

Dharma and the Climate Crisis: Great is the Matter of Birth and Death

By Anthony Ekai Braus

INTRODUCTION:

Myogen Steven Stucky, former abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center, died in 2013 from pancreatic cancer. He was 67. Only a few months before he died, he sat in a doctor's office after having a variety of medical tests to evaluate his complaint of abdominal pain.

The Doctor said, "I am sorry to tell you that the tests show that you have stage 4 pancreatic cancer." Steven replied, "What is stage five like?"

Cancer has no fifth stage.

I wonder if you can imagine how you would feel if you or a loved one were informed of a terminal diagnosis? Fear...Regret...Grief...Legacy

I propose to look at how we experience the global climate crisis in light of death and dying. I agree with Scranton and Franzen (and many others) that we are very unlikely to avoid a several decade slide into environmental degradation that will end in disaster for human societies across the globe. It is already happening. Australia's fires have recently been called "omnicidal."

The climate crisis generates fear, regret, and grief, (and probably many other kleshas) - after denial and avoidance and anger are dealt with. And it challenges the very notion of legacy. We have much to work on in our practice!

Buddhist practice aims at liberation, authenticity, and compassion. Our practice needs to aim at letting go of fear, atonement for our regrets, resolution of grief, discernment, and compassionate engagement. Legacy, understood as benefit for future sentient beings may be an expression of the Bodhisattva vow.

THE SITUATION:

Most people know at least on some level that the planet may soon have stage IV disease. We are 7.5 billion sentient beings who share our 4.5-billion-year old planet with many trillions of plants and animals

- about 9 million species of animals and 400,000 species of vascular plants. We know we have a terminal diagnosis in the climate crisis. “Uncrossable thresholds” have been or will soon be crossed. Tipping points are set to tip. To be sure, the planet will do relatively OK, however transformed it may be. Maybe only 20-30 percent of the plants and animals will go extinct, maybe more. We are mistaken to think that the environment is fragile. Biology and geology will persist. We are the fragile vulnerable ones. And what is lost is dear to us.

Grief is a multifaceted experience. It is a mixture of emotions, an absence, a thousand-mile stare, a burden that crushes at one point, later pierces, and at other times just drags you into a slow moving dream. But it is the price of love. Grief is normally about individual loss, sometimes casting a bigger net when regional disasters occur. And it resolves with time.

The climate crisis is associated with two kinds of complicated grief, disenfranchised and ambiguous grief. These are types of grief that are more difficult to acknowledge. They persist over an extended time in three phases: anticipatory, progressive, and acknowledged.

Climate related grief has passed from anticipated to progressive. For some, it is acknowledged. There are grief support networks among scientific labs that study global warming. Jim Antal, a United Church of Christ minister and climate activist, says, “the whole globe is covered by a blanket of grief.”

And somehow we have been paralyzed to do anything effectively to address the situation.

Dylan Thomas, grieving for his father, wrote

Wild men who caught and sang
the sun in flight,
And learn too late, they grieved
 it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good
 night.

I have thought that Dylan Thomas should not recommend a fight against death and grief and that his poem would not help anyone to learn how to do what so many dying people ultimately do – they face death with dignity, acceptance, and love – they do not let fear, regret and grief close them up.

As we witness the passing away of our whole civilization, actually many civilizations over the whole planet, perhaps we really ought not go gentle. And we ought not succumb to fear or despair.

But I have been stuck, immobilized, like just about everybody else. I mostly feel unable to do anything about the climate crisis. Why?

1. It is very big. It is all encompassing, an unraveling, the beginning of a perilous and unknowable course of human life.
2. It is caused by ourselves. Our culture has reduced nature to utility and thus given up our bond and intimacy with nature. Even though the climate is what we depend on for life, we have lived in an ever more destructive way for over 200 years, pushing the levers of energy from fossil fuels beyond the capacity of climate stability. #3 makes us doubly responsible.
3. Our cultural, social, economic, and political structures of consumption, domination, and entitlement (i.e., greed, hatred, ignorance) have prevented any effective response. In spite of all the books, conferences, international agreements, and conservation efforts, CO2 emissions and sea levels keep going up, and severe regional weather events, fires, coral bleaching, insect vectors, agricultural stress, etc., all grow more widespread. The three poisons (literally!) have become our way of life, our tragic flaws. Our social and political systems are in grid-lock.

