Cultivating Compassion for Mother Earth: Can *Tonglen* Offer a Path Towards Environmental Healing?

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Abstract

This study explores the viability of the Tibetan Buddhist practice of *Tonglen* as a mainstream eco-consciousness activity. While a substantial body of literature suggests Buddhism offers a potential environmental ethic, some even claiming that it is inherently eco-friendly, the perspectives of contemporary Buddhist teachers are largely underrepresented in the academic debate. Drawing on qualitative research with tonglen practitioners, this paper investigates how they engage with the nonhuman world in their practice and whether tonglen might contribute to meaningful community action on the eco-crisis. The study also examines the points of convergence between tonglen and Council of All Beings ritual through an autoethnographic account of the ritual, exploring shared themes, such as interdependence and notions of Self. While this study concludes *Tonglen* has potential as a path to eco-healing for *Tonglen* practitioners, it is questionable whether it would be accessible to a broad cross-section of the community. Although this is something that can be explored in further studies, this current study suggests that *Tonglen* requires a grounding in Buddhism's core concepts, such as the Two Truths. This study found that Council of All Beings rituals share common themes with *Tonglen* and might be considered as manifestations of *Tonglen*, or valuable and accessible alternative to *Tonglen*.

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Cultivating Compassion for Mother Earth: Can *Tonglen* Offer a Path Towards Environmental Healing?

Introduction

This paper aims to explore how practitioners of the compassion practice of *Tonglen* engage with the nonhuman world and whether they believe *Tonglen* might offer a path towards global environmental healing[1]. When Lucas Johnston spoke of the 'coevolution of Buddhism and environmental consciousness', he was highlighting the significant influence Buddhist thought has had on emerging conversations about the environment.[2] Back in 1967, historian, Lynn White Junior applauded poet, Gary Snyder's approach to environmental consciousness.[3] He believed Snyder's Zen-inspired outlook represented a positive alternative to the ecologically damaging anthropocentrism of Christianity. [4] White was effectively labelling the Western religion of Christianity as the enemy of Nature and promoting the Eastern tradition of Buddhism as Nature's potential saviour. Since then, extensive research has been conducted into whether Buddhist thought offers a possible environmental ethic.[5] For example, Professor of Environment Studies, Stephanie Kaza proposed a climate ethic based on the Buddhist principles of

[1] *Tonglen* is a Tibetan Buddhist compassion practice. An explanation of *Tonglen* can be found in Key Terms and Concepts.
[2] Lucas Johnston, 'The "Nature" of Buddhism: A Survey of Relevant Literature and Themes', *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*, 10.1 (2006), 69–99 (p.74) https://doi.org/10.1163/156853506776114456.
[3] Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science*, vol. 155, no. 3767, (1967), pp. 1203–07.[accessed 24/04/25]
[4] White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', pp. 1203–7, doi:10.1126/science.155.3767.1203 pp. 1203–07.[accessed 24/04/25]
[5] For example: [5] Stephanie Kaza, Buddhist Environmental Ethics: An Emergent and Contextual Approach in Cozort, Daniel, and James Mark Shields, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, First edition. (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 447; Allan Hunt Badiner, Introduction, in *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, ed by Allan Hunt Badiner, (Berkley, California: Parallex Press, 1990), p. xvii; Padmasiri de Silva 'Buddhist Environmental Ethics' in *Dharma Gaia – A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, Ed. By Allan Hunter Badiner, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1990), p. 15.

non-harming, compassion and skilful means.[6] Contributing Editor at Buddhist magazine, Tricycle, Allan Hunt Badiner was confident 'Buddhist *Dharma* offers a clearly defined guide to ecological living.'[7] Professor of Buddhism, Padmasiri de Silva argued Buddhist qualities like equanimity and non-attachment offer a 'viable Buddhist stance on nature.'[8] However, according to Damien Keown, Professor of Buddhist Ethics, it is unwise to assume Buddhism offers an inherently eco-friendly perspective.[9] Keown's caution is echoed by Professor of Buddhist Studies, Ian Harris who warned of the danger of over-simplifying Buddhism's green credentials.[10]

Western Buddhist centres regularly teach on eco-*Dharma* (a merging of teachings on ecology and Buddhism), demonstrating that protection of the environment has become an integral aspect of their teaching programmes.[11] Yet the voices of modern Buddhist teachers are largely absent from the debate, bar a few exceptions. Buddhist master, Thich Nhat Hanh spoke extensively on the need to protect the environment. While he acknowledged the importance of scientific intervention, he challenged the idea that more policies and more technology will prevent ecological collapse.[12] What he proposed was a radical shift in consciousness – a shift humanity's attitude towards the natural world.[13] Buddhist teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, Ogyen Trinley Dorje the Seventeenth Karmapa, His Holiness the Dalia Lama and Roshi Joan Halifax all emphasize the importance of cultivating compassion for Nature and the nonhuman

[6] Stephanie Kaza, Buddhist Environmental Ethics: An Emergent and Contextual Approach in Cozort, Daniel, and James Mark Shields, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*, First edition. (Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 447.
[7] Allan Hunt Badiner, Introduction, in Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology, ed by Allan Hunt Badiner, (Berkley, California: Parallex Press, 1990), p. xvii.
The word *Dharma* refers to the body of Buddhist teachings.
[8] Padmasiri de Silva 'Buddhist Environmental Ethics' in *Dharma Gaia – A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, Ed. By Allan Hunter Badiner, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1990), p. 15.
[9]Damien Keown, 'Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 8.2 (2007), pp. 97–112, doi:10.1080/14639940701636083 [accessed 21/04/2025].
[10] Ian Harris, 'Magician as Environmentalist: Fertility Elements in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism', *The Eastern Buddhist* 32, no. 2, (2000: 128–56.(p.128)) http://www.jstor.org/stable/44362260
[11] For example, *Kagyu Samye Ling,* Compassion in Nature, 2025, https://www.samyeling.org/courses/mindfulness/view/compassion-in-nature-weekend-may-2025
[12] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, (London: Rider, 2021), p. 12.
[13] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, (London: Rider, 2021), p. 12

world.[14] Compassion is also a theme running through environmental consciousness movements. Eco-philosopher and climate activist, Joanna Macy said her work is grounded in the Buddhist concept of compassion.[15] Inspired by philosopher and environmentalist Arne Naess's Deep Ecology Movement which highlights the interconnectedness of all life, Macy developed the Council of All Beings ritual along with fellow-environmentalist John Seed.[16] These rituals harness participants' compassion for the nonhuman world in order to stimulate their motivation to act as environmental protectors.

Founder of Compassion-Focused Therapy, Professor Paul Gilbert suggests compassion evolved as a caring or altruistic quality in response to the needs of more vulnerable members of social groups, such as, children.[17] It is a quality that does not, therefore, necessarily arise spontaneously and, instead, needs to be cultivated. Compassion is a core practice of Buddhism, and many Buddhist practices are designed to awaken compassion within practitioners. Given that the Council of All Beings rituals are founded in the practice of compassion, this paper also explores points of convergence between *Tonglen* and Council of All Beings rituals to establish whether Macy's ritual can be considered a form of *Tonglen*. As this study is interested in the meanings practitioners assign to their practice, as opposed to a doctrinal exploration of the practice itself, this topic is researched using qualitative methods, combining a survey and interviews. It also includes an autoethnographic account of a Council of All Beings ritual I attended in order to understand what the ritual might mean to participants and

[14] See: Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, (London: Rider, 2021); The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, *The Heart is Noble: Changing the World from the Inside Out*, (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2013), p92; The Dalai Lama, Foreword, in , in Dharma Gaia,: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology, ed by Allan Hunt Badiner, (Berkley, California: Parallex Press, 1990),p. v.; Joan Halifax, 'The Third Body: Buddhism, Shamanism & Deep Ecology' in *Dharma Gaia – A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, Ed. By Allan Hunter Badiner, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1990) p. 23.
[15] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How To Face The Mess We're In With Unexpected Resilience And Creative Power*, (Novato, California: New World Library, 2022), p.232.
[16] John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess, *Thinking Like a Mountain: Towards a Council of All Beings,* (USA: New Catalyst Books, USA, 2007).
[17] Paul Gilbert, 'Compassion: From Its Evolution To A Psychotherapy', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11 (2020), doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.586161 .[accessed 24/04/25]

to provide richer comparison with the experience of *Tonglen* practitioners. The following section explains some key terms and concepts used in this paper.

Key terms and concepts

Different schools of Buddhism emerged after Buddha's death. Theravādan Buddhists, found mainly in Southeast Asia, base their tradition on the Pali canon, traceable back to the time of Buddha. The later tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhism emerged in East and Central Asia several centuries later and differs from Theravāda in terms of its emphasis on *Bodhisattva* practice, which will be explained below. Mahāyāna was, and is, the form of Buddhism practised in the Himalayas. Vajrayāna Buddhism is a strand of Mahāyāna Buddhism widely practised in Tibet. There are four major schools of Buddhism in Tibet: Gelug, Kagyü, Nyingma and Sakya. The Head of Kagyü Buddhism is known as the Gyalwang Karmapa. After the Sixteenth Karmapa died in 1981, complications arose about the recognition of the Seventeenth Karmapa. Two individuals were presented as the incarnation of the Sixteenth Karmapa, resulting in controversy about who is the true Karmapa. The current Dalai Lama has recognized both lamas.[18] In this paper, the Karmapa referred to is Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

While this study focuses on Buddhist compassion practice, it is not the intention of this paper, and it lies beyond its scope, to offer an historical overview of Buddhist compassion practices. However, it is worth mentioning that antecedents of Tibetan compassion practices like *Tonglen* can be found in the earlier Theravādan practice of Loving Kindness (in Pali, *mettā).*[19] The Latin root of the word 'compassion' is *compati*, with *com* meaning 'together with' and *pati* meaning 'to suffer', giving a meaning of 'to

[18] Lama is the name given to spiritual teachers of the Vajrayana tradition. See, Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/lama_n1?tab=factsheet#39910708> [accessed 27/04/2025].
[19] See Oxford English Dictionary <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/metta_n?tab=factsheet#1272804660> [accessed 27/04/2025].

suffer with'.[20] Compassion differs from empathy in several ways. For example, as Professor of World Religions, Marc Gopin explains, compassion is cultivated universally towards all beings, whereas empathy might be directed selectively toward particular individuals .[21] For instance, an animal rights campaigner may feel empathy for farm animals but anger towards to farmers, whereas Buddhists might feel compassion for both animal and farmer.

Tibetan Buddhists cultivate compassion through the practice of *Bodhichitta,*[22] (Tibetan *chang chub kyi sem*[23]*).* Buddhist teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche explains that *bodhi* means awakened and *chitta* means heart, so *Bodhichitta* means 'heart of the awakened mind'.[24] A *Bodhisattva* is a being who has taken a *Bodhisattva* Vow to arouse *Bodhichitta,* relieve suffering and help all beings achieve enlightenment. *Bodhichitta* has two aspects according to the eighth century Buddhist scholar, Shantideva, who is believed to have written the classic guide to Mahāyāna Buddhism, the *Bodhicharyavatara*.[25] Relative *Bodhichitta* is the motivation to attain enlightenment for the benefit of others, while Absolute *Bodhichitta* is a state of enlightenment which

[20] See, Oxford English Dictionary , <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/compassion_n?tl=true&tab=etymology> [accessed 27/04/2025].
[21] Gopin, Marc, *Compassionate Reasoning : Changing the Mind to Change the World* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 37-39. .[accessed 24/04/25]
[22] Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/*Bodhichitta*_n?tab=factsheet#1284621320>, [accessed 24/04/2025}. The Sanskrit form is *Bodhichitta,* but this paper will use the phonetic form – *Bodhichitta* - throughout the paper for ease of readership.
[23]See, *Rigpawiki,* 'Bodhichitta' 2008, <https://www.rigpawiki.org/index.php?title=*Bodhichitta*#Literal_Meaning/Etymology>, [accessed 25/04/2025].
[24] Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (London: Rider Books, 1992), p. 201.
[25] Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, Translated from the Tibetan by the Padmakara Translation Group, 2nd edition, (Boulder: Shambhala, 2006).
There have been several recent translations of the *Bodhicharyavatara*. For example, Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton translate directly from the Sanskrit, whereas Alexander Berzin translated mainly from the Tibetan with some clarifications from the Sanskrit. The Padmakara Translation Group have chosen to translate from the Tibetan. There are differences between the surviving Sanskrit text and the Tibetan, for example, the length of the text. In their Introduction, the Padmakara Translation Group explain their decision to translate from the Tibetan was based on the precious contributions made to this text by generations of accomplished Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, with their extensive practical experience of implementing the teachings of the *Bodhicharyavatara,* make it a valuable handbook for living for Tibetan Buddhist practitioners.
This paper uses the phonetical rendering of the Sanskrit form of Śāntideva, so throughout this paper *Śāntideva* will be referred to as Shantideva.

recognises all form is empty.[26] Absolute *Bodhichitta* is achieved through the practice of Relative *Bodhichitta*.

