they* are in fact the ones stuck in despair. It is far healthier to wake up to one’s unsurprising inclination to despair, to depression, or to denial, than to deny these.

On the other side, there are those who would embrace *doomerism* and abandon all hope that we will, or are even capable of, meaningfully turning to address the climate crisis. Perhaps political and economic forces are too firmly entrenched to be moved at all by popular will and protest. Or perhaps human psychology is too stubbornly hardwired to focus on the immediate future at the expense of the long-term thinking required to meet the challenges of the climate crisis. The grave danger of doomerism is that it is tacitly a way of avoiding action, and of avoiding the pain of knowing/feeling that there is something we can meaningfully do, only we are not doing it.

It seems as if these two perspectives could not be more diametrically opposed in their treatment of the seriousness of climate breakdown: one says “We can fix this!”; the other says “We can’t fix this”. Nevertheless, they are often rooted in the same profound grief that we feel at what is being done to our planet. Doomers try to deal with their grief by deciding that nothing can be done, thus letting themselves off the hook; they deny their own agency, in order to deal with the pain of failure, thus far and perhaps in the future, to stem the deadly tide of eco-decline. Whereas ‘optimists’ try to deal with their grief by suppressing it, and insisting to themselves and each other that somehow all will still be well. Both err by imagining that climate breakdown is something that is the kind of thing that in principle should or could be fixable. Whereas actually one’s response to the crisis—this predicament that is so much deeper than anything that could be fixed as mere problems are fixed—needs to be far subtler than that: more variegated (some things can be ameliorated, others cannot), and more profound (this is not about ‘fixing’ nor about regret at not being

able to succeed in fixing anything/everything; it is about us being called to a profound and ultimately spiritual active response to our predicament, a genuine transformation).

So climate grief, if not fiercely accepted and embraced in the way I outlined in Section 2, can lull us into a distorted view of reality, a false binary where either everything is broadly fine or completely irredeemable. Either path leads to the disavowal of our own full agency to meaningfully act, on the basis of truth, in the midst of and *from* the very strong sense of climate breakdown.

The uncomfortable truth lies somewhere in between the two positions: While it is certainly too late to avoid disasters, it is not yet too late to avoid the very worst-case scenarios. It is never too late to make things less bad. Facing up to climate reality means accepting that things *will* get worse . . . and working to build a more resilient society.

If grief sometimes gives people a distorted perspective on climate breakdown, then the title of this section perhaps seems inapt. How could climate grief be the making of us—how could it naturally be the basis of needful mass action—when it seems to be pushing many of us to disavow our own agency?

To understand this fully, we need to return to the previous section and remind ourselves where grief springs from. Love is at the root of all aversive emotions. We feel eco-anxiety because we love life. We feel fear for the fate of those whom we love (including ourselves! There is no non-dual spirituality without proper self-love). We feel anger or rage at the state of things because our passion for those weaker or more powerless than ourselves is unnecessarily being put in jeopardy. We feel heartbreak and grief for what is 'lost' and what more will be lost.

And we feel despair (or depression, or numbing) when all of this just seems too much to bear. We despair because we care.

All these are *rational, natural* responses to the (unnatural) situation we are in, *given our compassionate nature*, which Buddhism of course reminds us of again and again.

As I indicated in the previous section of this essay, denial is the not altogether unreasonable resistance to the devastating 'loss' I have described: The loss of species, the loss of beauty, the loss of quiet, the loss of connection, the loss of certainty and security, the potential loss of future. It is the motivated rebellion against it. After all, in an important sense what we have lost and what we are in the process of still losing/destroying is not entirely believable. It is simply too awful to be believed, to be credited.

Yet there is of course another and ultimately more authentic form of rebellion than denial: that is, motivated rebellion to stand up for people and the planet by protecting what is still protectable while mourning what is lost. That 'rebellion' may take many forms: From throwing one's money at the crisis while that money still has value (for you cannot take it with you, and you cannot eat it, and it will be of no use to anyone if or when society does collapse), to insisting on making the climate crisis present in one's workplace, to telling the truth relentlessly in one's life, to quitting one's job or breaking the law. We need those diverse forms. We need everyone who is waking up to step up fully into their power. (And obviously, that includes you, reader).

