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Joanna Macy, Buddhism and Power for Social Change

Caiti Schroering

How can a Buddhist understanding of rights, responsibilities, compassion and interdependence effect one's motivation for social activism and inform social justice work? I see this question as imbedded within a larger question of what constitutes the Buddhist concept of justice or, perhaps more accurately, compassion. To begin to answer it, I will examine the writings and perspective of Joanna Macy. I will use Macy's ideas on compassion and interconnectedness to articulate how Buddhist thought and practice can be used to create social justice and to "heal our world." Over the past twenty years Macy has produced an abundance of work, and I will examine the fundamental basis of those writings as well as the evolution of Macy's views through that period. Specifically, I will extrapolate from these sources how Macy's "despair and empowerment work" serves as an impetus for working for change.

Macy provides an interesting perspective to examine because, while clearly influenced by Buddhist beliefs and practices, her work is not exclusively comprised of Buddhist ideals. Moreover, an examination of her work shows how religious traditions are transportable to new cultures and adaptable, oftentimes creating new hybrids. This is demonstrated in how some classify her work as "New Age". Indeed, as the "About the Author" section of her memoir, Widening Circles, states:

She has created both a ground-breaking theoretical framework for a new paradigm of personal and social change, and a powerful workshop methodology for its application. Her wide-ranging work addresses psychological and spiritual issues of the nuclear age, the cultivation of ecological awareness, and the fruitful resonance between Buddhist thought and contemporary science (285).

Macy's ideas are influenced from her Presbyterian upbringing (Macy, Widening Circles 36-37), just as they are by her work with the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka (Macy, Dharma and Development 9). The Dalai Lama says that every religion, "with its teachings of love and compassion, can produce good human beings" (Dalai Lama 190). Walpola Rahula also asserts that what is important is not the label placed upon Buddhism, Christianity, or any other faith or worldview,

for the truth needs no label (Rahula 5). In other words, it is actions -- and thoughts -- that matter, which is why it is important to conduct yourself from a place of love and compassion. I argue that Macy's impetus for all of her work has stemmed from a place of love and compassion for the world; she has taken aspects of teachings and ideas from different places, and together they comprise her view on the world. As such, the question of what label best characterizes her worldview becomes less relevant and is not one that I will spend much time deciphering. Rather, I will focus on the question of what drives her to work for social change and her manner of operating.

Evolution of Despair and Empowerment Work

Do Macy's teachings serve as a model for effective sustainable social justice work? Macy discusses "despair and empowerment work" in her book *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*, written in 1983. It serves as a step-by-step framework to turn despair -- which comes from the often depressing realities of the world such as war, environmental destruction and poverty -- into a positive energy of empowerment, change and social justice. Macy argues that we have powers to heal the world, and in order to find these we have to go through a journey of seeing and healing (Macy, *Despair and Personal* 21). She poses the questions: how does one transform emotions of powerlessness and hopelessness into positive energy for change? How do we see our collective humanity and the need to acknowledge this interconnectedness in order to create a different, more hopeful world?

When people are bombarded with information about the depressing state of the world, a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness can ensue. Apathy replaces the impulse to action when people feel they can do nothing to change the situation. Macy argues that this is why it is important that in tandem with depressing information comes a supportive community, so that information may be processed, and then collective action taken to improve the situation (Macy, *Despair and Personal* xi). How, though, do we begin to do this? How do we build a community? According to Macy, it is a process. It is a journey, and while a significant aspect of the work is coming together as a community, every individual must also experience this journey differently (Macy, *Despair and Personal* 21).

When you think about the things in the world that worried you this week, what are the images that come to mind? Macy contends that different people will have different images: some will have had no difficulty conjuring up a myriad of doomsday thoughts, while others might struggle to think of visions of their prob-

lems. She believes, however, that everyone shares responsibility for our world: “Though our styles of response may differ, we are all citizens of the same planet, all trying in our different ways to cope with a deep, inchoate and collective sense of danger. For to be conscious in our world today involves awareness of unprecedented peril” (Macy, Despair and Personal 1). She lists the possibility of nuclear war, the reality of environmental destruction and degradation, and the vast impoverishment of much of the world’s people as causes of despair.