All the major lineages of Tibetan Buddhism practise *Lojong,* often translated as 'training of the mind'. One of the most important sets of instructions for mind-training is 'Seven Points of Mind Training' (Tibetan, *lojong dön dünma)* by the Buddhist adept, Geshe Chekawa.[27] This important text offers practitioners memorable, pith instructions on how to cut through self-clinging behaviours and develop a more compassionate attitude towards others.[28] *Tonglen* is a giving and receiving compassion practice, using the breath as the medium for transformation. *Tong* means giving/sending out whereby practitioners send love to another. *Len* means receiving or taking in, whereby practitioner take on the suffering of others. Geshe Chekawa's description of *Tonglen* comes under 'Point Two: The Main Practice, Which is Training in *Bodhichitta*'.[29] Geshe Chekawa's slogan for *Tonglen* is, 'Sending and taking should be practiced alternately/These two should ride the breath'.[30]

Literature

Buddhism within the Environmental Debate

The so-called 'Buddhist worldview' has emerged as a major theme threading through the Western environmental consciousness movement.[31] Mark E. Koltko-Rivera defines

[26] Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, p. 33.
[27] Jamgon Kongtrul*, The Great Path of Awakening: The Classic Guide to Lojong, a Tibetan Buddhist Practice for Cultivating the Heart of Compassion*, translated by Ken McLeod, (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications,2005).
Commentaries on the classic spiritual texts of Tibetan Buddhism are widely used to prevent misunderstanding. Jamgon Kongtrul's commentary on 'Seven Points of Mind Training' is a well-known commentary.
[28] Jamgon Kongtrul*, The Great Path of Awakening,* p. xv.
[29] Jamgon Kongtrul*, The Great Path of Awakening*, p. 93.
[30] Jamgon Kongtrul*, The Great Path of Awakening,* p. 94.
[31] For example, a search in JSTOR using the phrase ' Buddhist worldview environmental ethics' produced over 536 results and a second search using the phrase 'Buddhist environmental ethics' produced 3425 results. Both searches took place on 8/3/25.

the concept of worldview as shared 'sets of beliefs and assumptions that describe reality' and the meaning and nature of life.[32] So, to speak of a Buddhist ecological worldview is to assume all Buddhists share a unified environmental ethos and there is extensive research on Buddhism's green credentials. Ericson, Kjønstad and Barstad, for example, investigated how mindfulness[33] might reduce consumerism by countering materialistic attitudes through generating inner wellbeing.[34] The link between mindfulness and sustainable behaviours has also been explored by Geiger *et al* among others.[35]

Simon P. James and David E. Cooper, however, warn against assuming there is a unified, inherently eco-friendly Buddhist worldview.[36] Describing Buddhism as a 'broad church' with diverse approaches to the environment, they suggest it is difficult to identify a definitive Buddhist eco-perspective.[37] Ian Harris also challenges the idea of Buddhism as an inherently Nature-friendly, noting traditional Buddhist tales often demonstrate an ascendancy over Nature, rather than protecting or accommodating it.[38] However, Buddhist scholar, Dawn Collins suggests Tibetan Buddhists have a rich history of engaging with their local environment through the spirited agencies they believe inhabit the land and contribute to the wellbeing of the Tibetan people.[39]

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[32] Mark E. Koltko-Rivera, 'The Psychology of Worldviews', *Review of General Psychology*, 8.1 (2004), 3–58, (p.3), https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.8.1.3. .[accessed 24/04/25]

[33] Mindfulness is a Buddhist practice that helps practitioners develop awareness by paying attention to something, for example, the breath. It has a quality of calmness and alertness. Mindfulness is now known for its application in secular settings, for example, it is often used as a mental health technique.

[34] T. Ericson, Kjønstad, B.G. And Barstad, A., 'Mindfulness and sustainability', *Ecological Economics,* **104**, (2014), pp. 73-79. .[accessed 24/04/25]

[35] Sonja M. Geiger, Paul Grossman, and Ulf Schrader, 'Mindfulness and Sustainability: Correlation or Causation?', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 28 (2019), 23–27 ;Ute B. Thiermann and William R Sheate, 'The Way Forward in Mindfulness and Sustainability: A Critical Review and Research Agenda', *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*, 5.1 (2021), 118–39.[accessed 24/04/25]

[36] Simon P. James and David E Cooper, 'Buddhism and the Environment', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 8.2 (2007), p.93, https://doi.org/10.1080/14639940701636075 .[accessed 24/04/25]

[37] James and Cooper, 'Buddhism and the Environment', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 8.2 (2007), p.93, https://doi.org/10.1080/14639940701636075.[accessed 24/04/25]

[38] Ian Harris, 'Magician as Environmentalist: Fertility Elements in South and Southeast Asian Buddhism', *The Eastern Buddhist* 32, no. 2, (2000, 128–56.(p.128) http://www.jstor.org/stable/44362260 . .[accessed 24/04/25].

[39] Dawn Collins, *Presence in Tibetan landscapes: spirited agency and ritual healing in Rebgong*, (Unpublished PhD, Cardiff University, 2014), p. 100, <url=https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:148287>[accessed 25/04/2025].

Reflecting on how much research focuses on historical Buddhist teachings, Scholar of Religions, Rita Gross suggests it is useful to contemplate what modern Buddhist teachers can contribute to the environmental debate, as all major religions adapt to remain relevant to the changing circumstances of their followers.[40] With some notable exceptions, the voices of modern Buddhist teachers are largely absent from the environmental debate. One reason for the inclusion of modern Buddhist teachers is that academic analysis can sometimes overlook more nuanced aspects of the tradition's key concepts. For example, Damien Keown posited that Buddha's teaching on impermanence implies that 'the eventual destruction of the environment is a basic feature of *samsara*'.[41] Reuben F. L. Habito similarly noted ecological decay is inevitable in Buddhist cosmology, rendering environmental activism redundant.[42]However, while not disputing the reality of impermanence, many Buddhist masters would challenge such a fatalistic attitude towards the decay of Nature. The Dalai Lama points out that Western understanding of impermanence is often flawed, saying,

> 'it does not suggest that we accept change for the worse as a fact of life. On the contrary, by being aware of constant change and trying to spot negative change at an early stage, negative developments can be avoided and sometimes become positive opportunities.'[43]

According to the Dalai Lama, then, impermanence is not the nihilistic teaching that Keown and Habito suggest, because Buddhist compassion always seeks to alleviate suffering. It is, therefore, important to understand the subtleties of Buddhist concepts to avoid the risk of oversimplifying Buddhism's ecological perspective. On the other

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[40] Rita M. Gross, 'Toward a Buddhist Environmental Ethic', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no. 2, (1997), p. 334. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1465768. [accessed 24/04/2025].
[41] Damien Keown, 'Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 8.2 (2007), pp. 97–112, doi:10.1080/14639940701636083 [accessed 21/04/2025].

[42] Ruben L. Habito, 'Environment or Earth Sangha: Buddhist Perspectives on Our Global Ecological Well-Being', *Contemporary Buddhism*, 8.2 (2007), p. 134. https://doi.org/10.1080/14639940701636117, [last accessed 21/04/2025].
[43] His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Laurens Van Den Muyzenberg, *The Leader's Way – Business, Buddhism And Happiness In An Interconnected World*, (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008), p. 24.

hand, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa[44] warns against the danger of over-philosophising key concepts, saying, 'intellectual exercise can have the result that you accumulate more thoughts, but not more wisdom'.[45] Overthinking is the antithesis of Buddhism. The voices of modern Buddhist teachers might clear up some of the more subtle points of understanding of key concepts, without over-analysing essential points.

Buddhist teachers

The Buddhist teaching of the Three Poisons (in Tibetan, *duk sum*[46]) identifies ignorance, desire and anger as the root causes of suffering and, therefore, serious obstacles to spiritual enlightenment.[47] Modern Buddhist teachers use the Three Poisons as a framework for discussing the causes of environmental collapse. For example, the Karmapa noted that the global culture of materialism, which has been so catastrophic for the Earth, is the result of human greed.[48] This greed is fuelled by ignorance, because lasting happiness can never be achieved by attaching to impermanent states, like material wealth. For Buddhist teachers, the roots of the eco-crisis lie much deeper than simply using too much plastic or favouring cars over public transport. By focusing on the emotional causes of the environmental crisis, modern Buddhist leaders are using traditional concepts like the Three Poisons to help Buddhist students understand what is driving this situation. In Tibetan Buddhism, generosity, compassion and wisdom are the antidotes to the Three Poisons. Buddhist teachers believe compassion can contribute to the protection of the planet. The Karmapa instructs practitioners to direct their compassion to 'all that is inanimate as well as animate.'[49] The entire planet must

[44] Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa will be referred to as the Karmapa in the remainder of this paper.
[45] The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, *Nurturing Compassion – Teachings From The First Visit To Europe* (Brussels, Belgium: Karmapa Foundation Europe, 2015), p. 14.
[46] The main poison is ignorance (of the true nature of existence), sometimes referred to as delusion, and this ignorance is what causes people to act from desire/attachment and hatred/anger/aversion. See *Rigpawiki,* 'Destructive Emotions*',* last ed. 2023,< https://www.rigpawiki.org>, [accessed 12/04/2025].
[47] *Rigpawiki,* Destructive Emotions*',* last ed. 2023, https://www.rigpawiki.org, [accessed 12/04/2025].
[48] The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, *The Heart is Noble: Changing the World from the Inside Out*, (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, 2013), p. 87.
[49] The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, *The Heart is Noble,* p92.

be the focus of practitioners' compassion. In Buddhist thought, there is an egality between beings considered to be sentient. Shantideva stressed this point, writing,

> 'Since I and other beings both,
> In wanting happiness, are equal and alike,
> What difference is there to distinguish us.' [50]

Buddhists do believe human birth is a particularly fortunate blessing. According to Patrul Rinpoche, only humans can engage with Buddhist teachings, but he goes on to say that every being wants to be free from suffering and 'there is not a single [being] who has not, at some moment throughout time without beginning, been a parent to us'.[51] In Buddhist cosmology, human beings are connected to all other beings and cannot, therefore, be considered superior.[52] It is, therefore, logical to consider compassion as central for the well-being of both humans and Nature. Buddhist monk, Matthieu Ricard urged people 'to develop your own compassion, altruistic love and courage' as a means of manifesting sustainable, eco-friendly attitudes towards Mother Earth.[53] Zen master and environmentalist, Thich Nhat Hanh warned, 'Technology alone is not enough to solve the problem. It needs to go together with understanding, compassion and togetherness.'[54] Science alone will not save the planet – the solution lies in addressing our attitude and developing more compassionate and egalitarian attitudes towards the nonhuman world.

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[50] Shantideva, The Way of the *Bodhisattva*, Translated from the Tibetan by the Padmakara Translation Group, 2nd edition, (Boulder: Shambhala, 2006), p. 122.
[51] Patrul Rinpoche, *Kunzang Lama'I Shelung: The Words of my Perfect Teacher, a Complete Translation of a Classic Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*, Edited by Kerry Brown and Sima Sharma, Translated by the Padmakara Translation group, (USA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p.222.
[52] Shantideva, The Way of the *Bodhisattva*, p.186.
[53] Matthieu Ricard, *Altruism – The Science and Psychology of Kindness*, Translated by Charlotte Mandell and Sam Gordon, (London: Atlantic Books, 2018), p. 679.
[54] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Saving the Planet*, p.49.

Professor of Religious Studies, Padmasiri De Silva said, 'the pollution of nature and the pollution of mind are facets of one problem'.[55] This implies environmental healing depends on decontaminating the poisons that exist within our own minds, as these emotional toxins are driving environmental collapse. For Buddhists, the solution is not one of simple environmental activism. Thich Nhat Hanh warned activists,

> 'If you don't have enough peace, understanding, and tolerance, or if you're burdened by anger and anxiety, your action will have little value.... the quality of action depends on the quality of being.'[56]

Activism motivated by anger or intolerance towards others is tainted by those poisonous emotions. Buddhist master, Dzongzar Khyentse Rinpoche maintains that self-righteous actions feed the ego as they are rooted in dualistic beliefs about right and wrong, friend and enemy, good environmentalist and bad polluter.[57] He believes such 'inflexible self-righteousness' is the wrong attitude because it allows no compassion for others. So, even for activists, it is important to detoxify negative habits of mind by cultivating compassion. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, 'The way out is in. You have to go back to yourself, ...our insight and awakening will give rise to compassion and peace.[58] Rather than urging outward activism, Buddhist teachers call on their students to practise inner activism first, to purify emotional poisons and generate compassion. Compassion, however, does not arise spontaneously in response to a stimulus in the same way other emotions do, like anger or fear.[59] Founder of Compassion Focussed Therapy, Paul Gilbert believes that compassion can be impeded by self-protective urges, like selfishness, greed and tribalism.[60] As compassion is not a response that

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[55]Padmasiri de Silva 'Buddhist Environmental Ethics' in *Dharma Gaia – A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, Ed. By Allan Hunter Badiner, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1990)
[56] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*,
[57] Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, *What Makes You Not A Buddhist*, (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2007), p. 113.
[58] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 48.
[59] Paul Ekman, 'What Scientists Who Study Emotion Agree About', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 11.1 (2016), 31–34 https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691615596992 .[last accessed 24/04/25]
[60] Gilbert, Paul, 'The Origins and Nature of Compassion Focused Therapy', *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 53.1 (2014), pp. 6–41, doi:10.1111/bjc.12043, p. 18. .[last accessed 24/04/25]

always arises automatically, like flight-flight emotions, it must, instead, be cultivated or trained.

