

Buddhist Resources in the Race Against Global Heating: Beginner's Mind as an Antidote to Misguided Certainty and the Status Quo

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Abstract: Indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte notes the limitations of embracing a “crisis epistemology” which seeks a clear, instrumentalist solution to a problem based on conceits of certainty rather than embracing an integrated view of ecological complexity with an eye toward genuine restoration, sustainability, and justice. If crisis epistemologies lack creative and nuanced engagement with possible futures they easily perpetuate, if unintentionally, destructive colonial industrial-growth paradigms that have brought humans into conflict with the biosphere. This essay explores the problem of certainty and the way that Buddhism offers an alternative to colonialist “crisis epistemology.” The value of uncertainty is manifest in Buddhism as a recognition of the nature of *saṃsāra* as marked by impermanence, *dukkha*, and no-self (the *trilakṣaṇa*) and comes out explicitly with the “don’t know mind” (*buzhi xin* 不知心) of the Chan tradition. I examine the application of these ideas within contemporary engaged Buddhist communities, considering how they have seized upon uncertainty as exemplified in “don’t know mind” to generate “wise hope” or “active hope” and move beyond despair into effective activism. I argue that Buddhist comfort with uncertainty provides an antidote to the instrumentalist conceit of certainty and opens space for transformative activism.

Keywords: climate change, beginner’s mind, psychology, activism, conspiracy theories

How might Buddhism contribute to helping humans face the challenge of global climate breakdown? As a problem of the anthropocene, it must be addressed by shifts in human behaviour. Like the Covid pandemic, the complexity of the climate crisis makes it impossible to solve through a single—however gargantuan—effort, like the development of a vaccine or carbon sequestration technology. Potawatomi professor of environment and sustainability, Kyle Whyte (2020), notes the limitations of embracing a “crisis epistemology” which seeks a clear, instrumentalist solution to a problem based on conceits of certainty; rather, he embraces an integrated view of ecological complexity with an eye toward genuine restoration, sustainability, and justice. Because “crisis epistemologies” lack creative and nuanced engagement with possible futures, they easily perpetuate, if unintentionally, destructive colonial industrial-growth paradigms that have brought humans into conflict with the biosphere. Whyte proposes an Indigenous-informed “coordination epistemology” based on recognition of kinship and ancestral relations between human and non-human animals and interdependent moral bonds. While there is much overlap between understandings of interdependence and non-harm to sentient beings in Buddhism and elements of Whyte’s coordination epistemology, my focus in this article will be on comfort with uncertainty in the present and future. The value of uncertainty is manifest in Buddhism as a recognition of the nature of *saṃsāra* as marked by impermanence, *dukkha*, and no-self (Skt. *trilakṣaṇa*) and comes out explicitly with the “don’t know mind” (Ch. *buzhi xin* 不知心) or beginner’s mind (Jp. *shoshin* 初心) of the Chan/Zen tradition. This paper will explore the potential for Zen comfort with uncertainty to provide an antidote to the instrumentalist conceit of certainty, and open space for engagement, advocacy, and activism. After establishing some of the problems with certainty, I will explore how some Buddhists and Buddhist communities are cultivating forms of uncertainty as a pre-requisite for social and political engagement.

Before turning to Zen uncertainty, it is important to first understand the issues that can be linked to discomfort with ambiguity and a need for cognitive closure (NFCC). Social psychologists have recognized that the need for closure can be both a situational condition and an individual trait. According to Choi et al., “whether evoked situationally or measured as an individual difference, high NFCC causes people to ignore multiple perspectives on a given issue and to stick to their initial conclusions without sufficient adjustment.... Certain

types of judgmental biases... are particularly aggravated under high NFCC.”¹ This need for closure or certainty can inhibit creative and sustainable solutions by failing to recognize systemic complexity and the existence of genuine unknowns.² As found by Djikic et al., “it is not only rationality, but creativity as well, that is impeded by the heightened need for closure.”³ The need for closure or certainty thus risks perpetuating mindsets and strategies that have produced the current ecological crisis.