This despair, she writes, takes a different form than other times, in that never before has there been a question that this generation would be followed by another; the threats present now (i.e. nuclear warfare) have changed that¹. Because of this, the emotions people have when thinking about the bad things in the world are different today than in the past. As Macy writes,

The responses that arise, as we behold what we are doing to our world, are compounded of many feelings. There is fear—dread of what is overtaking our common life and terror at the thought of the suffering in store for our loved ones and others. There is anger—yes, and bitter rage that we live our lives under the threat of so avoidable and meaningless an end to the human enterprise. There is guilt; for as members of society we feel implicated in this catastrophe and haunted by the thought that we should be able to avert it. And above all, there is sorrow. Confronting so vast and final a loss as this brings sadness beyond the telling. (Despair and Personal 3)

She continues to explain how even all of those terms are inadequate to convey fully the feelings that many people experience. What better conveys these impressions is something called compassion, because compassion is not an individual feeling; it is a collective one. It stems from concern not just for one’s self -- or even one’s posterity -- but for the future, for the world. It sees suffering and, as Macy writes, this feeling experiences “suffering with”; it experiences pain, for oneself and for the world (Macy, Despair and Personal 3-4). She argues that in fact no one is exempt from experiencing this suffering, this pain, even if they do not fully understand what it is or act on it. Many try to hide it, however, because to experience it is to admit weakness—a behavior anathema to how one is “supposed” to act. People act apathetic not because they do not care but because they have been conditioned not to experience or address pain and suffering (Macy, Despair and Personal 4-5).

Apathy stems from an inability to process the seemingly inconceivable infor-

¹ Macy wrote her book on despair and empowerment in 1983, during which time the Cold War waged and the threat of nuclear annihilation seemed particularly to be a possibility. Today, the threat of a nuclear accident remains and, as Macy stated in a 2001 interview, every day we see the pain and suffering caused by “oppression and destruction and wars and preparations for wars” (Arbogast). Add to this list global climate change, environmental degradation as a whole, abuses of human rights, and poverty, and Macy’s work appears to continue to be quite relevant.

mation that we have created technology -- for example, nuclear weapons -- that has the ability to end our world as we know it. Macy says that this has two results: 1) denial that what is at stake is important, and 2) leading a "double life" as though nothing is wrong. In turn, these two things create a life where repression rules; where people repress awareness of the gravity of what is at stake. Just as apathy comes from a place of disregarding suffering, the repression itself stems from deeper sources. Macy lists these as a) fear of pain—of being afraid of how to cope with reality; b) fear of not conforming to society's standard to be "happy"; c) fear of being ignorant or stupid by bringing up seemingly unsolvable problems; d) fear of guilt or acknowledging one's own complacency in the problems facing the world; e) fear of causing more pain or worry for others by talking about depressing things; f) fear that by talking about the doom facing the world we will actually accelerate its pace; g) fear of not being "patriotic" by criticizing the United States; h) fear of creating panic; i) fear of showing religious doubt—because God will not allow anything bad to happen unless it should happen; j) fear of being perceived as too emotional or idealistic or "acting like a woman"; k) sense of living as a separate, individual entity from the rest of the world; and finally, l) fear of feeling powerless (Macy, *Despair and Personal* 6-12). In summary, our apathy stems from a fear of fully experiencing the totality of our emotions, which include—if we are sensitive to our surroundings and other beings—distressing realities.

This long list of repression-causing factors in turn creates a series of responses. Macy says that these can be categorized as developing a further sense of alienation and separateness from the rest of society, which in turn means that people chase after consumption of things as a displacement activity. Additionally, repression means hiding true feelings and not becoming politically involved or, alternately, experiencing burn-out from too much political work and developing a sense of powerlessness (Macy, *Despair and Personal* 12-16). It is out of this state of powerlessness that stems "despairwork".