Tonglen

All schools of Tibetan Buddhism practise *Lojong* and, as previously mentioned, Geshe Chekawa's 'Seven Points of Mind Training'[61] is one of the key spiritual texts used and describes *Tonglen* under 'Point Two: The Main Practice, which is Training in *Bodhichitta*'.[62] Jamgon Kongtrul's offers a vivid description of the *Tonglen* visualization,

> '..as you breathe in, imagine that black tar collecting all the suffering, obscurations, and evil of all sentient beings enters your own nostrils and is absorbed into your heart. Think that all sentient beings are forever free of misery and evil. As you breathe out, imagine that all your happiness and virtue pour out in the form of rays of moonlight from your nostrils and are absorbed by every sentient being. With great joy, think that all of them immediately attain Buddhahood.'[63]

His description highlights three key elements of *Tonglen*: recognising suffering; transforming suffering; and the aspiration that all being attain enlightenment. Buddhist teacher, Pema Chödrön describes *Tonglen* as a 'meditation practice that develops equanimity and compassion by taking in the suffering of others and giving away all that is positive and good.'[64] It is often seen as a healing practice, both for practitioner and the object of the *Tonglen*. As a healing practice that perceives all beings as equal and is motivated by the desire to reduce suffering, the question arises of whether *Tonglen* is a practice that can be used in environmental contexts.

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[61] Jamgon Kongtrul*, The Great Path of Awakening*, p. xv.
[62] Jamgon Kongtrul*, The Great Path of Awakening*, p. 93.
[63] Jamgon Kongtrul*, The Great Path of Awakening*, p. 15
[64] Pema Chödrön, *No time to Lose: A Timely Guide to the Way of the Bodhisattva*, ed. Helen Berner, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), p369.

A keen supporter of practical environmental action, the Karmapa established an eco-programme called *Rangjung Khoryug Sungkyob Tsokpa*.[65] K*horyug* means environment and the Karmapa's project promotes eco-friendly activity in Buddhist monasteries across the Himalayan region. Environmental Advisor to the Karmapa, Dekila Chungyalpa asked his advice on how to support environmental workers. He developed an environment-focused *Tonglen* for them (from now, referred to as eco-*Tonglen*).[66] *Tonglen* can be practiced for both human and nonhuman beings. His instructions include visualising breathing in the compassion of Mother Earth to open the practice, before focusing on 'a place or being that is suffering from environmental and climate harm [...] Bring to mind how environmental degradation and climate change affects them. When the distress arises, focus on your desire to heal and to care for this entity.'[67] This example demonstrates how some Buddhists are now using *Tonglen* to specifically address environmental issues and confirms the importance of compassion as tool for Buddhist environmentalists.

Research on *Tonglen*

At the time of writing, I could find only limited research on *Tonglen*. Jeff Pardy's Masters dissertation found that *Tonglen* practitioners felt more connected with self and others as a result of their practice.[68]Examining the distant healing properties of *Tonglen* on cancer patients, Pagliaro *et al* found some showed slight mental health

[65] *Kagyu Office*, 'Celebrating World Environment Day, Karmapa, <https://kagyuoffice.org/celebrating-world-environment-day/#:~:text=If%20the%20ecology%20was%20to,of%20great%20benefit%2C%20they%20said>. [last accessed 29/04/2025].
[66]Dekila Chungyalpa, 'Tonglen For Eco-Anxiety', *One Earth Sangha*, , 2022, <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety/ >[last accessed 28/04/25].
[67] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[68] Pardy, Jeffrey, '*The Tonglen experiences of individuals with established sitting meditation practices: a grounded theory study*', (Unpublished Masters thesis, Memorial University, 2016) p. 94, [last accessed 24/04/25].

improvements.[69] American teacher of nursing, Geraldine Gorman explored whether *Tonglen* offers student nurses a way of being more compassionate with patients.[70]*Tonglen* and computer technology might not be an obvious partnering, but Mah, Loke and Hespanhol explored the value of lived-experience of compassion practice for human-computer interaction design.[71] They practised *Tonglen* for twelve weeks, attempting to bring an 'authentic account of contemplative practice' to the field of technological design. While noting the value of *Tonglen*, they encountered challenges in developing a regular practice and acknowledged the real value of the practice lies in sustained practice over a long time.[72]John Reacroft tested the hypothesis that third sector workers who practise *Lojong* from the perspective of Two Truths are better able to find solutions to workplace problems.[73] He found *Lojong* practitioners developed 'deep empathy for others', producing solutions in 'hopeless' cases.[74] Sharon Betcher explored how *Tonglen* might enrich the practice of Christology by helping practitioners become less pain-averse and more responsive to the needs of others.[75] Although these *Tonglen* studies do not relate to the eco-crisis, two main threads might be applicable to the eco-crisis: recognition of suffering; and healing through connection. Although, there are differences between *Tonglen* and Loving-

[69] Pagliaro, Gioacchino, P Pandolfi, Natalina Collina, Giovanni Piero Frezza, Alba Ariela Brandes, Margherita Galli, Federica Marzocchi Avventuroso, Sara De Lisio, Muriel Assunta Musti, Enrico Franceschi, Roberta Degli Esposti, Laura Lombardo, Giovanna Cavallo, Monica Di Battista, Simonetta Rimondini, Rosalba Poggi, Cinzia Susini, Rina Renzi and Linda Marconi. 'A Randomized Controlled Trial of Tong Len Meditation Practice in Cancer Patients: Evaluation of a Distant Psychological Healing Effect', *Explore,* 12 1 (2016): 42-9, [last accessed 24/04/25].
[70] Gorman, Geraldine PhD, RN. Gestation Of Compassion: Nursing Education, *Tonglen*, And A Little Cello Music', *Nurse Educator*, 30(1), p. 1-3, January 2005. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[71] Mah, Kristina, Lian Loke and Luke Hespanhol, 'Towards a Contemplative Research Framework for Training Self-Observation in HCI: A Study of Compassion Cultivation', *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 28 (2021), 1 – 27, [last accessed 24/04/25].
[72] Mah, Kristina, Lian Loke and Luke Hespanhol, 'Towards a Contemplative Research Framework for Training Self-Observation in HCI: A Study of Compassion Cultivation', *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 28 (2021), 1 – 27, p. 23. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[73] John Reacroft, '"*Profit And Victory To Others, Loss And Defeat To Myself" – A Study Of How Volunteers And Staff In Tibetan Buddhist Voluntary Organisations Have Applied The Lojong (Transformation Of The Mind) To Problem Situations At Work'*, (Unpublished Masters dissertation, University of East London, 2001), [last accessed 24/04/25].
[74] John Reacroft, '"*Profit And Victory To Others, Loss And Defeat To Myself" – A Study Of How Volunteers And Staff In Tibetan Buddhist Voluntary Organisations Have Applied The Lojong (Transformation Of The Mind) To Problem Situations At Work'*, (Unpublished Masters dissertation, University of East London, 2001), p. 103 [last accessed 24/04/25].
[75] Sharon Betcher, '*Spirit And The Obligation Of Social Flesh: A Secular Theology For The Global City*', (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 94. [last accessed 24/04/25].

Kindness, they are both Buddhist compassion practices. Tanja Mancinelli explored whether Loving-Kindness helps practitioners develop qualities that promote connection with the nonhuman world and found practices like Loving-Kindness could have a 'positive impact on the ecological self'.[76]

'Personhood' in Buddhism

Buddhism rejects the notion of a Self as a solid entity with its own individual, innate existence. Buddhist environmentalist, Joanna Macy explains that, in Buddhist belief, the Self is 'a changing, fluid construct created by the dynamics of mind'.[77] Trying to hold onto a sense of Self based on the false notion it is solid and real causes suffering. It is like trying to grab a handful of air. The idea of no-Self is not, however, a nihilistic, self-loathing perspective.

Sogyal Rinpoche distinguishes between ego-based notions of self and ultimate notions of self.[78] The ego cherishes ideas of a solid identity, for example, Jay is a rich, forty-six-year-old banker who is a good footballer. Sogyal Rinpoche argues such identifiers have no permanent or independent existence. They only exist within a set of specific causes and conditions. If Jay lost his job, is he still a banker? If he breaks his leg, is Jay still a footballer? If Jay dies and is reborn as Gillian, is Jay still Jay? Contemplating existence from this perspective questions the nature of things as we perceive them in our daily lives. Thich Nhat Hanh explains, 'When you're caught in the idea that *this body* is you, or *this mind* is you, you underestimate your value.'[79] This is because in Buddhism, there is the concept of Two Truths: the relative nature of things and the absolute nature of

[76] Tanja Mancinelli, *'Subjectivity, Ecology And Meditation. Dynamics Of Heart Meditations And Potential Implications For The Ecological Self,'* (unpublished Masters dissertation, University of Wales Trinity St David, 2019), p. 47. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[77] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality In Buddhism And General Systems Theory – The Dharma Of Natural Systems,* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. xi.
[78] Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, p. 189.
[79] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 97.

things. On a relative level, Jay appears to exist as a being who works in a bank and plays football. On an absolute level, the notion of an inherently existing Jay falls apart because what we perceive as Jay depends on a specific set of conditions and circumstances that are subject to constant and inevitable change. Jay will not always work in a bank or play football. Overcoming these false notions of Self helps practitioners recognise the truth of impermanence and interdependence. Giving the example of a cloud, Thich Nhat Hanh explains that through contemplating interdependence and impermanence 'we discover that the same cloud is free from birth and death, being and nonbeing, and we touch the ultimate truth of the cloud. We don't have to throw away the cloud in order to touch it true nature.'[80] Like the cloud, relative notions of Self exist simultaneously with the absolute notion of Self. Cultivating *Bodhichitta* helps practitioners develop this deep understanding of the true nature of Self. As Sogyal Rinpoche explains, 'You have no greater ally in this war against your greatest enemy, your own self-grasping and self-cherishing, than the practice of compassion.'[81] The practice of *Bodhichitta* helps practitioners break down rigid concepts of Self and other. Compassionate existence is not something that is narrowly confined to human beings only. As Thich Nhat Hanh explains,

> '*Bodhisattva*s aren't only human. A deer, a monkey, a mango tree, or a rock can all be called *Bodhisattva*s because they are offering freshness, beauty and refuge to the world.'[82]

*Bodhisattva*s surround us and have, by virtue of their *Bodhisattva* nature, the power to heal us. This Buddhist concept of *Bodhichitta* is relevant to the eco-consciousness movement because Earth itself is sometimes referred to as the 'Great Refreshing Earth *Bodhisattva*'.[83] This does not mean that the planet is inhabited by a spirit or being – rather, it is a view of Earth as a life-giving, life-sustaining entity that we are

[80] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 44.
[81] Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book Of Living And Dying*, p. 189.

[82] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art Of Saving The Planet*, p. 72.
[83] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art Of Saving The Planet*, p. 72.

simultaneously part of but that can also offer us refuge and healing, as well as healing herself.[84] So, our wellbeing is intricately linked with the Earth's wellbeing and the Earth's wellbeing is linked with ours.