Furthermore, I propose that certainty plays a role in various forms of burnout. Burnout has been identified as a problem in sustaining activist movements, so much so that handbooks have been written to address it.⁴ Among the factors leading to activist burnout, one is the experience of failure and the perception that the unjust situation will never end.⁵ While previous studies have identified values and ideals motivating activists, which are then linked to disappointment after failures or with the perceived impossibility of change, they have not identified the role played by a need for closure. I propose that certainty or need for closure plays a role in precipitating feelings of despair, leading to burnout.

Certainty fuels both burnout and general public inaction by leading to despair precipitated by defeatist attitudes built on the conceit of certain failure or doom. In other words, it requires a sense or intuition of certain failure in order to feel despair. Similarly, certainty is behind the burnout that activists

¹ Choi et al., “Need for Cognitive Closure and Information Search Strategy,” 1029.

² Chirumbolo et al., “Effects of Need for Closure on Creativity in Small Group Interactions,”; Van Hiel and Mervelde, “The Need for Closure and the Spontaneous Use of Complex and Simple Cognitive Structures.”

³ Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu, “Opening the Closed Mind: The Effect of Exposure to Literature on the Need for Closure,” 149.

⁴ On burnout in activist movements, see Driscoll, “When Ignoring the News and Going Hiking Can Help You Save the World: Environmental Activist Strategies for Persistence,” 2–4; Cox, “How Do We Keep Going? Activist Burnout and Personal Sustainability in Social Movements”; Chen and Gorski, “Burnout in Social Justice and Human Rights Activists: Symptoms, Causes and Implications,” 367–68; Retting, *Lifelong Activist*. For a handbook for dealing with burnout, see Jones, *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World: A Guide for Activists and Their Allies*.

⁵ Gomes, “The Rewards and Stresses of Social Change: A Qualitative Study of Peace Activists,” 143; Pines, “Burnout in Political Activism: An Existential Perspective,” 385–93; Driscoll, “Going Hiking,” 191.

speak of after meeting repeated failures. Again, it requires an assumption that the situation will never change; a certainty with regard to the fruitlessness of one's actions. If activists expect short-term victories in their cause, they will be dispirited after defeats and setbacks. Such a situation is not sustainable for long-term movements which require more time to realize their goals.

Finally, a desire or need for certainty has been implicated in the spread of conspiracy theories and related forms of denialism, most recently around climate, vaccines, masks, and voting in the USA.⁶ Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska (2017) conducted two experiments to determine the relationship between need for cognitive closure and the endorsement of conspiratorial explanations. They found that “people high in need for cognitive closure rely on conspiratorial explanations when such explanations refer to uncertain, mysterious events.”⁷ This research found that individuals possessing a need for cognitive closure turn to conspiracies when such explanations are widely available. The prevalence of such theories on the internet combined with the algorithms used by both search engines and social media platforms, which favour popularity over accuracy, have led to the viral distribution of conspiracy theories.⁸

In sum, a cognitive need for closure or discomfort with ambiguity has been found to contribute to burnout, disengagement, despair, decrease in creative and rational faculties, and to be a factor in adopting conspiratorial explanations. All of these impacts stand in the way of creative, skilful, and just responses to the challenge of climate change. Given the various obstacles to acting on climate that are related to a need for certainty, cultivating wise forms of uncertainty may be seen as a critical requirement for building sustainable support for effective climate action. It turns out that some Buddhist communities have been doing just this by promoting the idea of “don't know mind” and other related Buddhist perspectives.

The Zen concept of “don't know mind” or “beginner's mind” refers to a state of openness, curiosity, and a lack of attachment to preconceptions or fixed ideas. It is a way of approaching the world and one's experiences with a mind-

⁶ Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka, “The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories.”

⁷ Marchlewska, Cichocka, and Kossowska, “Addicted to Answers: Need for Cognitive Closure and the Endorsement of Conspiracy Beliefs,” 114.