Macy relates her own experience in the later 1970s of feeling utterly overwhelmed by the problems facing the world and the pain that she experienced from it. She questioned how to live with the knowledge of nuclear holocaust, environmental destruction and other problems. Should she return to a place of somnambulance? Macy decided instead to organize a week-long conference on planetary survival at which academics would present work on various issues, from the water crisis to nuclear technology. As part of the presentation, each person starting with Macy spoke to why and how the issues affected him or her. She writes that this sharing transformed the conference into something new that had not happened

before. As the conversations continued, a term emerged: despairwork (Macy, Despair and Personal 17-18).

As I noted above, despairwork is a journey, a process of transforming pain and powerlessness into power to heal oneself and the world. This journey stems from acknowledging a series of factors. Macy lists the first of these as the acknowledgement that experiencing pain for the world is normal and indeed healthy. The second factor is that acknowledging this pain is not morbid, and that it is actually morbid to not acknowledge it. Macy's third factor is that information about the horrible state of the world is in and of itself inadequate. Finally, the fourth and fifth factors are that we must unblock repressed feelings in order to release energy, clear the mind, and reconnect to the web of life (Macy, Despair and Personal 22-23).

I argue that it is this last component that is most intrinsic to the process of despairwork, because it centers on the notion of interconnectedness. As Macy writes, "What is it that allows us to feel pain for our world? And what do we discover as we move through it? What awaits us there 'on the other side of despair?'" To all these questions there is one answer: It is interconnectedness with life and all other beings. It is the living web out of which our individual, separate existences have risen, and in which we are interwoven. Our lives extend beyond our skins, in radical interdependence with the rest of the world (Despair and Personal 24).

Buddhism, Macy and the understanding of interconnectedness

Macy's ideas on interconnectedness stem from basic Buddhist concepts. Buddhism states that all things, including a notion of self, are false because they are impermanent. This is because our world is constantly changing; but we "condition" things to exist and be permanent, so our perceptions of life create suffering, create duality, and fail to see the connectedness of all things (Rahula 25-26). Walpola Rahula explains that through the Buddhist doctrine of Conditioned Genesis, everything is conditioned, interdependent and relative. This doctrine posits that "when this is, that is; this arising, that arises; when this is not, that is not; this ceasing, that ceases" (Rahula 53). Thich Nhat Hanh takes this key Buddhist understanding of life and pushes it even farther with the idea of "emptiness," which he re-terms "interbeing." He writes how life is a journey of continuation, and a significant part of this journey is realizing our interconnectedness. Just as we are born connected to our mothers by an umbilical cord, a stem, whether we acknowledge it or not, we will continue to be connected by a stem to our Mother Earth forever. There is no disconnection between anything—this is what emptiness is. It is not empty in the sense of nothing; it is empty in the sense of nothing existing alone.

We are empty because there is no independent self. We are linked. Because of this, while we may change in circumstances and even in physical form, there is no end or beginning, simply connectedness of interbeing (Nhat Hanh 22-27). Ultimately, the lesson is that everything is connected, which I argue is a central component of Macy's work.²

Western science has historically compartmentalized things, from our bodies being broken down into discrete parts to plants being separated from ecosystems. As such, part of Macy's work has been trying to break down these false conceptions of separateness. She contends that the world is in the process of another "Great Turning" and that we are beginning to recognize the interconnectedness of life and to rise to a higher level of consciousness. It is her observation that our problems are so deeply systemic and ingrained—especially since much of the pain of the world stems from the present global economic system—that this turning will take time (Macy, World as Lover, World as Self 239; Arbogast). She maintains that a shift in understanding convened with the start of general systems theory, which looks at whole systems instead of just single parts of the system. For example, looking at how actions affect an entire ecosystem instead of just one part of it, or disregarding how human actions might affect the non-human environment altogether. Systems theory, therefore, has allowed us to look at the world and see it as interconnected. It has, as Macy notes, broken the idea of separateness, and shown the idea of interconnectedness. Through understanding that we are interconnected with other life on Earth, we are able to begin the work to reconnect (Macy, World as Lover 24-27).³