Arne Naess described the ecological Self, as emerging out of an expanded sense of Self intricately connected with Nature.[85] Like Sogyal Rinpoche, Naess warns against identifying with the ego-based Self , which he claims 'indicates a vast underestimation of the human self'.[86] Naess suggested people should develop a deeper and wider sense of their selves.[87] Considering others as important as oneself and recognising connections between all beings makes us more inclined to act out of genuine kindness for others as opposed to duty, argues Naess. Feeling interconnected with Nature changes our relationship with the natural world, so that 'protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves.'[88] So, for Naess, this expanded sense of Self and awareness of interdependence encourages the notions that the wellbeing of humanity depends on the wellbeing of the nonhuman world.[89]

In Buddhist thinking, interdependence is not a one-way path of cause and effect. Cause and effect can work both ways. For example, washing dirty socks in a bowl of clean water, the water becomes muddy, but my socks become clean. Joanna Macy notes convergence between the Buddha's concept of mutual causality and science's General Systems Theory,[90] Macy describes Buddhist mutual causality as a 'vision of interdependence, presenting reality as a dynamic interaction of mutually conditioning events, [which]posits no prime cause or unconditioned absolute to which occurrences

[84] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art Of Saving The Planet*, p. 73.
[85]Arne Naess, '*Self* Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World' *in Thinking like a Mountain – Towards a Council of All Beings*, John Seed and others, (Gabriola Island, Canada : New Catalyst Books, 2007), p. 28.
[86] Arne Naess, '*Self* Realization' *in Thinking Like A Mountain*, p. 26.
[87] Arne Naess, '*Self* Realization: *in Thinking Like A Mountain*, p. 27.
[88] Arne Naess, '*Self* Realization, p. 29.
[89] Arne Naess, '*Self* Realization, p. 28.
[90] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory – The Dharma of Natural Systems,* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. xii.

can be traced in a linear fashion.'[91] The Western scientific theory of causality, General Systems Theory, recognises the connection of natural and social systems, but, until recently, this was largely perceived as a one-way causal relationship.[92] One of the founders of General Systems Theory, biologist, Ludwig von Bertalanffy[93] challenged the linear view of causality and it is now accepted that all phenomena are connected through 'interweaving circuits of causality'.[94] Macy called the union of these two concepts a "Dharma of Natural Systems", which she believes might provide a philosophical and moral basis for an emergent ecological worldview.[95] Macy argues that scientific evidence of interconnected systems should inform human ethical interactions with the natural world.[96] Macy has said her work is grounded in the Buddhist concept of *Bodhichitta*.[97] Along with environmentalists John Seed and Pat Fleming, she developed the ritual of the 'Council of All Beings' workshops.[98] Participants represent a nonhuman at Council and dress up in adornments representative of that chosen being. Summarizing the work of Victor Turner and Arnold van Gennep, Jack Hunter describes ritual as having three aspects, starting with '*separation* from normal life, followed by a *liminal period* of anti-structure, finally culminating with *a re-aggregation* of the individual into society as a changed person with a new social status'.[99] Council of All Beings rituals follow this format.[100] Participants are separated from normal life as they dress up as their chosen nonhuman beings. In the anti-structural middle section, nonhuman beings hold the floor to describe their suffering at the hands of human interference. Finally, participants reaggregate into society as newly emergent activists, ready to uphold the rights of their chosen being. Labelling the event a ritual, Macy and Seed imply that Council of All

[91] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality*, p. 18.
[92] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality*, p. 10.
[93] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality*, p. 16.
[94] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality*, p. xii.
[95] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality*, p. xii.
[96] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality* pp. xii-xiv.
[97] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How To Face The Mess We're In With Unexpected Resilience And Creative Power*, (Novato, California: New World Library, 2022), p.232.
[98] John Seed, Introduction, John Seed, Joanna Macy, Pat Fleming and Arne Naess, *Thinking Like A Mountain: Towards A Council Of All Beings, (USA:* New catalyst Books, 2007), p. 7.
[99] Jack Hunter, *Ecology And Spirituality, A Brief Introduction*, (Ceredigion, Wales: Sophia Centre Press, 2023), p. 26.
[100] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope*, pp.36-38.

Beings activities represent a spiritual encounter with the nonhuman world which profoundly changes the participants.

Reflections on the Literature

Despite the volume of literature exploring Buddhism's green credentials, the discourse often overlooks the voices of modern Buddhist teachers and their students. This can lead to superficial interpretations of how Buddhist principles might be applied to contemporary ecological challenges. For many Buddhist teachers, the roots of the environmental crisis lie in negative human emotions. Prominent teachers, like the Karmapa and Thich Nhat Hanh stress environmental healing depends on humanity showing compassion towards Nature. Joanna Macy and Arne Naess believe successful environmental protection will only be achieved once interdependence is universally recognised and humanity acknowledges its own survival depends on Earth's survival. The Council of All Beings rituals encourage a more spiritual relationship with the nonhuman.

Inspired by the Karmapa's use of eco-*Tonglen*, this paper will now explore *Tonglen* practitioners' engagement with the eco-crisis. In particular, I will explore their connection with Nature, whether *Tonglen* encourages a sense of the ecological Self, and whether their ecological beliefs align with those articulated by Buddhist teachers in believing compassion, in particular *Tonglen*, offers a pathway to environmental healing. Finally, the study will also explore the shared emphasis on interdependence and compassionate action evident in both *Tonglen* and the Council of All Beings, analysing the interface between these practices to identify the specific aspects of *Tonglen* that are reflected in the Council of All Beings rituals. The next section outlines the methods that will be used.

Methodology

This study explores what significance *Tonglen* practitioners assign to compassion practice for the environment. Hennink, Hutter and Bailey suggest qualitative research is useful for exploring beliefs of new areas of study.[101] Since there is limited research on *Tonglen*, this study uses qualitative methodology, incorporating survey and interviews. This study explores points of convergence between *Tonglen* practice and Council of All Beings rituals. Participant observation allows for a deeper sense of what it feels like to be part of a community.[102] Autoethnography allows space for subjective and emotional responses to the object of study.[103] Rituals are, as previously discussed, transformative experiences.[104] Therefore, this study also included an autoethnographic account of a Council of All Beings ritual.

Participants were recruited via gatekeepers known to me in UK Tibetan Buddhist networks, who acted as trustworthy advocates for the research.[105] Gatekeepers were sent the survey electronically, with an explanation of the study's purpose and an invitation to cascade it to other practitioners. Seeking to build diversity into my participant group, I emailed Buddhist centres across the UK affiliated to each of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism: Gelug, Kagyü, Nyingma and Sakya. Survey responses were slow coming in, so UK Buddhist Facebook groups were included.

Participation was voluntary. No rewards were offered. Information was provided about the study's purpose, recording, transcribing and data storing procedures, in line with current GDPR legislation. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the

[101] Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, SAGE Publications, London, 2020, p.11.
[102]Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods,* pp. 180-181.
[103] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E Adams, and Arthur P Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum, Qualitative Social Research*, 12.1 (2011), p. 2, [last accessed 24/04/25].

[104] Jack Hunter, *Ecology And Spirituality, A Brief Introduction*, (Ceredigion, Wales: Sophia Centre Press, 2023), p. 26.
[105] Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p. 98.

research at any point and the right to ask about information stored about them. Interviewees were anonymised by substituting names with a letter A1, A2, onwards.

Bell and Waters surveys do not always establish causal relationships but can be useful for indicating what respondents believe.[106] The survey aimed to simply capture basic data on practitioners' beliefs about the eco-crisis, and their Buddhist practice. Designed on Google Docs, the survey was easily shared via the internet and allowed for anonymised responses. It comprised thirteen questions, with questions covering demographics, Buddhist practice and views on the environment. Participants were invited to provide email addresses for potential follow-up interviews.[107]

To gain deeper understanding of how *Tonglen* practitioners' beliefs, semi-structured interviews were conducted.[108] I emailed those who provided their email address and explained the interview process, for example, that they would be conducted remotely, information about data storage and their right to withdraw consent. Questions aligned with topics emerging from the literature. For example, the question 'To what extent has *Tonglen* helped you develop a sense of resilience in the face of environmental changes?' explored whether participants' beliefs aligned with the Karmapa's eco-*Tonglen* practice. Eight basic questions were asked, sometimes with follow-up questions.[109] Interviews were recorded over Zoom, transcribed, then stored anonymously in password-protected files on my computer.

After an Internet search revealed no in-person Council of All Beings were being held in the UK during the research period, I searched for online events and booked onto a Council ritual with Frieda Nixdorf, a trainer on the global Work That Reconnects

[106] Judith Bell and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project : a Guide for First-Time Researchers*, 7th edition. (London: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education, 2018). p.32.
[107] See Appendix One for a full list of the survey questions.
[108] Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p. 117.
[109] See Appendix Two for a full list of interview questions.

Network.[110] Edmund Hurserl suggested the individual 'I' can offer 'an original and pure descriptive knowledge of the psychical life as it is in itself'.[111] Adding my own psychical experience of the Council of All Beings ritual, I hoped to provide a deeper layer of comparison with *Tonglen* than library research would have provided.

Similar to Braun and Clarke's model of reflexive thematic analysis, interview data was processed in a six-step process: getting familiar with the data; separating data into codes; creation of initial themes; reworking initial themes; refining the themes; writing up.[112] Transcribing the interviews using technology would have been quicker, but I believed transcribing by hand deepened my knowledge of the data. The act of listening slowly and repeatedly as I transcribed helped me recall each interviewee's words in detail. After listing of words, phrases and ideas commonly repeated across the interviews, these initial codes were divided into largely deductive or largely inductive codes, along with brief code descriptions and quotations. Created longhand in my notebook , the kinaesthetic act of scribbling ideas helped me connect ideas. Although the interviews revealed rich seams of data, a number of these themes were discarded as the limitations of this study prohibited full analysis of all the topics discussed by participants. The data was revised until it distilled into main headings that could be discussed coherently in this paper. I made handwritten notes immediately after the Council of All Beings ritual ended, when the experience was fresh in my mind. This account was then written up on the computer and analysis of themes followed the same format as the interviews.

[110]*Work That Reconnects*, 'WRT Network Mission', at Our Mission, Vision, & Values - Work That Reconnects Network[last accessed 24/04/25].
[111] Husserl, Edmund (1972), Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology, London: Collier-MacMillan [1913, Eng. trans.1931].p.7. Accessed from Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology : Edmund Husserl : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive , [last accessed 24/04/25].
[112] Braun, Victoria, and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis : A Practical Guide* (London: SAGE Publications, 2022), p. 6.

Reflexive Considerations - Hearing Adiantum Cry

Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam observed that research interests 'reveal something about who we are'.[113]The catalyst for this research was a *Tonglen* encounter I had with one of my houseplants. Normally, my houseplants thrive, but my *Adiantum* was dying. Not knowing how to help it, I directed *Tonglen* towards it. After doing *Tonglen*, I researched optimum conditions for *Adiantum capillus-veneris* and discovered two mistakes: overwatering; and wrong position. I moved it and allowed it to dry out. *Adiantum* started to recover. I cannot pretend to be an expert practitioner, but what I observed was that *Adiantum* recovered because *Tonglen* changed my attitude and behaviour. It changed the way I interacted with it. When my compassion was directed towards *Adiantum*, I felt a responsibility to eliminate its suffering, which prompted me to be more proactive in my care for it.

Figure 1 – My photograph of Adiantum capillus-veneris before and after Tonglen.

My Buddhist beliefs sparked my interest in how other *Tonglen* practitioners interact with the nonhuman world and what this might mean for larger scale environmental consciousness.

[113] Marilys Guillemin, and Lynn Gillam, 'Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10.2 (2004), 261–80 https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360 p. 14, [last accessed 24/04/25].

This paper considers Buddhist eco-attitudes, so my Buddhist background is a relevant consideration. I have been involved in Tibetan Buddhism since 1990, when I worked at Rigpa Buddhist Centre, London for several years. Buddhism has been the single most transformative influence on my life. *Tonglen* practice is an important practice for me. I have had many powerful experiences with *Tonglen*, such as an experience when I was training to be a counsellor in the 1990s. Our tutor lined up half the group down the middle of the room. They were blindfolds and we, the remaining half, were asked to stand silently in front of them. They were asked to tune into the energies of the person in front of them. A student called Ben[114] was standing next to me, in front of Gail.[115] They had recently had a big argument. As the blindfolded students silently tuned into the energy between them and their partner, I noticed Gail was crying. After a few minutes, the tutor asked our line to move along one. I was then in front of the still crying Gail. I did *Tonglen* for her. When we returned to class to discuss the exercise, Gail described feeling waves of anger from one person (Ben), which had made her cry. She said that the next person (me) seemed to pull all the pain out of her heart. Gail had no idea that I was standing in front of her doing *Tonglen*, yet she seemed to feel the *Tonglen*. That incident showed me that *Tonglen* can be a powerful practice. However, I must not assume this study's respondents find *Tonglen* as powerful and transformative as I have found it to be.

Hennink, Hutter and Bailey stress the importance of recognising the influence that the researcher's and participants' background, culture and characteristics might have on the research process.[116] Interaction between researcher and participant can affect things like rapport, and data interpretation, resulting sometime in a 'co-construction of reality'.[117] My background in Buddhism implies I have an *emic* or insider perspective.[118] This facilitate rapport, but could also disadvantage and bias the research process.[119]

[114] Ben is not his real name.
[115] Gail is not her real name.
[116] Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, Qualitative Research Methods, p.19.
[117] Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, Qualitative Research Methods, p.19.
[118] Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods,* p. 18.
[119] Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods,* p. 19.

Fiona Bowie, however, warns against being too distant and objective and recognises the value of connection between interviewer and interviewee.[120] Although my *emic* position might ease rapport, caution would be needed to avoid assuming shared values and beliefs. Using a semi-structured interview format, I hoped to minimise influence on the interview process. To reduce bias during the analysis process, I will seek to adopt Guillemin and Gillam's suggestion of taking two steps back when interpreting the data and asking two questions: what do I know? And how do I know it?[121]

I am an 'outsider' regarding the Council of All Beings. Although my participation in the online ritual would be short, my presence could still bias my responses.[122] Charlotte Aull Davies suggests researchers should reflect on the suitability of participation as a research method.[123] I will seek to objectively reflect on my participation in the ritual, focusing on the elements of relevance and suitability to this study.