⁸ Grandinetti and Bruinsma, “The Affective Algorithms of Conspiracy Tiktok.”

set of not clinging to fixed beliefs or certainty, but rather remaining open to new perspectives and ways of understanding. Zen teachers such as Suzuki Roshi, Seung Sahn, and others have taught the important role of “don’t know mind” in the cultivation of wisdom and wise action.⁹ As Shunryu Suzuki said, “in the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few.”¹⁰

While the concept of “don’t know mind” is articulated in Zen traditions, it is closely tied to the more fundamental idea of impermanence and the acceptance of change and uncertainty. It is believed that clinging to fixed beliefs or a need for certainty leads to suffering, as it prevents one from being able to adapt to new circumstances and see things as they truly are. Instead, by embracing a “don’t know mind,” one is able to approach the world with a sense of curiosity and openness, allowing for a more fluid and dynamic engagement with the world. It also enables one to be a better listener or dialogue partner and comes up in the fourth of six insight dialogue guidelines.¹¹ Insight dialogue is a type of Buddhist meditation which includes the use of partners. The insight dialogue guidelines are Pause (establish mindfulness of the present moment), Relax (release bodily tension), Open (expand awareness to others and the environment), Attune to Emergence (notice and yield to change, to not knowing), Listen Deeply (with the whole body), and Speak the Truth (offer words in kindness and for mutual benefit). Insight Dialogue as taught by Nicola Redfern and others trains individuals to attune to emergence and be open to what may arise, which requires letting go of what is known and familiar. This openness to what arises in the present moment is also a key part of the Buddhist practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the practice of directing one’s attention to present moment experience by noticing one’s thoughts, feelings, and sensations without judgment or expectation. By being mindful and not getting caught up in fixed beliefs or preconceptions, one is able to see things as they reveal themselves, rather than through the lens of one’s own biases and assumptions. Mindfulness trains one to notice thoughts and preconceptions and let go of

⁹ Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*; Sahn, *Only Don’t Know: Selected Teaching Letters of Zen Master Seung Sahn*.

¹⁰ Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 21.

¹¹ Nicola Redfern, personal communication, 2023. See also “Insight Dialogue Community,” 2024. I would like to acknowledge the Bess Family Foundation in facilitating contact with Nicola Redfern.

them. This *letting go* is a species of non-attachment and is closely related to the concept of non-attachment to results, which is an important aspect of maintaining beginner's mind.

Fundamentally, then, “don't know mind” and the supporting constellation of Buddhist concepts and practices, including impermanence and mindfulness, promote comfort with unknowns and openness to an undetermined future. They thus serve as an antidote to the need for cognitive closure and the associated risks outlined above. Contemporary Buddhist scholars and communities in North America have promoted the attitude of “don't know mind” as a component of Zen wisdom and a pre-requisite for moral engagement and activism. Bernie Glassman was among the first in North America to emphasize “not-knowing” as a pre-requisite for social justice actions undertaken by the Zen Peacemakers order. David Loy of the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Center in Colorado notes that cultivating “don't know mind” can bring more expansiveness that, in turn, leads to responding appropriately to the ecological crisis. Joanna Macy of the Work that Reconnects Network describes not knowing as a “gift,” forcing us to be in the present moment to do what our heart commands, a pre-requisite to “active hope.”¹² Similarly, Joan Halifax of the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe has pointed out how “don't know mind” leads us to a form of “wise hope,” leading to action. She writes, “this kind of hope is informed by wisdom and sourced in ‘Not Knowing’ or Beginners [sic] Mind.”¹³ Former Zen monastic Deborah Eden Tull, drawing from personal experience and practice, suggests the following spiritual principles to face contemporary challenges: “We have to let go of story and rest in not knowing. The surface narrative—of fear, doubt, and what-if—maintains our insistence on limiting beliefs.... Resting in ‘I don't know’ can feel uncomfortable at first, yet it positions us to listen more deeply within. This is how we begin to reclaim our internal authority.”¹⁴ Tull's spiritual principles also include non-attachment to results and shifting our focus to intentions instead.¹⁵ Lastly, Extinction Rebellion Buddhists in the

¹² Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in with Unexpected Resilience & Creative Power*.