Just as we are able to experience pain for the world because we are connected to it, our own power also stems from connectedness to other beings. Macy talks about this as "power at work in the web". In this sense of understanding, power is not something that is an individualistic pursuit for gain. Rather, it is a collective ability to effect change. It is bottom-up, it is non-patriarchal, and it is power with rather than power over. She says that this is called synergy. It is power as a process rather than a means to an end (Macy, World as Lover 30-31). By acknowledging our place in the web of life, we are able to access this type of power, to connect to the suffering of others, as well as to the power of others. In Buddhism, this synergy is referred to as *muditha* which translates as the "joy in the joy of others" (Macy, World as Lover 32). Macy says that this is the other part of compassion: just as we

² It is important to note that I have just described here understandings of interconnectedness from the Theravada (Rahula) and Mahayana (Thich Nhat Hanh) schools of Buddhism. I am not going to explicate the differences—which certainly exist—between these two schools of thought within this paper. I think that what is relevant is the shared understanding of interconnectedness of all things, and how Macy has incorporated these understandings into her work. Additionally, as noted earlier, Macy does not practice only Buddhism; she pulls from various religious and spiritual teachings, including different schools of Buddhism.

³ In Macy's later work she actually switches the terminology of her work from "despairwork" to "the work that reconnects."

can experience the pain of others, we can experience the strength and power in others (Macy, World as Lover 32).

In order to experience this, however, we have to open ourselves up to power as a process. Macy likens power to a verb and says that “it happens through us”. In other words, power is a process and action (Macy, World as Lover 33). When we are able to open ourselves up to this process, what happens is what Macy calls a “holonic shift”. Holons are open systems, comprised of subsystems. So, for example, each person exists as an individual entity, but in turn is part of a family, community, and the entire world. We have to make the shift to see ourselves as part of this holonic system, Macy argues, in order to avoid a collective suicide of humankind (Macy, World as Lover 34-35). She thinks that the planetary crisis is forcing us toward this holonic place; and in that sense, something bad—the nuclear bomb—serves as a sort of gift. The despair that we feel from such atrocities as the bomb has the ability to compel us to reconnect with our interconnectedness. As Macy notes, in the face of such daunting obstacles, individual actions can seem insignificant; however, if those individual actions are united as part of a collective action, they have truly transformative power (Macy, World as Lover 35-36).

Before Macy officially began her “despairwork” she studied the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka (1979-1980). I contend that what she learned about the Sarvodaya movement helped shape her beliefs and teachings on social justice movements (Macy, Dharma and Development 91). Sarvodaya means the awakening of all beings (Macy, Dharma and Development 13). It is a developing movement that uses religion and Buddhist Dharma to guide its process; it is based on the goal of achieving awakening for everybody (Macy, Dharma and Development 32). Macy poses the question: “Does Sarvodaya’s use of indigenous religious tradition offer lessons applicable to non-Buddhist societies? To industrialized as well as to developing countries?” (Macy, Dharma and Development 90). She contends that it is and that it teaches five main lessons: 1) to listen to the people of a community; 2) to integrate spirituality into social change; 3) to create collective self-esteem; 4) create opportunities to work together; and 5) to engage youth in the work. Macy states that while the Sarvodaya is not a perfect movement, it demonstrates that “we can learn to draw strength from each other, and especially from the religious traditions to which we are heir. Powerless, embittered, and apathetic Sri Lankan villagers have drawn inspiration for action from their once-discredited tradition, the Dharma” (Macy, Dharma and Development 97). Macy’s despairwork is based on transforming powerlessness into power—and this is ultimately what I see the Sarvodaya movement doing.