Findings and Discussion

This section unpacks key insights gathered from this study. Firstly, it presents the survey findings, followed by an analysis of the interview data, concluding with a description and analysis of the Council of All Beings autoethnographic study.

Survey

Eighteen respondent completed surveys: eight female; nine male; one non-binary. Gender diversity was achieved but age was skewed towards older participants (thirteen

[120] Bowie, Fiona, 'Building Bridges, Dissolving Boundaries: Toward a Methodology for the Ethnographic Study of the Afterlife, Mediumship, and Spiritual Beings', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 81.3 (2013), 698–733, p. 711, [last accessed 24/04/25].
[121] Guillemin, Marilys, and Lynn Gillam, 'Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10.2 (2004), 261–80 https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360 p. 14, [last accessed 24/04/25].
[122] Charlotte Aull Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide To Researching Selves And Others*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 73.
[123] Charlotte Aull Davies, Reflexive Ethnography, p. 74.

were over fifty-one, and only one was aged twenty to thirty). While only fourteen identified as Buddhist, every participant aligned with a specific Buddhist path (the majority self-described as Vajrayāna, and others self-described as Zen, secular Zen, and Theravadan). It was unsurprising that not all described themselves as Buddhist, as many practitioners avoid attaching to specific labels because of Buddhist concepts like no-self.

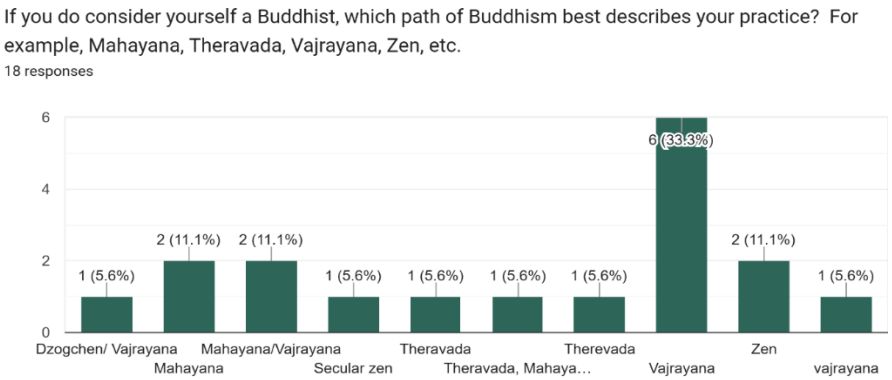

Figure 2 – Survey question five graphic.

All four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism were represented. Of those who answered 'Other', one described themselves as 'New Kadampa Tradition', one 'Kagyü/Nyingma' and identified as '*Rimé*' (meaning they follow teachings from all main schools of Buddhism).

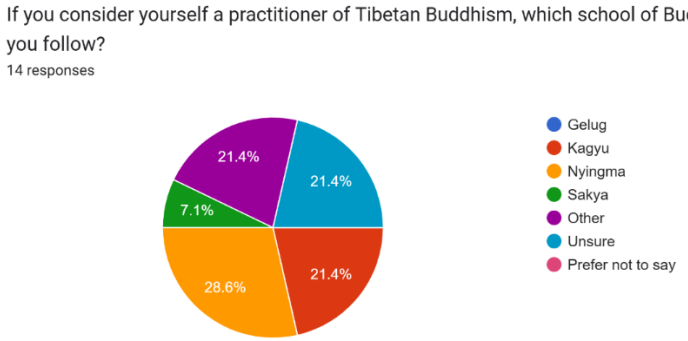

Figure 3 – Survey question six graphic.

Twelve respondents were experienced Buddhists who have been practicing for more than ten years, with a further two practicing for five to ten years. Three were relatively new to Buddhism, having practised for one to three years, with another practising three to five years.

Bell and Waters note the challenge of ensuring truly representative samples and advise it is more realistic to aim for a 'reasonably representative' sample of the target population.[124] The study aimed for a higher number of respondents. No external Buddhist centres replied to my emails, so it is not known whether the survey was cascaded through their *sangha*.[125] However, given the small number of survey respondents, diversity of Buddhist traditions was achieved.

Describing spiritual enlightenment, the Dalai Lama said, 'The key, and the root, is great compassion.'[126] Given this centrality of compassion to Buddhism, it was no surprise that seventeen respondents believe compassion is integral to their practice and fourteen practise compassion or loving kindness. The Karmapa advocates for a more compassionate attitude towards the living planet,[127] and Thich Nhat Hanh urges people to develop a *Bodhisattva* attitude to help all species thrive on Earth.[128] Yet only fourteen respondents agree that compassion is applicable to environmental challenges and only nine believe their personal Buddhist practice contributes something positive to the eco-crisis. Two respondents did not think their Buddhist practice could offer any solutions.

[124] Bell and Waters, *Doing Your Research Project*, 7th edition. (London: Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education, 2018). p.31.
[125] *Sangha* means community of Buddhist practitioners.
[126] His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Dzogchen: The Heart Essence Of The Great Perfection*, translated by Geshe Thupten Jinpa and Richard Barron (Chokyi Nyima), ed. by Patrick Gaffney, (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2000), p. 149.
[127] The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, *The Heart Is Noble, Changing The World From The Inside Out*, (Boulder: Shambhala, 2014), p. 163.
[128] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art Of Saving The Planet*, p.77.

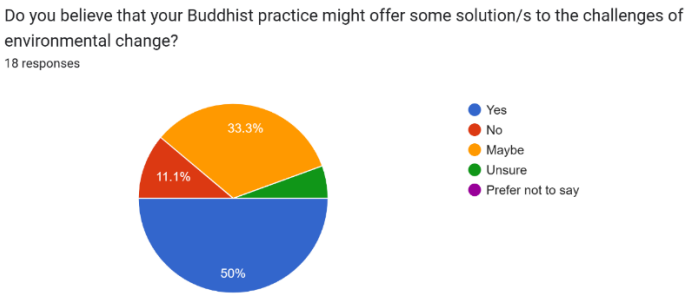

Figure 4 – Survey question seven graphic.

The apparent scepticism of some practitioners regarding the impact of compassion practice on the natural environment implies they are unconvinced by the perspective advocated by Buddhist teachers like the Karmapa. It also raises questions about how practitioners interpret interdependence and mutual causality in relation to the natural environment. These core concepts of Buddhism imply thoughts and actions have effects beyond the boundary of the ordinary Self. As the literature showed, concepts of compassion, Self and interdependence are interlinked. Bell and Waters suggest surveys, while useful for capturing what people believe, usually fail to explain **why** people hold those beliefs.[129] This survey simply showed that not all Buddhists are convinced their personal compassion practice adds any positive value to the eco-crisis. On reflection, it would have been useful to have included a comment box to better understand why they doubt the positive ecological impact of compassion. Hennink, Hutter and Bailey argue in-depth interviews provide opportunities to explore deeper meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences.[130] The interviews, therefore, provided an opportunity to explore their beliefs about the relationship between compassion and the eco-crisis in detail.

Interviews

Seven survey respondents agreed to interviews. After two emails to one unreachable participant, six interviews were scheduled, with one being cancelled on the day due to

[129] Bell and Waters, *Doing Your Research Project*, p.32.
[130]Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods,* p117.

family emergency. Of the five interviews conducted, three extended into a second Zoom session.

All participants were long-standing practitioners (three female, two male), four of whom I knew through Buddhism. While I sought to maintain an affable but objective stance during the interviews to avoid co-constructing realities,[131] as will be shown, there were times I missed opportunities to explore the deeper meanings interviewees held on certain topics, because I made the 'insider' mistake of assuming I understood the interviewee's meaning. All were aged over forty. Three followed the Nyingma path, two were Rime/non-denominational. It was unfortunate the Secular Buddhist had to cancel as this would have injected greater variety into the group, and possibly a completely different perspective. It was disappointing no Buddhist beginners elected to interview. Two interviewees suggested potential respondents might have been discouraged from participating for fear of being grilled on their in-depth knowledge of *Lojong* or *Tonglen*. To improve engagement in any future studies, it would be beneficial to reassure potential respondents about the parameters of the research, and actively welcome beginners to Buddhism.

The positive aspect of interviewing experienced practitioners was their confidence in talking about what the practice means to them and how they implement it in their lives. Participants discussed a range of topics in depth, however, the limitations of space for this study will not allow for a detailed discussion of all the rich layers of meaning that emerged. Instead, this section explores the interviews under six headings: 'Practice for Nature' about practitioners' practice in relation to the nonhuman world; 'Turning Towards' examines *Tonglen*'s potential to sit with the pain of climate catastrophe; 'Transformation' explores how compassion can transform attitudes towards challenging situations; 'Deep-time' discusses how practitioners' alternative perspective on the eco-crisis; and 'Interbeing' explores the relationship of

[131] Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods*, p.19.

interdependence and planetary emergency ; and, finally, '*Tonglen: An* eco-consciousness resource?' analyses *Tonglen's* usefulness as an ecological resource.

Practice for Nature

This study explores *Tonglen* as an antidote to the problems of the eco-crisis, so, the first thing to establish was whether practitioners already routinely engaged with Nature in their practice. I asked them, 'Have you ever included the nonhuman world in your *Tonglen* practice?'

A3 said it was natural to include the nonhuman world because 'when you do a *Tonglen* and say, "All sentient beings", you know that's the animals, the hell beings, everybody.' For A1, interdependence means the inclusion of the nonhuman is logical. A4 remembered practising *Tonglen* for animals affected by Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) during the 1990s.[132] He recalled,

> 'being on the train and seeing the smoke, like huge piles of animals being burned in the countryside. It really touched my heart. Compassion being the core of *Tonglen*, so that's the main thing I directed.'

A5 described being in a group that practised compassion 'to heal this huge oak tree in the courtyard at this retreat in the hills.' A1 highlighted the importance selecting a 'specific example, [so] it becomes very real', otherwise the *Tonglen* practice 'can seem amorphous'. A1's comments align with the Karmapa's instructions on eco-*Tonglen,* which asks practitioners to direct their *Tonglen* towards a particular place or being they

[132] Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy is a fatal disease for cattle. There was a major outbreak of the disease in the UK during the 1980s and 1990s which lead to millions of cattle being slaughtered to prevent the spread of the disease. *Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy* US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) | Mad cow disease | CDC , [last accessed 24/04/25].

know which is under threat.[133] He also advises including both the inanimate and animate in compassion practice.[134] This study suggests *Tonglen* practitioners do regularly include the nonhuman world in their practice, suggesting practitioners follow the guidance of Buddhist teachers in terms of including Nature in their practice.

Turning towards

Participants describe *Tonglen* as an 'introspective' (A1) practice they use for 'working with difficult people/situations' (A2). This section explores the aspect of turning towards pain, which was a significant theme in each interview.

Buddhist master, Sister Chan Khong recalled when Thich Nhat Hanh was asked how to save the planet, he replied that we must hear within us the sound of the Earth crying.[135] My fourth question was 'How do you feel, personally, about the changes that we are witnessing in the environment?' This question evoked profound emotional responses to Earth's cries. Four participants took a very long pause, sighed deeply and appeared emotionally moved. One participant cried. Despite the remote setting, a powerful sense of shared connection emerged. This was a deeply moving moment in each interview.

The power of any *Tonglen* practice hinges on the extent to which practitioners are able to recognize and sit with pain. Interviewees' candid expressions of grief, anger and fear in response to Question Four suggest an ability to identify the pain of the eco-crisis, without recoiling from it. A1 described feeling, 'rage' and 'complete hopelessness'. A2 felt 'overwhelmed' seeing the damage done to the Earth since she was a child. A3 felt 'hopeless', fearing 'it's gone too far.' A4 worried about the impact of war in Ukraine and the Middle East, wondering if nuclear bombs will be released. A5 spoke of eco-collapse

[133] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[134] The Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, *The Heart Is Noble: Changing The World From The Inside Out*, (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2013), p92.
[135] Sister Chan Khong, *Can You Hear Mother Earth – A Special Message From Sister Chan Khong*, Plum Village, 2016, https://plumvillage.org/articles/can-you-hear-mother-earth , [last accessed 24/04/25].

as ‘just very sad…just awful’. Dekila Chungyalpa warns that eco-*Tonglen* might evoke emotions like ‘grief, anger, vulnerability, sadness, fear’.[136] These were all feelings expressed by interviewees. Chungyalpa suggests such responses are evidence of compassion for Nature.[137]

As well as recognizing Nature’s suffering, participants were concerned about eco-activists. Both A1 and A2 expressed disbelief at the long sentences handed down to Just Stop Oil climate protestors in July 2024 for conspiracy to block the M25 motorway.[138] A1 said, ‘This whole thing about the sentences those protesters have just been handed […] I hope that those will be appealed successfully.’ A2 expressed both outrage and disbelief, saying, ‘When these protestors got jailed the other day for four and five years […]Sorry, but really what the f***!They really need to be freed!’ A2 lives at a retreat centre and described witnessing the burnout experienced by an anti-fracking protestor who had been living at a protestors’ camp for two years. She said,[139]

> ‘He was so burnt out. It makes me feel (looking emotional, raising her hand to her chest) it makes me want to weep. They’d won but at what cost? He was so raw, and it inspired me to create a programme for climate protesters to come and have a week to two weeks’ respite.’