¹³ Halifax, “Meeting the Boundless Horizon Through Wise Hope and Not Knowing.”

¹⁴ Tull, *Luminous Darkness: An Engaged Buddhist Approach to Embracing the Unknown*, 129–30.

¹⁵ Tull, *Luminous Darkness*, 130.

UK are an activist group of Buddhists who explicitly center non-attachment to results. They note the importance of non-attachment to results on their website: “A key offering of the Dharma in the context of direct action is non-attachment to results. This is our perspective. It is freeing and takes the stress out of our action. Instead we focus on cultivating the wholesomeness of our motivation and do our best to be well prepared.”¹⁶

Non-attachment to results may be even more difficult to cultivate than beginner’s mind given the social value attached to attaining goals or achieving results. People often link their sense of self or worth to the achievement of (desired) results. The cultivation of non-attachment through repeated mindfulness practice, generosity, and other means is likely required and therefore space and guidance for such cultivation is necessary. This is one way that Buddhist organizations can make a difference, by providing such dedicated spaces and expertise. Such communities have seized upon uncertainty as exemplified in “don’t know mind” to transform hope into a new form that ameliorates despair and provides a prerequisite for engagement and activism. Just as traditions of mental cultivation in Theravāda Buddhism include the application of antidotes like the *brahmavihārās* to counter hindrances such as greed and anger, contemporary communities seem to be applying “don’t know mind” as an antidote to the need for certainty which has fueled conspiracy theories, denialisms, and disengagement. How is this being done? Is there evidence for its effectiveness in inspiring activism? In this final section, I will examine the work of David Loy and Johann Robbins at the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center, the Zen Peacemakers Order, and Joanna Macy’s Work that Reconnects, followed by testimony from practitioners.

Macy has been running workshops since the early 1980s to cultivate engaged citizens. The Work that Reconnects is based on a four-part cycle. The four parts are: beginning with gratitude, honoring our pain for the world, seeing with new eyes, and going forth. Seeing with new eyes includes not-knowing, non-attachment to results, and leads to “going forth” to work to heal the world. Of all the groups discussed here, only Macy does not identify primarily as Buddhist. She draws from Buddhist teachings, as well as from Indigenous traditions, Deep Ecology, systems thinking, and Gaia theory. A model for individual engagement used by Macy is that of the Shambala warrior from

¹⁶ Wistreich and Mishan, “Buddhist Q&A.”

the Shambala prophecy. It calls for the arising of warriors wielding compassion and insight to protect and heal the world. Macy points out that the prophecy does not say what is going to happen. The future is uncertain. Macy describes this not-knowing as the gift of uncertainty. It is the gift of being in the present moment so that one responds appropriately to what is needed. Macy recently revealed how over the years of teaching she came to realize that not-knowing the future was one of the most useful insights for others. She writes,

I've emphasized the importance of not knowing the outcome, because I see how the desire for certainty can distract our attention and warp our perceptions. Liberated from the need for certainty, and even hope, we can more fully inhabit the present moment. Not knowing rivets our attention on what is happening right now.¹⁷

Thus, Macy and other facilitators of the Work that Reconnects have been cultivating comfort with uncertainty for decades, impacting countless people around the world.

Loy and Robbins of the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center have developed ecodharma retreats and have held two or three sessions over the past several summers. The ecodharma retreat is modeled loosely on the cycle of the Work that Reconnects. The retreat begins with sitting mindfully in nature to become more aware of nature through mindfulness of the body, sensations, and perceptions. Layered into this are instructions to practice gratitude. After this, participants are encouraged to share feelings, parallel to honoring our pain for the world. This is followed by a two days/nights solo retreat in nature to see what arises, without an agenda, without expectation. This abandoning of an agenda to see what arises is a cultivation of “don’t know mind” as well as of non-attachment to results. Loy emphasizes the importance of non-attachment to results in relation to the path of the bodhisattva, which includes the vow to save all beings. He explains that the bodhisattva vow is not about achieving a particular goal, but about a shift to a larger sense of self that is committed to relieving the suffering of others without attachment to results. After the solo retreat, the group reconvenes to share what has arisen and is given an opportunity to network with others if interested in working together to heal the world.