Evolution of Macy's Ideas: 1990s to Present

How has Macy's understanding of the state of our world changed through the years? In her 1991 book, *World As Lover, World As Self*, she discusses despair work and how while we live in a world of anxieties, we have tried to hide those anxieties, to not acknowledge the problems that face our world. (Macy, *World as Lover* 15). She provides a similar discussion of despairwork as she does in her original work on the subject; she highlights the importance that this must take place within a community and that it is not an individual effort (Macy, *World as Lover* 28). She also draws a connection between "faith, power, and ecology" and notes how social justice movements in various places, including Latin America and the Philippines, have stemmed from a spiritual impetus and that they have been effective. These movements, she asserts, are roots of power (Macy, *World as Lover* 29 and 37).

While the benefits of the social justice work described above are immeasurable, the work is tiring and can be quite draining. Macy argues that in order to heal our planet, we must begin with our own well-being. She speaks of the importance of meditating on death, in order to free ourselves from worldly attachments. She also speaks of the importance to meditate on loving-kindness, and to strive to live with compassion and to experience the suffering of all beings (Macy, *World as Lover* 39-44). The Buddhist teaching of dependent co-arising is something that has inspired much of Macy's work; she says that there are three "Turnings of the Wheel of the Dharma". The first is the Buddha's teachings recorded in scriptures; the second is the beginning of the Mahayana tradition, and is found in scriptures that speak of the Perfection of Wisdom. Lastly, Macy maintains that "the cognitive shifts and spiritual openings taking place in our own time can be seen as the Third Turning of the Wheel, that is as dramatic re-emergence of the Dharma of dependent co-arising" (Macy, *World as Lover* 239).

In her 1998 book, *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*, co-written with Molly Young Brown, Macy writes that the purpose of this book is to serve as a map for how to begin to participate in healing the world. She said that this work can be done alone, but it is best when we can connect with each other for change. This is called "Work that reconnects". Macy used to call this "despair and empowerment work" and then "deep ecology work", and, while these terms are still relevant, she thinks that "work that reconnects" gives a more hopeful impression (Macy and Brown 5-6). It also stresses the importance that any change in our world must stem from a place of acknowledging our interconnectedness. Macy and Brown write that we have the ability to choose life, to choose

not to destroy the systems of life that support our world. They write that we must “build a life-sustaining society” (Macy and Brown 16). Evidence of a Great Turning is supported by recognizing these movements: 1) actions such as campaigning for laws to mitigate or slow environmental degradation and poverty -- for example, the Endangered Species Act -- or protesting against unjust economic policies -- for example, NAFTA; 2) examining and challenging the structural causes of problems; and 3) a shift in how reality is conceived and an incorporation of spirituality and ecology into world views (Macy and Brown 17-22).

Just as Macy cited apathy as a problem in her first book on despair and empowerment work in 1983, she continues to see that the greatest threat to humankind is apathy or, as one chapter of the book is entitled, “the deadening of mind and heart” (Macy and Brown 25). Our fear of pain has made us numb to our own pain and the pain of the world; the result is apathy (Macy and Brown 26-27). This fear is compounded by a drive of consumerism; as Macy and Brown note, the global economy with its corporate focus and disintegration of community makes it difficult for us to respond to or even hear the cries of pain in the world. We are bombarded with information by the media to consume; and we lack the knowledge to connect our actions and consumption patterns to the suffering that exists in the world. In order to have money to consume, we work long hours, leaving little time to think about the problems in the world. So we live our lives silently, becoming further fragmented from ourselves, our families, our communities, our entire world (Macy and Brown 32-34).