The intimate connection between grief and love reveals just how the process of grief can catalyse us into a state of action. For without love for the planet and its inhabitants, our grief could not tempt us into either the stubborn optimism or doomerist perspectives that cloud our vision of what remains possible! So these positions too are both potential jumping-off points for action once we see more deeply into our grief and recognise how badly we need it to mobilise us. For love, which grief is based on—and in fact a *form* of—ultimately needs to be expressed in behaviour, movement, action.¹⁰

A further upshot of all this, as hinted already in the previous section, is that the gap between soft climate denial and forceful climate action is often less than that between *indifference* and action. This may in itself be a cause for some non-naïve, active hopefulness.¹¹ After all, if grief is often at the root of both denial and action, then shifting people from the former to the latter is surely an easier task than moving someone from indifference to action. Someone who is indifferent is like a stone. Whereas someone who is genuinely afflicted by

denial is someone who has tremendous energy but is compressing or enclosing that energy, or sending it off for the moment in an inefficacious direction. ‘All’ that is needed is then to release the excess energy, and/or change the direction.

Why then does grief provoke such radically different responses in people? Well, part of the reason stems from the extent to which grief has become individualised rather than shared.

Our society obstructs the collective mourning of what has been ‘lost’ in ecology and climate. This makes it harder to understand that the unbelievable nature of the crisis is in fact a deep, shameful, shared truth.

By individuating grief in the way that our society tends to do we encourage the fantasies of stubborn optimism, doomerism, and outright denial. There is a reason communities come together and grieve when a person passes away. Collective mourning helps us better understand and process the loss. Yet we generally do not do the same enough with the rending of climate and nature. This needs to change if we are going to catalyse those in the early stages of grief into activists and ‘doists’ helping to create a better world.

And it is changing. We are starting to recognise that the more communitarian wisdom traditions have something which is badly needed to counter-balance Western versions of ‘Enlightenment’. And, more specifically, grief rituals are being reinvented or rediscovered. For instance, a very powerful one is the ‘truth mandala’ created by Joanna Macy. In this practice, we inhabit together our fear, our anger, our sadness, and our numbness organically, as they arise, in a safe and welcoming space. These difficult emotions, which we typically fear, then become our friends. Moreover, they become our greatest resource. They really do present as energy, energy which can then be turned in other directions. The enormous energy most of us expend trying to damp down these so-called ‘negative’ emotions—energy which largely disables doomerists and stubborn optimists, both of whom are, in precisely Kierkegaard’s sense, stuck in despair—then frees us and frees us up for positive use.

The thing about even despair is this: *There is nothing wrong with it*. Provided one does not get frozen by one’s fear of it, does not get stuck in it, and allows it instead to pass through one, and emerge, transfigured.

4. Conclusion: Our Eco-Grief Will Be the Making of Us

Grief is a mighty latent power. It is the power of love, of truth, of righteous action.

Joanna Macy draws on the Tibetan Shambhala ‘warrior’ prophecy¹² to find a way of seeing and being that could be adequate to our times. We need to find the legendary Shambhala kingdom, to be fully, fiercely equipped for the struggle that, like it or not, is upon us. But that struggle is likely to be at least largely non-violent; that fierceness, at least as I have characterised it in this piece, is one of non-dual acceptance of everything—including our outrage, our despair, our courage, the love that we are. And Shambhala is of course not a place in the world; it is a place in our hearts and minds. And a place moreover that above all we find (and make) *together*.

We have so far seen only the beginning of what ecological grief makes possible. There is a natural path from *allowing* one’s/our ecological grief to acting upon it. This path is going to be followed by more and more of us, as this decade and century unfolds in all its horror and nobility.

There are absolutely no guarantees. Buddhism may well be crucial now to environmentalism, in providing powerful practical as well as philosophical tools for understanding that *attachment* to outcomes is as catastrophic as attachment to desires.

Our attachment *to the Earth*, and to each other, is inextricable and exquisite. It is the merest common sense; it is metta; it is everything. Recall here the Buddha’s pivotal touching of the Earth, the ultimate authority for our awakening. But it is attachment to outcomes (which is essentially just another way of describing attachment to desires—which are for outcomes) that causes suffering, including the suffering that ecological degradation is raining over the beings of our planet and, in particular, the suffering that comes from despair, *and from hope*. Such attachment to outcomes has led the doomerist to give up

(because they can no longer face the pain of what Macy calls active hope, the pain of actually striving for a future, while knowing that there are no guarantees, and in fact that the challenge is now an extreme one) and it has led some stubborn optimists into fallaciously claiming that at the material level we can set everything right, or even that we can insist that we WILL win (a desperate attempt to avoid facing the pain of loss and of uncertainty, an avoidance of the profound Buddhist insistence on impermanence: that everything changes). Of course, this, in turn, implies that doomerists and stubborn optimists alike deserve our profound compassion because, as failed attempts to avoid pain, they are themselves both places of intense self-inflicted pain.