This could be interpreted as a form of *Tonglen* with A2 taking on the raw burn-out of the protestor and transforming that exhaustion and pain into love by setting up the respite programme. Other interviewees were concerned about the emotions activists were

[136] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[137] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[138] The protestors were handed sentences of between four and five years for conspiring to block the M25 motorway – these are believed to be the longest sentences ever given for peaceful protest in England. The sentences had just been handed down to the protesters the week before our interviews. See, Damien Gayle, ‘*Five Just Stop Oil protestors receive record sentences for planning to block M25,* ‘The Guardian’ (18/07/2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/article/2024/jul/18/five-just-stop-oil-supporters-jailed-over-protest-that-blocked-m25> [accessed 30/04/2025].
[139] A2 lives at a remote rural retreat centre.

experiencing. A4 noticed protestors had to be 'direct and sometimes not very polite to crystalize the message'. Buddhists believe thoughts, speech and action create a karmic effect. Thich Nhat Hanh explains, 'When we produce a thought, it is energy, it is action, and it can change us and change the world, in a good way or in a bad way.'[140] Dzongzar Khyentse Rinpoche warned, activism tainted by anger is ineffective because of the inability to generate compassion when caught up in dualistic beliefs about the rights and wrongs of a situation.[141] Interviewees' comments reflected these perspectives as they seemed concerned protestors may be accumulating karma for themselves through the 'confrontational' and 'aggressive' emotions they were experiencing.

While acknowledging the suffering caused by the eco-crisis, this study showed interviewees did not fear witnessing pain in themselves and others. Aligning with Dekila Chungyalpa's guidance to observe suffering 'from a short distance without letting it wash you away',[142] they were able to articulate painful feelings without being consumed by them and expressed the belief that *Tonglen* helps them withstand suffering. A5 finds suffering makes her feel stronger, with her 'strength [coming] from that compassion and meditation.' A2 said, 'I don't feel hopeless. I don't feel as though I've not nothing.' She continued, 'There might be death and destruction going on around, but I can go inside, and I can make a change in my own mind.' This echoes Thich Nhat Hanh's advice to turn the mind inwards to deal with difficult emotions.[143] Similarly, A3 observed a 'paradoxical' effect: the 'risk' of embracing suffering made him feel 'more resilient'. This study suggests practitioners believe *Tonglen* protects them from feeling overwhelmed by suffering. Their responses are not surprising because, as A1 explained, feeling without resources 'isn't actually the Buddhist doctrine.'

[140] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art Of Saving The Planet*, p. 40.
[141] Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, *What Makes You Not A Buddhist*, (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2007), p. 113.
[142] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[143] Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 48.

Macy and Johnstone describe awareness of climate change as the 'Great Unraveling' - a deeply disturbing acknowledgment of environmental threats which could mean extinction for human beings .[144] Climate anxiety is widespread and impacts people's wellbeing. Niedzwiedz and Katikireddi found that 42.8% of Europeans reported feeling worried about climate change.[145] Tavolacci and Ladner's found that eco-anxiety is linked to negative mental health impacts among university students in France.[146] However, this study suggests *Tonglen* practitioners may experience a different outcome. While acknowledging profound concerns about planetary emergency, participants revealed the act of focusing on suffering, rather than avoiding it, provided them a degree of emotional protection. As A2 emphatically stated, 'I can do something, I can do *Tonglen*.' A4 noted 'the turning towards [is] really an important aspect of *Tonglen*'. Shantideva described the value of negative conditions for spiritual practitioners,

> 'For I am like a blind man who has found
> A precious gem inside a heap of dust.
> For so it is, by some strange chance,
> That *Bodhichitta* has been born in me.'[147]

Out of the dust, opportunities for arousing *Bodhichitta* emerge. As Pema Chödrön explains, 'No matter what arises, we can always find the soft spot of the bodhi heart.'[148]

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[144] Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How To Face The Mess We're In With Unexpected Resilience And Creative Power*, (Novato, California: New World Library, 2022), p.16.
[145] C. Niedzwiedz, and S V Katikireddi, 'Determinants of Eco-Anxiety: Cross-National Study of 52,219 Participants from 25 European Countries', *European Journal of Public Health*, 33.Supplement_2 (2023) https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckad160.069 [last accessed 24/04/25].
[146] Tavolacci, M, and J Ladner, 'Eco-Anxiety: An Additional Burden for University Students?', *European Journal of Public Health*, 34.Supplement_3 (2024) https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckae144.1352 [last accessed 24/04/25].
[147] Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, p. 51.
[148] Pema Chödrön, *No Time to Lose, A Timely Guide to The Way of the Bodhisattva*, ed Helen Berliner, (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala , 2005), p.71.

Thich Nhat Hanh said, 'if there's no suffering, there can be no…compassion.' This is, perhaps, one of the reasons that interviewees do not recoil from the ecological suffering they perceived. Thich Nhat Hanh explains, '*Bodhisattva*s are not people who don't have difficulties. Difficult moments may come, but *Bodhisattva*s are not afraid because they know how to handle them.'[149] The participants in these interviews all demonstrated the kind of confidence that Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of - confidence that *Tonglen* provides them with the spiritual tools to handle difficult situations.

Fear of acknowledging environmental collapse plays out as 'climate denial'. Macy and Johnstone describe this attitude as "Business as Usual", which they say hastens environmental collapse.[150] Climate psychotherapist, Caroline Hickman suggests that, by ignoring decades of warnings to adapt our behaviour, we have arrived at a position which is 'simultaneously powerfully causative and powerlessly helpless'.[151] She argues acknowledging responsibility for the climate emergency can result in complex feelings of overwhelming guilt.[152] Paul Gilbert *et al* noted that courage is required to face one's negative emotions.[153] To admit there is an environmental problem is to admit to a degree of personal responsibility. Gilbert argued people can lack the courage to express compassion because self-protective habits take precedence.[154] This study showed *Tonglen* practitioners do not hide behind self-protective emotions. Rather, they demonstrate an openness to exploring their own and others' suffering.

Interviewees showed *Tonglen* helps them face difficult eco-emotions. None of them denied the climate emergency, or their anger and fear about the situation. Neither did they feel overwhelmed. *Tonglen* gave them confidence to face the eco-crisis. Macy and

[149] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, p.74.
[150] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 22.
[151] Caroline Hickman, 'We Need to (Find a Way to) Talk about … Eco-Anxiety', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34.4 (2020), 411–24 https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2020.1844166 p. 414. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[152] Hickman, 'We Need to (Find a Way to) Talk about … Eco-Anxiety', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34.4 (2020), 411–24 https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2020.1844166 p. 414. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[153] Paul Gilbert, 'The Evolution and Social Dynamics of Compassion', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 9.6 (2015), 239–54 https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12176, p. 241. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[154] Gilbert, Paul, 'The Evolution and Social Dynamics of Compassion', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 9.6 (2015), 239–54 https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12176, p. 241. [last accessed 24/04/25].

Johnstone said 'bringing our fears into the open is a necessary step toward exploring how to respond to them.'[155] Thich Nhat Hanh warned that, 'Only by waking up to [the eco-crisis] … will we have the insight and energy we need to change our way of life'.[156] This study showed *Tonglen* empowers practitioners with a sense of agency, along with hope and confidence in the spiritual resources *Tonglen* offers them. Perhaps *Tonglen*'s very courageous relationship with suffering can help climate activists find the wisdom and the motivation they need to make positive change possible. As Thich Nhat Hanh said, ' if you can be at peace in the face of the reality [of climate change], then we have a chance.'[157]

Transformation

Padmasiri De Silva suggested humanity needs to transform its exploitative attitude towards Nature.[158] This was a sentiment echoed by Thich Nhat Hanh.[159] Sogyal Rinpoche described *Tonglen* as one of the most transformative compassion practices, saying 'when your heart is blocked, it destroys those forces that are obstructing it.'[160] This transformational aspect of *Tonglen* was highlighted by interviewees in this study.

A2 described *Tonglen* as 'a resource to use [her] own capacities to transform.' She said, 'It can change my mind. It can widen my outlook. It widens my capacity.' By broadening her perspective, A2 implies *Tonglen* allows her to understand situations from more than just her own narrow perspective. A3 noticed *Tonglen* transforms his view of Self,

> 'Most of the time I'm walking around supporting and protecting this (says his name) who's just (his name) because somebody gave him that name a very long time ago (laughing), so it's very transformative when, even for a few milliseconds, you've got the possibility of letting go of that.'

[155] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope,* p. 18.
[156] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 47.
[157] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 48.
[158] pp. 14-19.
[159] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 48.
[160] Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, p. 193.

Through *Tonglen*, A3 was able to challenge his existing ontological assumptions about the nature of Self and identity. Arne Naess encouraged people to expand their sense of Self, in order to experience a deeper connection with Nature.[161] For Naess, this broader sense of Self is not a self-annihilating. This was echoed by A3 who believed he retained his sense of agency, explaining, 'You [still] have the power to change everything.' Pema Chödrön emphasized the effort it takes to transform through the practice of *Bodhichitta*.[162] This was echoed by A4 who cautioned against viewing *Tonglen* as a quick fix, 'It's extremely powerful [but] not something to be used like paracetamol - you just pop one in and suddenly expect for it to work by itself – one needs to apply oneself.' As Mah, Loke and Hespanhol discovered, *Tonglen*'s transformative power only manifests through consistent practice and self-examination over time.[163]

Thich Nhat Hanh, who said, 'The practice is to deal with our fear and grief *right now;* our insight and awakening will give rise to compassion and peace'.[164] This study suggests that through a process of mindful engagement, practitioners cultivate awareness, which transmutes fear into compassion. Climate psychologist, Catherine Hickman proposes reframing young people's eco-anxiety as a manifestation of their compassion and caring, to move therapeutic conversations away from fear and towards themes of connection and relationship.[165] This approach demonstrates the potential that the concept of compassion has to transform negative emotions into something positive, offering potential mental health benefits for young people struggling with eco-anxiety. Chungyalpa also uses the transformative qualities of compassion and *Tonglen* to guide practitioners beyond the overwhelm of eco-pain, encouraging, instead, a more resourceful frame of mind. Following the Karmapa's instructions for eco-*Tonglen*,

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[161] Arne Naess, '*Self* Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World' *in Thinking like a Mountain – Towards a Council of All Beings*, John Seed and others, (Gabriola Island, Canada : New Catalyst Books, 2007), p. 27.
[162] Pema Chödrön, *No Time to Lose, A Timely Guide to The Way of the Bodhisattva*, ed Helen Berliner, (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala , 2005), p.12.
[163] Mah, Kristina, Lian Loke and Luke Hespanhol. "Towards a Contemplative Research Framework for Training Self-Observation in HCI: A Study of Compassion Cultivation." *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction (TOCHI)* 28 (2021): 1 - 27. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[164] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 44.
[165] Hickman, 'We Need to (Find a Way to) Talk about … Eco-Anxiety', *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34.4 (2020), 411–24 https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2020.1844166 p. 416. [last accessed 24/04/25].

Chungyalpa guides practitioners to "note what it feels like to transform your eco-anxiety into the motivation to heal others and set the intention to return to this practice whenever you feel depleted.'[166] This study found *Tonglen* practice has had a positive impact on the mental health of the interviewees because they feel empowered by the options of changing their perspective on negative situations – it allows them choice in how to respond to challenges. As A2 said, 'I appreciate having the practice of *Tonglen* because it is a transformative practice.'

Deep-time

This paper has already noted interviewees experience a sense of agency in addressing the suffering of the eco-crisis. A5's observation that 'Ultimately, everything's empty' may explain this perspective. At the risk of making assumptions about a remark I did not clarify with A5, I would suggest she is alluding to the Buddhist concept of Two Truths.[167] Explaining Two Truths in relation to Nature, Thich Nhat Hanh said on the level of Relative Truth 'we differentiate mind from matter[...] humans from other species.'[168] However, he clarified that 'on the level of ultimate truth, such differentiation is not possible. The ultimate truth transcends the ideas of separate selves, separate species[....] there is only continuation.'[169]

Although both Truths perceive phenomena in different ways, they are not mutually exclusive - one is not superior to the other.[170] Both Truths explain the nature of reality. Participants used the concept of Two Truths to describe the eco-situation from both micro-personal and macro-impersonal perspectives. A3 described himself situated within an interdependent spatial and temporal continuum, 'I'm sitting here now, but there were people doing things a hundred thousand years ago, and if they had not been doing that, I would not be sitting here now' As he observed, 'the whole of everything

[166] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[167] Absolute and Relative Truth is also sometimes referred to as Ultimate and Conventional Truth.
[168] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 44.
[169] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 44.
[170] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 44.

comes together at a single point.' Similarly, A2 viewed the situation from a broad temporal perspective, saying, 'I just have these sixty odd years on the Earth, but the Earth is billions of years old.' She believes that 'What we're doing now is just a very small part of what's happened to the Earth in its evolutionary history, and also the evolution of who we are as human beings.' This deep-time perspective offered her confidence because she believes 'our consciousness evolves over thousands of years, and I do see that what we're doing now, there could be roots of "the new" being born right now. I do have a sense of being part of an evolutionary cycle.' A2 perceives the human story as a short chapter in the context of Earth's vast, ongoing evolutionary history, a cycle of events flowing from the past to the present and into the future. The interviewees' recognition of 'continuation' across time and space seemed to offer them a sense of comfort and confidence that, ultimately, everything will be fine, echoing Thich Nhat Hanh who explained,

> 'We can see that the Earth can renew herself, can transform herself, can heal herself – and can heal us. That is fact. We have to think of time geologically. A hundred years is nothing. In the present moment, if we go deep, we can embrace the whole of eternity.'[171]

Macy and Johnstone believe that such long-term thinking is needed in order to avoid ecological collapse.[172] To continue with the 'Business as Usual' attitude, which means acting as though nothing is wrong, they warn, 'The beautiful world we were entrusted to protect will have been all used up.'[173] This study suggests that the broad temporal perspectives that the *Tonglen* practitioners in this study demonstrated is not only useful for reducing climate anxiety and stress: it also has the potential to generate a more responsible attitude towards the natural world and reduce the environmental debt we are leaving future generations.