¹⁷ Macy, “Outcome Uncertain,” 299.

Loy indicates that the retreat has been found to inspire participants to feel more, care more, and do more.¹⁸

The Zen Peacemakers Order was founded by Bernie Glassman (1939–2018) in 1996 based on three tenets. These are Not-Knowing: letting go of fixed ideas about yourself, others, and the universe; Bearing Witness: to the joy and suffering of the world; and Taking Action: that arises from Not-Knowing and Bearing Witness. Not-knowing is thus the pivotal component of the activist agenda of this group. The Zen Peacemakers order has been engaged with justice, protest, and relief work for more than two decades, including working with immigrants from Africa and the Middle East in the UK, Switzerland, and Germany, and assisting refugee camps in Greece. Some support the efforts of Lakota elders to revitalize their language and culture and stood with them at Standing Rock to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline. Some have worked to bring peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Others work in prison systems throughout the USA and Canada, with inmates, guards, and administrators. Still others work politically for solutions to climate change.

Joan Halifax studied with Bernie Glassman and writes of learning to sit with beginner's mind to bear witness to suffering. Describing the practical value of "don't know mind," she writes, "this is the same spirit I bring to sitting with dying people or the man on death row, or in a climate protest where I get arrested. And I believe that this is the same wise hope and Beginners [sic] Mind, powerful, braided mindsets that you can manifest as global citizens in our very complicated world, a mindset of openness and possibility."¹⁹ Halifax Roshi promotes cultivation of beginner's mind to enable compassionate engagement in justice work.

These individuals and groups are actively cultivating the Zen-inspired "don't know mind" and non-attachment to results to inspire active engagement with the climate crisis. These teachers and communities are thus deploying aspects of Buddhist teachings in service of ecological justice and healing, proving the continuing relevance of these features of the bodhisattva and the Zen master. The result is sometimes dubbed the ecosattva path.²⁰

Looking outside of these Buddhist communities, we find attitudes marked

¹⁸ David Loy, personal communication, 2023.

¹⁹ Halifax, "Meeting the Boundless Horizon."

²⁰ Loy, "Ecodharma: A New Buddhist Path?"

by a passion to work towards justice against seemingly insurmountable odds with an openness to the future. Vaclav Havel, former political prisoner turned President of the Czech Republic, said of hope, “it is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.”²¹ While Havel speaks of being certain, this certainty is not about results, but rather certainty about one’s values, certainty about one’s commitment. The important thing is the ability to remain committed in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds and not to give in to hopelessness or despair.

Nelson Mandela is another example of a political prisoner turned president. Mandela never gave up and continued to work towards peace and reconciliation while a prisoner. Lawyer, Zen teacher, and environmental activist Tim Ream was in South Africa at the time as a Peace Corps volunteer. He said that he never expected apartheid to end so quickly and without bloodshed.²² More recent examples include legal wins for gay marriage and corresponding changes in public attitudes.²³ In all these cases, progress came unexpectedly and rewarded those who had pursued those ends in the face of great threats and difficulty. Such transformations are not made by giving up or sinking into despair, but by acting in consonance with one’s convictions no matter the odds. The ability to stay committed and engaged for the long haul in the face of setbacks is what is needed for transformative changes to take place. We now turn to individual voices that speak to the usefulness of the perspectives and practices discussed above.

Tim Ream provides an example of being open to possibilities and not listening to negative stories. He was working with the Center for Biological Diversity who wanted to have wolves listed as an endangered species in California in order to protect them in the event that they were removed from the federal list. A petition was circulated and Ream argued the petition in front of the Wildlife Commission. Members of the group, having lost so many battles, were very pessimistic. To everyone’s surprise they won. Ream says, “I was really surprised, because we had been made cynical over the years.... They didn’t

²¹ Rowson, “The Hope of Vaclav Havel, 1936-2011.”