A final point. Sometimes, Buddhists (and other religious or spiritual paths, especially ‘New Age’ paths) argue that the ‘negative’ emotions are bad: in particular, that anger and fear are dangerous bases for being. We get told not to rehearse our anger, or not to come from a place of fear. I gently reply that such talk is dualistic. A non-dual spirituality, accepting all without distinction, which is as I have sought to start to show here can be what Buddhism today most profoundly is and offers,¹³ by contrast truly accepts all these difficult emotions (including accepting both their very difficulty *and* their in-built motility towards action) . . . and searches out the gold in them, understanding them as energy, understanding them as essential.

When this happens, it is liberating: A liberation from compulsive unthoughtful thinking, from ideological blinkers; a liberation quintessentially achieved with others; co-freedom. And it is liberation from a quietism—which Buddhism has too often in its history been: suppressing anger, etc., suppressing justice; ultimately, thereby, suppressing love itself.

When instead we find the living impulse of Buddhism to be a kind of ecological liberation-post-theology, then we are ready and well equipped to act, with determination, in a sustained fashion, as the love that we *are*. Sentient beings are virtually numberless; we vow to free them and care for them in spite of (and . . . because of) the now seemingly impossible odds. But we do not do this in a spirit of optimism; we do it in a spirit of as serene a stoic courage and compassion as we find possible. The despair or depression transmutes into lived love. Without attachment to outcome, we allow whatever is difficult to turn alchemically into further bodhisattva power.

In the magnificent words of Milarepa:

‘See demons as demons: that is the danger.

Know that they are powerless: that is the way.

Understand them for what they are: that is deliverance.

Recognise them as your father and mother: that is their end.

Realise that they are creations of the mind: they become its glory.

When these truths are known, all is liberation.’

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Notes

¹ The fantasy of open-ended rights in private propriety in the Earth; the term is due to Ursula le Guin.

² The ideological pursuit of endless economic growth.

³ An ur-text here is [Albrecht \(2006\)](#).

⁴ For a strong recent treatment, see [Buhner \(2022\)](#).

⁵ Of course, there are alternative pictures of grief that contest both the specifics and wider framework put forward by Kubler-Ross. Indeed, one problem with the Kubler-Ross framework is due to the conceptual simultaneity of some stages of grief ([Read 2018](#)). Nevertheless, I focus my discussion on the Kubler-Ross framework here because of its cultural significance (and because it serves

as a useful springboard for my own observations about ecological grief). These observations are likely to be compatible with other plausible frameworks for understanding grief.

⁶ This thinking owes much to Merleau-Ponty (cf. [Read 2018](#)).

⁷ This expands one sense of the love that is in play in this paper: it is not of course just the love of other human beings, but of other beings, nature, and the Earth. The great treatment here is [Wilson's \(1984\)](#). Thich Nhat [Hanh's \(2021\)](#) work and practice is also highly salient.

⁸ Some philosophical views about depression claim that it can weaken the strength of our desires ([Stocker 1979](#), p. 744), or, at least, the motivational force of our desires ([Mariqueo-Russell 2023](#), pp. 1985–86). If something like this is correct, then it might be thought that climate depression is unvaluable because it is a barrier to climate action. Nevertheless, on my view, climate depression only really becomes a problem when we get stuck in it. This is because the process of experiencing climate depression can be profoundly revelatory. Better understanding climate breakdown on an emotional level is part of effectively responding to it. This is true even if we find that climate depression leaves us demotivated in the short term.

⁹ This may be a wise moment to note in passing that, obviously, 'Buddhism' is a term unifying or even reifying a wide set of traditions (as is 'Western thought!'). In a full-length presentation, I would discuss more the perhaps relevant fine differences between (say) Dzogchen and Zen, and indeed between Thich Nhat Hanh and Zen. But I do mean to suggest that any Buddhism that fails to be on a non-dual path is in a certain sense failing to actually be Buddhistic (cf. [Read 2012](#)).

¹⁰ For more on this point, see [Solomon \(1994\)](#) and [Fromm \(1956\)](#).

¹¹ This is the term that Joanna Macy uses ([Macy and Johnstone 2012](#)).

¹² Cf. <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=236> (accessed on 19 November 2023).

¹³ This non-dual sensibility can of course be found in a number of key moments and traditions in Buddhism. For me, it is particularly exquisitely expressed by Shunryu Suzuki. For instance, in his Soto-style critique of the dichotomy between practice and attainment/enlightenment and of the very idea of Buddhism as something that is allegedly superordinate to practice. See especially [Suzuki \(2002\)](#).

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