[171] Thich Nhat Hanh, *Art of Saving the Planet*, p. 47.
[172] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 143.
[173] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, (Novato, California: New World Library, 2022), p. 143.

Interbeing

Buddhists do not believe in the separation of Self and other. Thich Nhat Hanh said,

> 'Nothing can exist by itself alone. It has to depend on every other thing. That is called inter-being. To be means to inter-be. The paper inter-is with the sunshine and with the forest.'[174]

This theme of interbeing with Nature threaded through all the interviews. A2 said, 'We're part of it' and A4 said, 'nothing is separate.' Roshi Joan Halifax's observed that nothing lives in isolation, because all things, animate and inanimate, share an entwined 'beingness'.[175] This entwined beingness was reflected in A5's vivid retelling of her experience of practising compassion practice for an old oak tree,

> 'Everything's made of energy[....] when I brought this energy up to the Ajna Chakra - the third eye - it was like someone had put the sun in my head, my whole head lit up.'

A5 inter-was with the tree and the light and the sun. Halifax suggests that encountering the 'numinous force or energy that animates the world', in the way A5 describes, can inspire the manifestation of the ecological Self.[176] She argues the ecological Self protects Nature through encouraging 'a human commitment to a responsible relationship with our co-species and the environment that supports all life.'[177] Echoing Halifax's observations, A5 believed compassion made her realize, 'very deeply how everything's connected. Little parts of the whole, aren't we? We can have a negative or a positive Influence on everything around.' A3 also recognised the impact that even small actions can have on the bigger picture,

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[174] Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear, Comforting Wisdom for Life,* (London: Rider, 2002), p. 47.
[175] Joan Halifax, 'The Third Body: Buddhism, Shamanism & Deep Ecology' in *Dharma Gaia – A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, Ed. By Allan Hunter Badiner, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1990) p. 23.
[176] Halifax, 'The Third Body' in *Dharma Gaia*, Ed. By Badiner, pp. 24-26.
[177] Halifax, 'The Third Body, in *Dharma Gaia*, Ed. By Badiner, p.34.

> ‘All change depends on billions of small things. It all counts. Although things seem huge and leads you a little bit to thinking it’s hopeless but[…] this happened because of billions of small things that happened over a long period of time. So, billions of other small things can make a difference. Why not be one of those?’

The interviewees’ sense of interbeing with Nature seemed to encourage the responsible ecological Self that Halifax described. A5 spoke of ‘making your own compost or recycling things, trying not to consume too much’. A2 spoke of trying ‘to live plastic-free’. A3 avoids flying wherever possible. These findings mirror Ericson, Kjønstad and Barstad’s findings that mindfulness encourages pro-environmental attitudes.[178] Matthieu Ricard argued that realization of interdependence is essential for effective action on climate.[179] While all the participants described the small pro-environmental actions they were taking, A1 suggested interdependence could be harnessed for global environmental healing. She called for, ‘worldwide calls for prayers for the environment…like a global network….when you do that kind of thing, you definitely feel that connection’. Arne Naess believed in the transformational power of understanding the deep and broad connections of life, suggesting that when ‘reality is experienced by the ecological Self, our behaviour *naturally* and beautifully follows norms of strict environmental ethics.’[180] This leads to the insight that we thrive when Nature thrives and suffer when Nature suffers.[181] This study showed that Interbeing awakened by *Tonglen* develops the ecological Self, and prompted practitioners to engage in environmentally sustainable behaviours. As Naess, Halifax and Ricard suggest, their belief in interdependence fosters a sense of responsibility towards Nature.

[178] T. Ericson, Kjønstad, B.G. And Barstad, A., ‘Mindfulness and sustainability’, *Ecological Economics,* **104**, (2014), pp. 73-79. [last accessed 24/04/25].
[179] Matthieu Ricard, *Altruism – The Science and Psychology of Kindness*, Translated by Charlotte Mandell and Sam Gordon, (London: Atlantic Books, 2018,) p. 679p. 682.
[180] Arne Naess, ‘*Self* Realization’ *in Thinking like a Mountain*, p. 29.
[181] Naess, ‘*Self* Realization, *in Thinking like a Mountain*, p. 29.

Tonglen: am eco-consciousness resource?

Despite their belief in a deep interconnection with Nature, the interviewees doubted *Tonglen*'s viability as a mainstream eco-practice. Comparing *Tonglen* with mindfulness, several practitioners stated *Tonglen* does not work as a standalone practice as mindfulness does. A3 explained,

> 'It is very easy to tell people watch your breathing and your mind will calm down [...] that's a simple hook. If you try to make *Tonglen* a simple hook, you're very quickly going to fail.'

A3 believes *Tonglen* is much more complex than mindfulness. A4 cautioned, '*Tonglen* is a very distinct practice which requires a particular kind of background in order for it to fully manifest its meaning and reach – it's very important to be aware of that.' A1 agreed, saying, *Tonglen* 'doesn't stand alone in the same way that mindfulness does because it **has** to be coupled with teachings on *Bodhichitta*...otherwise it can't get over that first hurdle.' A3 clarified the difference between mindfulness and *Tonglen*,

> 'Look at 'Seven Points of Training the Mind', the practice is half Relative *Bodhichitta* and half Absolute *Bodhichitta*... if you're going to talk about *Tonglen* without having that kind of mindset, it's not really *Tonglen*.'

In other words, *Tonglen* is only accessible to those who already have an understanding of Two Truths and *Bodhichitta*. Interviewees cited examples of beginners' reactions to *Tonglen*. A1 noticed even beginners interested in Buddhism were concerned about the practice because 'their first thought is, "Is breathing in all this negative energy is going to harm me?"' Reinforcing this point, A3 explained, 'when you tell them, you take the suffering yourself and you offer your happiness to [others], for some people that's outrageous. Like, "Is this some kind of sadomasochism?"' A5 concurred and recounted a story about a student in one of her classes who became angry when a guest teacher (a monk) spoke about compassion and the concept of emptiness. A1 stressed the

importance of studying *Tonglen* with an established Buddhist teacher, explaining, 'the difference between learning directly from a master to learning from a book is that they tell you all the practical things that bring it to life.' This includes not just the concepts of Two Truths or *Bodhichitta* but also the nuances of the practice, such as, how to direct the practice, by connecting with something they have experienced, before widening the practice. These are the same instructions given by the Karmapa and Chungyalpa for their eco-*Tonglen* practice.

Despite reservations about the viability of *Tonglen* as a mainstream eco-practice, it is worth noting interviewees valued the notion of eco-spirituality. A2 believes human connection with the nonhuman world is grounded in spiritual connection and we can 'touch on spirituality just by going into a forest .... just by walking on the beach' because 'it's our spirit [that] connects us to the earth.' For A2, connection with nature 'is not some esoteric thing that you have to go into a church for – it's just how you connect with the earth'. She said, 'for children to develop a love of nature is so important because they might go through a stage in their life while they're busy in the city, but they still have that inside them that they'll come back to.' A5 also believed it is important that society nurtures children's connection with Nature because of its mental health benefits. Both A2 and A5 are teachers so perhaps it is not surprising that they value the importance of spiritual education. None of the interviewees believed Buddhism was the only way to heal Nature. For example, A3 felt eco-spirituality 'doesn't have to have the Buddhist label' because understanding interdependence 'is not specifically Buddhist - Buddha pointed to but it's not specifically Buddhist.'

While mindfulness was seen as an accessible entry point to Buddhist practice, interviewees felt *Tonglen*, because it requires the scaffolding of *Lojong* and *Bodhichitta*, is not effective as a standalone practice for beginners or people unfamiliar with Buddhist concepts. A3 noted, notions of no-self and interbeing can be challenging for those can perceive only Relative Truth. Despite this, a shared belief emerged regarding the vital importance of developing a spiritual relationship with Mother Earth for the

healing of both human and nonhuman life, a connection they felt should respect an individual's existing spiritual frameworks.

Final considerations – Interviews

Practitioners spoke of engaging with the nonhuman world in *Tonglen* practice, showing they do not limit compassion to humanity only. They tend not to direct compassion to the whole of Nature. Rather, they follow the advice of Buddhist teachers and directed *Tonglen* towards a single being or particular aspect of landscape. A1 for example, directed her *Tonglen* towards a polluted beach she knows well. In this, their compassion practice aligns with the guidance given by the Karmapa and Chungyalpa.[182] They were also able to face suffering without being overwhelmed, leaning into Chungyalpa's advice to leave a little space between oneself and the suffering one is observing.[183] This is beneficial in terms of the eco-crisis as the inability to face the suffering of eco-collapse can result in denial and/or eco-emotions like eco-anxiety.[184]

The study revealed another benefit of *Tonglen* is its deep-time perspective, which enabled practitioners to experience more optimism about the future, like A2 who believed positive change was possible because difficult situations had evolved for the better in the past. Viewing life in planet time and recognizing they are links in a chain of life, practitioners were less attached to a solid sense of Self, which contributed to a sense of connection with Nature. Arne Naess and Joanna Macy argue this perspective is necessary for healing the planet as it encourages a more responsible attitude to Nature. This was demonstrated in the interviews as all practitioners mentioned taking individual pro-environmental actions, such as recycling.

[182] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[183] Dekila Chungyalpa, Center for Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison, *Guided Practice: Tonglen for Eco-anxiety*, <https://centerhealthyminds.org/join-the-movement/healthy-minds-in-practice-*Tonglen*-for-eco-anxiety >, [accessed 24/04/2025].
[184] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 63.

Despite *Tonglen* encouraging pro-environmental behaviours and attitudes, none of the participants felt that it was a suitable as a mainstream ecological activity. Their reservations stemmed from the fact *Tonglen* cannot stand alone as a practice like mindfulness, because it can only be appreciated within the framework of the Two Truths. Although they did not favour rolling out *Tonglen* to mainstream audiences, they all expressed a belief in the importance of cultivating spiritual relationship with Nature from within whatever spiritual tradition best suits the individual person.

Autoethnography

Joanna Macy said her work is grounded in *Bodhichitta* practice.[185] This study aimed to examine how the practices of Council of All Beings rituals reflect specific aspects of *Tonglen* practice. This section describes my participant observations of an online Council of All Beings ritual held on 28th January 2024, 6.00p.m. to 9.00p.m. It is followed a discussion of my autoethnographic findings of this event.

The Council of All Beings was created by Joanna Macy and John Seed as a means of encouraging individuals to develop a sense of their ecological self. The rituals can be delivered as standalone activities, such as the one described here, or as part of Macy's extended Work That Reconnects activities. Both the Council of All Beings and the Work That Reconnects follow a four-stage format: offering gratitude; honouring our pain for the planet; seeing with new eyes; going forth. These Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods,* (London: Sage, 2020), observations are taken from the notes I made in my journal straight after the ritual had concluded. Due to the limitations of this paper, the account of my preparation for this ritual could not be included here. However, a complete account of my experience in can be found in Appendix Three. I attended as a Sand Lizard. The names and locations of the other

[185] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope,* p.232.

beings in the ritual have been changed (apart from Sky, our facilitator) to protect the identities of those taking part.

Figure 5 – Sand Lizard mask for Council of All Beings.

The ritual

Signing into the Zoom link, I felt self-consciousness about my very basic, homemade mask and apprehensive about how much of a sand lizard I would be expected to be. It was relief to see there were only eight participants. Six of us were adorned in something representing our chosen being. There were painted faces, decorated headscarves and a glove puppet. My mind tried to work out what beings they were from their adornments. Sky, our facilitator, asked us to change our Zoom names to our chosen being and Blackbird, River, Sand Lizard, Sky, Beetle, Mountain, Shell Fungus and Dragonfish all appeared on the screen. That was a nice touch. The atmosphere had changed – it no longer felt like a slightly weird training workshop with participants wearing odd head gear. With the new names, it had subtly become something a lot less material.