There is a sense of turning despair into hope and a better future by uniting together as a community of interconnected beings in Macy’s work. I think, however, that a slightly less optimistic shift in her view is present in a 2001 interview. She claims, as she does in [Coming Back To Life](#), that the “Great Turning” from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society is already in motion. She cautions, however, that “what we don’t know is whether we’ll pull it off in time to save life on earth” (Arbogast). She continues to say that acknowledgement of this makes it different to forge ahead with courage; and she says that we must acknowledge the despair, the sadness that we have. The reality of entire cultures and ecosystems disappearing is depressing; it is expected and natural to be depressed about that. Macy contends that if we acknowledge this sadness, this “dark sister”, then we are able to live with more honesty. In turn, we are better able to give our work and compassion in an unattached manner. This is the same tenet of Buddhism which states that attachments in any form are bad because they cause suffering and that one’s actions must stem from a pure, unattached place. Approaching social justice

work from this place also makes the work more sustainable because the focus is on not creating suffering for oneself.

Acknowledgement of past and of interconnectedness in order to move forward

In her 2001 interview with Marianne Arbogast, Macy explains the present pain of the world through a Buddhist belief in the presence of karma, defined as the idea that actions from the past create the future. She states:

It's important to acknowledge that the problems we're dealing with have roots in the past, before our birth, and also that most of those for whom we work are not born yet. We need to see our lives and actions within larger expanses of time. (Arbogast)

Additionally, this acknowledges an interconnectedness of all of humankind—indeed of all beings—and a responsibility to and for one another. The world that we live in today is a product of the actions that people have taken in the past, and the actions that we take today will create the future. This, I think, speaks to the Buddhist tenet of samsara, the circle of life. It also means that because we are all interconnected, it is too simple to say that there are “bad” people or “good” people, or that those who work for a corporation that pollutes are inherently the “bad” people. As Macy writes, the “enemy” is institutionalized greed, hatred and ignorance, and the enemy it is not the people “who are in bondage to those structures”. She believes that it is possible for everyone to awaken to see our interconnectedness, and in turn that a person presently working for a “bad guy” can also become an agent for change (Arbogast).

This message is surely a hopeful one. Acknowledging despair and uncertainty does not mean gloom and destruction. It means acknowledging the present, being in the present, and then working in the present to change the world. It is the same idea that is professed by those involved in “engaged Buddhism”. Kenneth Kraft, in his essay “Engaged Buddhism: An Introduction”, quotes Macy on her views on interdependence. He argues that this idea is the keystone of engaged Buddhism. Essentially, engaged Buddhism simply refers to active involvement of Buddhists in society to address problems of social justice (Kraft xii-xiii). Just as Frank E. Reynolds and Charles Hallisey contend that there is no singular “Buddhism”, Kraft maintains that there are different forms of engaged Buddhism (Reynolds and Hallisey 46).

He argues that awareness of interconnectedness leads to awareness of universal responsibility, and the impetus to work collectively for change (Kraft xiv). Moreover, he contends that “engaged Buddhists refuse to turn away from suffering or sadness. They believe that no one is really able to avoid feeling pain for what is happening in the world today, try as one might to keep such feelings from coming

to consciousness" (Kraft xvi). This is the same place from which Macy approaches her despair and empowerment work or "doing the work that reconnects". It is a place of acknowledging reality and actually being in the present -- of seeing and feeling the problems in the world -- and then of engaging oneself in activities that strive to build a more just world.

Macy says that we live in a time where the future of humanity is at stake, and that this reality must impel us to conscious and collective action if we are to avoid calamity and build a different world. Macy talks about how "despairwork" has emerged as a way to take our pain and turn it into actions of compassion, courage and commitment. She notes that Buddhist values are at the core of this work (Macy, *Not Turning Away* 162). That said, while precepts of Buddhism guide this work, one need not be Buddhist to participate in it because the ideas are universally applicable (Macy, *Not Turning Away* 167). Could it be that through acknowledging our interdependence and responsibility for each other, we might be able to create a powerful movement for social justice that effects change? Moreover, might this movement also be *sustainable* for its members, as they are *sustained* through the empowerment that they experience? This, I think, is the idea behind engaged Buddhism, as well as the practices of Joanna Macy.

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