²² Tim Ream, personal communication, December 30, 2022. I would like to acknowledge the Bess Family Foundation for facilitating contact with Tim Ream.

²³ Lee and Mutz, “Changing Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage: A Three-Wave Panel Study.”

really think it was possible, but, you know, I thought it was possible. If I hadn't thought it was possible maybe we wouldn't have won!"²⁴ Given the challenges we currently face, Ream believes that being "open to not knowing what could happen is critical for us right now."²⁵

Dr. Wendy Boring asked three individuals engaged with climate action about their work and the connections between that work and their inner lives. Camila Thorndike works with the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, Wesley Look is a senior research fellow for Resources for the Future, and Navina Khanna is the founding director of Heal (Health, Environment, Agriculture, Labor) Food Alliance, a coalition of 55 organizations focused on sustainable food justice. Referring to her activism, Thorndike said: "This work cannot be based on the promise of success."²⁶ Speaking of losing a huge policy campaign which caused the movement to suffer, she noted, "I came to realize I had to reach to deeper resources to sustain the work over the long haul."²⁷ Thorndike goes on to note the importance of meditation: "I can't do my work if I'm burnt out, tired, or distracted, or if I'm assuming I'm going to lose. Meditation practice has taught me to loosen my grip. I'm not my thoughts or my body. Meditation teaches you that all of this is impermanent."²⁸ Look, who has advised cities and leaders on clean energy and climate policy, explains the importance of taking the bodhisattva vow under the Dalai Lama in India. In particular, Look highlights the Buddhist concept of impermanence as a key to his cultivation of equanimity. Lastly, Khanna, like Thorndike, explicitly recognizes the importance of not knowing: "We have no idea what is going to evolve. The only thing we have control over is how we show up right now, in this moment."²⁹ All three climate justice workers drew on "don't know mind" and the related spectrum of values—namely, impermanence, mindfulness, and the equanimity found from letting go—to draw strength and sustain their work. These individual activists further suggest the value of beginner's mind and the constellation of related concepts and practices explored above as critical components for sustaining their work.

²⁴ Tim Ream, personal communication, December 30, 2022.

²⁵ Tim Ream, personal communication, December 30, 2022.

²⁶ Boring, "Resources of the Spirit in the Race Against Climate Change."

²⁷ Boring, "Resources of the Spirit."

²⁸ Boring, "Resources of the Spirit."

In conclusion, I would like to draw attention to an exemplary case of the efficacy of “don’t know mind” in achieving unexpected progress in the climate movement. One of the most consequential instances of Buddhist-facilitated climate commitments was the 2015 Paris Agreement adopted by 195 nations in order to guide economies to a climate-safe future. How was it Buddhist-facilitated? The Executive Secretary of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change from 2010 to 2016 was Christiana Figueres. Figueres is the daughter of the “father” of modern Costa Rica, which has no military and generated 98% of its energy from renewable sources in 2020. What is less known, however, is that Figueres credits her success at the UN with her mindful approach to negotiating inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh and marked by the hallmarks of beginner’s mind. In particular, it was her ability to be mindful and not assume foregone opposition or agreement by any nation, rich or poor. While commentators always focused on obstacles to an agreement, she chose to remain open to possibilities and not assume any foregone conclusions. She attributes her success in Paris in 2015 to her deployment of mindfulness and openness to unknown possibilities.³⁰

Obstacles in the quest for a more just and sustainable world often stem from a need for certainty and cognitive closure, leading to burnout, despair, and disengagement. The Buddhist concepts and practices explored here offer a helpful alternative, promoting engagement and humility through “don’t know mind” and non-attachment to results. This approach provides an alternative epistemology based on not-knowing, which has already been shown to help overcome the limitations of a crisis epistemology focused on misguided certainty.

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²⁹ Boring, “Resources of the Spirit.”

³⁰ Figueres and Rivett-Carnac, *The Future*; Figueres, “Plenary Lecture.”

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