Roy Scranton suggests that we must, therefore, learn how to die, and how to be at the bedside of human civilization while it dies. He also suggests that we need to pass along a legacy, in whatever way we can, of the best of our civilization to whoever survives in whatever conditions are created by global warming.

But we may feel that we are in an untenable position from the view point of our posterity. We won't be with them when conditions get really bad. As their forbearers, we caused this, so can we be the ones to tell the next generation what they need to know in order to have a flourishing life? We who "learn too late, they grieved it on its way"? Will those people of the foreseeable future (1-3 generation) have the minimal conditions needed to support a flourishing life and a Buddhist practice and to apply whatever wisdom we might transmit? The environmental conditions of the future have been called the next "dark ages" since, with climate equilibrium and stability lost, we will no longer be able to know what is going to come next. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes will be meaningless; everything will no longer have its time. Without predictability, society finds itself in perpetual uncertainty and must improvise on the verge of chaos.

HOW TO DIE

Maybe the only thing I can pass along is the knowledge of how to die. And then hope that it contains the deepest wisdom about how to live.

Scranton suggests that what we do about death is what we need to do about global warming.

And what do we do about death? We either go softly or blindly or maybe with rage, or we clarify our fears, hopes, and values. We connect and communicate as we have never done before. We confess and forgive, and we proclaim gratitude and love. We make the biggest deposits we have ever made into the emotional bank accounts of all those we love and cherish. And we project all that into the future by devising some sort of legacy, a kind of non-mystical leap of faith.

I have seen many dying people and their families engage passionately in this work, and I have tried to assist and support them along this way of dying. Can this last rally be both a bearing witness and a guide to living in the condition of great instability and insecurity likely to be our species' future reality?

It is said the the Bodhisattva seeks out very difficult situations. This would be among the most difficult I can imagine. I have searched for guidance inside and outside Buddhism.

The German philosopher, Karl Jaspers may offer some help with his notion of the “ultimate situation”. His views may add some analysis to the Buddhist notion of impermanence. Jaspers said that living fully is living in ultimate situations. He also called them limit or boundary situations, because they are the situations we are powerless to escape from, and they go beyond the limits of reason. The ultimate situation is the given (from whatever causes or karma). We are free to make choices about whether and how to engage. If we are to live fully and authentically, we cannot duck or simply try to get by. We must confront and investigate, and then project our lives creatively into the ultimate. Here and now, moment by moment.

An ultimate situation is not a problem to be solved. It is the concrete condition of our lives, the “given”, our vital situation, our radically changing organic and historical reality, the existential dilemma and mystery - impermanence. Karl Jaspers might have called global warming the “mother of all ultimate situations”. It holds all five unavoidable categories (per Jaspers) of ultimate situations: death, suffering, struggle, chance, and guilt.

Jaspers posits that ultimate situations contain the possibility of transcendence (or, as a commentator wrote, of transdescendene). Jaspers says that to live fully, and die vitally, we must open, embrace, and reflect creatively with all that arises in the ultimate situation, and then commit to action and communication.

The delusion of being apart from, oppressed by, or inconsequential to the ultimate situation in which we find ourselves is dissolved when we decide to see and to engage transparently. The ultimate situation is a calling to go beyond subject-object split, mind-body split, and self-other split – the three “antimonies”,

paradoxes, that Western Philosophy has not addressed. He proposes a reflective practice that looks beyond conceptual thought to learn a non-conceptual, non-objectifying, non-dual way of seeing and being.

Jaspers emphasizes communication above all. He coins the German word, “Mitsein” - literally “being with” – transparency and intimacy with oneself and others and all life. How is this to be carried out? He says that we can awaken to the “encompassing” (transcendence-existence, or as we would say, the Personal-Universal) that encompasses and illuminates all experience. I was not surprised to learn that Jaspers studied Buddhism along with Hegel, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Kant, etc. Jaspers read and wrote about Nargajuna. His “ultimate situation” is very much like the Abhidharma notion of Dharmas. In Buddhist terms, cessation and shunyata are the way to transparency of self and “being with”.

Franzen seems to express his version of Mitsein. Franzen’s essay presents a humanistic, if minimalist, approach. He simply recommends that we make our lives now generously involved with our community. Our best efforts to live in community now are the way we prepare to live in a more burdened environment in the future. We endeavor to use skillful means that are altruistic and resourceful, connected and committed. There are plenty of challenges to this compassionate way of living now, as there will be in the future.

Franzen has been criticized for not primarily and strongly endorsing adaptive and mitigating strategies to fight global warming. He does not discourage that or rule that out, but he believes, as Scranton does, that we are too late and too politically encumbered to be effective. He believes that global warming is a problem of human behavior, perhaps in part amenable in the long run to technological interventions but only with the right human intention. He recommends cultivating that intention by altruistic and compassionate behavior now and toward the future. In a recent piece in the NYT, Michele Goldberg strikes a similar cord: “We have the desperate longing for kindness and solidarity to replace the cruelties of a society devouring itself, but also a grief-stricken apprehension of what’s in store if we don’t.”

SO HERE WE ARE

We face an implacable condition of great suffering. There is no place to rest, no reassurances, no avoiding the worst. We have our feelings about all this. We are all in it together. What is our intention?

It is not simply a matter of “saving the planet” so that human society may continue roughly as it is now. How paradoxical if our intention is to save the way of life that is causing destruction! We may feel that we are “damned if we do and damned if we don’t” but maybe not really. Can we find a to live that transforms our competitive and destructive culture into a cooperative and compassionate society?

Santideva says in “Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life” Chapter 3, after a many verse meditation on death, “If I must surrender everything, it is better that I give it to sentient beings.” If we are to die, let us die aspiring to save all sentient beings from delusions, ignorance, fear, greed, and hatred - an age old endeavor that manifests all that is good and hopeful about human life and that promises a certain kind of happiness arising from unity and intimacy in the ultimate situations of life, without turning away from struggle – whether with chaos, conflict, illness, loss, evil, afflictive emotions, or tragedy. Shantideva, like Kierkegaard, presents this as an “either-or” decision to commit to or to abandon all sentient beings.

Buddhist contemplative practice - sitting with the intention of cultivating openness to the suffering of all sentient beings in the concrete ultimate situation of our lives – offers a way, the Bodhisattva way, condensed into the paramitas. The Four Noble Truths - suffering, grasping, cessation, and the path - form the guiding framework for way-seeking in our ultimate situation of global warming.

And still...the whole turning of history is in a direction that is almost unbearable. It seems filled with unbearable losses. My anticipation of this loss is nothing compared to the actual losses to be experienced by the generations coming in the 21st century. To use Katagiri’s striking phrase, “the cruelty of impermanence” has grown exponentially. How to comprehend such global tragedy? The pace and scope of change has no precedent, and so we humans may not be prepared to cope with it. The past will not anymore be a guide for the future.

Our practice needs to grow exponentially! And our faith. I wonder if all religions have a built-in “stumbling block”. I recall the teaching of St Paul about the resurrection being the stumbling block to faith in Christ. I wonder if Buddhism doesn’t have its own stumbling block: the faith that life and love and human community will flourish when suffering is embraced and the self emptied. Nobody seems drawn to embrace suffering, especially the suffering we are sure is too great for ourselves to bear. And still...is there another way to go?

I need, and am grateful for, the Dharma, the Sangha, and the Buddha Way, right here in our practice together. I hope that taking refuge in the Three Treasures will be a meaningful legacy – along with the Bodhisattva vow. It is a brave and hopeful vow. The paramitas involve a vision of how life can be renewed, as Norman Fisher says in the title of his new book about imagination and the paramitas, “The World Can Be Otherwise”. And that vision does not depend on how good or bad the world is to start with or how good or bad the prospects for the future are. It depends only on the intention to venture along the Bodhisattva way.

WHAT TO DO:

1. Do whatever possible to reduce one's carbon footprint.
2. Advocate for the the structural adaptation and mitigation strategies we desperately need. These make up a long list of long avoided efforts, with the end being complete conversion to sustainable non-carbon ways of living, and equitable protection of each and every person. Let imagination be compassionate.
3. Endeavor everyday to respond to the suffering and the needs of the community, however enmeshed we all may be in "the three poisons", and no matter how impenetrable the wall of our practice may sometimes seem.
4. Practice with "hair on fire." It is "Maha." It is a Bodhisattva practice of bearing witness, not-knowing, and service. It is a bottomless practice, and also, I hope, a bottomless legacy.
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