Sky opened the evening with a moment of meditative land acknowledgement and gratitude to the ancestors. She asked us to mentally acknowledge the land and

ancestors of wherever we were individually based (America, Brazil, Greece, Poland and United Kingdom). American, she acknowledged the land of her local Native tribe, the Nisenan People, offering them gratitude for sharing the land with her people. The watcher in me wondered what it feels like to know that one lives on land taken from others, to be permanently apologetic. Could you ever feel at home living on borrowed/stolen land? Sky's acknowledgment continued and pulled my attention once more. She thanked all the other beings in the landscape, now, in recent history, and from before the time of humans. It was a surprisingly moving start to the ritual. These opening prayers reminded me that the story of the European settlers to America is just one small chapter in the volumes and volumes of Turtle Island's story and, indeed, of Earth's story. My mind visualized Sky's land before the settlers arrived from Europe, then back before any humans roamed the landscape. I felt a longing to linger in this vision of deep time, this nonhuman world, but Sky moved us on.

As I listened to Sky and others introducing themselves, I felt like a novice. They all spoke so freely about who they were. Even though we were doing the ritual remotely, they seemed to completely embody their beings. Sky was spacious, abundant and ever-changing - Mountain was old and solid and lived in slow time - Blackbird was light and musical, small head movements suggesting a graceful dance from land to tree to sky. Waiting for my turn to speak, my mind was very much in human form, wishing I had done more research and made a better mask. Selfishly, it was a relief when River seemed as self-conscious as I felt – awkward and dammed, not a gentle flowing river at all. Dragonfish did not seem comfortable either and preferred to move his glove puppet in front of the camera instead of talking. I was not the only novice in this ritual.

My turn to introduce myself. Once talking, my nervousness subsided. Taking my lead from Blackbird, I tried to mimic Lizard's little head movements as I spoke. Although I did not know much about our local Fylde Sand Lizard, I had spent happy hours in the hot Italian sun at my parents' house watching lizards skittering on the rocks. Lizard was moving into my being. Finally, I was joining the Assembly, instead of simply observing it.

Beings were each welcomed to the gathering. It was a beautiful feeling to hear all the beings say, 'Welcome Sand Lizard'. A feeling of being accepted and protected, but also a feeling of being part of some eternal bond between all beings of the Earth, like something out of the film, 'Avatar'.[186]

Sky moved us gracefully into the next section, inviting us to make the case on behalf of our being. Each speaker was then witnessed and acknowledged by Council. It was not anger that arose as I listened to Sky's concerns about pollution or Blackbird's fears of losing her nesting habitats or Dragonfish's worries about rising sea temperatures. Sadness was the feeling. All these entities were suffering because of human activity. It was so unfair because they all had a right to live in peace. They all sought survival. It was hard listening to the pain, but it felt like we, the Council, had a duty to listen, to witness their struggles.

When it was my turn to speak, I was surprised at the emotion I felt being Sand Lizard, talking about living in glass boxes while our 'saviours' developed a breeding programme to save us from extinction. Then the joy of being free but the dangers posed by other humans, with disposable BBQs left in the dunes. The fact we are now penned in on a small strip of duneland because of huge new concrete shore protections against rising sea levels. As my being, I was confused. One group of humans are trying to save my Sand Lizard family, while the other half dumps tonnes of concrete onto our beautiful wild dunes. We Sand Lizards may be small, but we cherish our lives just as humans do, and while our numbers are up again, the question is - for how long? The words I spoke were not planned; they just flowed. I noticed that Sky and Blackbird were crying. I was emotional too. A deep well of quiet despair.

[186] James Cameron (dir.), *Avatar*, [Film], (London: 20th Century Fox, Dune Entertainment, Ingenious Film Partners, Lightstorm Entertainment, 2009).

This section was the hardest part of the ritual – both as speaker and as listener.

Sky moved us on to the healing section, where Council spoke about the changes needed. By this part of the ritual, my immersion in Sand Lizard felt complete. No longer watching the humans behind the adornments, I was listening to the beings speak. It was powerful listening to each of us addressing the Assembly. Each had great wisdom to impart. There was togetherness. Unity to save the planet. Maybe it was because all of life seemed present – beings associated with the depths of the oceans, the woodlands that adorn the earth, and the air above us. All of life was here and we depend on each other for our survival. It felt real and important. Essential, even. We were performing an ancient ritual, one that we had been doing since the dawn of time.

Closing the ritual, Sky invited us to step back into human form. I did not want to let go of Sand Lizard. It felt like a hard shift to see the humans behind the adornments again, but I felt warm gratitude to each of them. I knew nothing about any of them, not even their names, but we were a Council, unified in our desire to save our Mothe Earth. I felt a lot of love for my little lizard. After a final contribution about action we planned to take, and a final gratitude meditation from Sky, in just three short hours, it was over. I was back in my room, instead of the virtual Round Table of the Council.

Discussion of my Council experience

This section examines my Council experience under five headings used to discuss the interviews: Practice for Nature; Turning towards; Transformation; Deep-time; Interbeing.

Practice for Nature

In *Tonglen*, any object can be the focus of compassion and practitioners regularly direct compassion towards the nonhuman world, aligning with the Karmapa's advice to

consider both animate and inanimate beings as the object of *Tonglen*. In Council of All Beings rituals the focus of compassion is primarily the nonhuman world. John Seed argued that, while participants select a single being/entity from the natural world, their defence of that being is symbolic and representative of the whole of that species or landscape.[187] During the Council, my compassion was primarily directed towards Sand Lizard. While I felt empathic resonance with the challenges faced by beings such as Blackbird and Beetle, my compassion remained focused on Sand Lizard. This focused intention aligned with the eco-*Tonglen* methodology outlined by Chungyalpa, and echoed by A1, which suggests that specifically directing *Tonglen* towards a particular entity enhances the transformative potential of the practice. Believing my Council ritual for Sand Lizard to be an advocacy of all lizard species would have diluted the impact of the ritual for me personally. The reason I connected with Sand Lizard was because I was able to clearly visualise Sand Lizard's appearance, movements and sounds, enabling me to inhabit the body and mind of the little creature. The narrow focus expanded my sense of connection. Even now, months after the event, I am not moved to protect all lizards everywhere in the world – the focus of my activism is still the little lizard of our local dunes.

My Council experience was similar to the eco-*Tonglen* practice described by the interviewees, in that my compassion was directed towards a specific being in the nonhuman world. I generated a deep sense of connection with Sand Lizard, in the same way A4 bonded with the farm animals of the BSE crisis. A1 said directing compassion towards a single focus makes *Tonglen* seem more real. This was my experience with Sand Lizard.

Turning towards

John Seed wrote, 'Deep ecology remains a concept without power to transform our awareness unless we allow ourselves to feel.'[188] Feeling the pain, then, is the first step

[187] Seed, Macy, Fleming and Naess, *Thinking Like A Mountain*, p. 15- 16.
[188] Seed, Macy, Fleming and Naess, *Thinking Like A Mountain,* p. 14.

towards transforming that pain into healing. This principle informs the initial stages of the ritual, where beings voice their suffering, which is formally witnessed and acknowledged by the other Council members. This open discussion of pain contrasts with *Tonglen*, which practitioners in this study described as an 'inner conversation', frequently performed without recipients' awareness. *Tonglen* remains a 'discreet' practice, unlike the Council rituals where witnessing and acknowledging is essential for the transformational process.

While I deeply empathized with the suffering expressed by the beings, subsequent reflection revealed a layer of guilt stemming from my human family's role in their pain. This study has shown *Tonglen* practitioners recognise the universal and inevitable nature of suffering. In contrast, my experience of Council was less expansive, and focused on aspects of avoidable human negligence. I responded like an activist. Gilbert *et al* found compassion requires a degree of courage because it is often compromised by self-preservation emotions.[189] I found the suffering of beings in the ritual quite overwhelming at times. Although I was moved to reduce the suffering of other, I wonder whether this was driven, in part, by a desire to shed the uncomfortable burden of vicarious guilt, so, perhaps, the ritual triggered empathy more than compassion. *Tonglen* practitioners avoided feeling overwhelmed by suffering, but my Council experience evoked momentary feelings of powerlessness when contemplating the monumental scale of planetary healing required to undo global ecological damage. This could have been because all of life was represented at that Council, so, the sheer scope of global restoration required felt profoundly daunting.

This study has shown practitioners see *Tonglen* as an 'inner conversation' that discreetly addresses suffering. Council rituals differed because they address suffering more openly. While both *Tonglen* and Council rituals turn towards pain, the way they do

[189] Paul Gilbert, Jaskaran Basran, Michael MacArthur, and James N Kirby, 'Differences in the Semantics of Prosocial Words: An Exploration of Compassion and Kindness', *Mindfulness*, 10.11 (2019), 2259–71 https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-019-01191-x p. 2266. [last accessed 24/04/25].

so is different, which, for me, resulted in quite different responses to the suffering witnessed.

Transformation

Seed and Macy believe Council rituals are opportunities for individuals to 'express their awareness of the ecological trouble we are in and deepen their motivation to act.[190] A significant difference between *Tonglen* and Council rituals lies in the latter's motivation for outward environmental action. While Council participants, including myself, spoke of outward action they will take to protect their chosen being, *Tonglen* practitioners in this study did not express a similar enthusiasm for traditional activism. Although they admired the work of the 'amazing people' (A4) dedicated to wider planetary protection, *Tonglen* practitioners' environmental engagement was largely at the individual level.

They did support broader Buddhist community action on environmental issues. A1 imagined 'a day of *Tonglen* for the environment' with practitioners across the globe 'like a sort of global shield[....] a net, with at each point, each cross of the net, a person doing [*Tonglen*]'. The group action they envisaged would take place internally within the confines of the *sangha,* unlike the more outward-looking action planned by Council participants.

Deep-time

One of the unexpected moments of the ritual was the opening land acknowledgements. Sky's guided meditation quickly took my mind beyond my inner conversation about human disputes about land ownership into deep time, a time before land boundaries. I enjoyed visualizing the sights and sounds of a land before humans walked the earth and found it very moving. Arne Naess suggested our joy arises out of 'the consciousness of our intimate relation to something bigger than ego'.[191] During the land acknowledgements, I felt my current human form dissolve into Life itself, in all places

[190] Seed, Macy, Fleming and Naess, *Thinking Like A Mountain,* p. 97.
[191] Arne Naess, '*Self* Realization' *in Thinking like a Mountain*, p. 29.

at all times. It was a joyful experience. I felt deeply connected with ancestors, both human and nonhuman. The act of convening across species felt weirdly familiar. My rational brain attributes this to the influence of films like 'Avatar'[192] but my experience also echoes Joan Halifax's sense of a Third Body, an ecological Self, emerging from her Buddhist and shamanic studies.[193] The feeling I had was of being part of a living thread of life itself. I was a thread stretching eons back through all the manifestations of Mother Earth. It was a very powerful feeling.

Macy and Johnstone argue 'Ecological intelligence involves thinking in terms of *deep time*.'[194] They suggest the busyness of modern life means there is no time to consider the longer-term direction of our lives or the choices we make, so we export problems into the future.[195] Macy and Johnstone recommend a shift in perspective from human time to planet time.[196] This study has shown *Tonglen* practitioners think in planet time, resulting in optimism about the future. A2 mentioned that the massive evolutionary epochs of Earth's billions of years of existence gives her hope that humans can reestablish a compassionate rapport with Nature. Change is possible in the future because change has happened in the past. This deep time orientation emerges as a feature shared by both *Tonglen* practice and the Council of All Beings. Thinking in planet time cultivates a profound sense of interconnectedness with all of Life and offers a shaft of hope about the reversibility of the current ecological crisis.

Interbeing

A sense of interbeing permeated the Council ritual. I inter-was with Sand Lizard, as well as my human and other nonhuman ancestors. I felt the assembled Council of the

[192] James Cameron (dir.), *Avatar*, [Film], (London: 20th Century Fox, Dune Entertainment, Ingenious Film Partners, Lightstorm Entertainment, 2009).
[193] Joan Halifax, 'The Third Body: Buddhism, Shamanism & Deep Ecology' in *Dharma Gaia – A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*, Ed. By Allan Hunter Badiner, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1990).
[194] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 153.
[195] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, pp. 141 – 145.
[196] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 153.

nonhuman world had met before to address the needs of Mother Earth. Time and space was no barrier. Life was a flow of energy, of which I was one small part.

Referencing Thich Nhat Hanh's advice to hear within us the sound of Earth crying, Macy and Johnstone noted this advice only makes sense through the lens of interconnection.[197] They argue it is only 'if we think of ourselves as deeply embedded in a larger web of life [...that] the idea of the world feeling through us seems entirely natural'.[198] Interconnected and interdependent systems reveal a mutual causality.[199] Causality is not a one-way phenomenon. Rather it is, as Macy describes, 'reciprocal, arising from interweaving circuits of contingency.'[200] This, Naess and Macy argue, is what prompts the evolution of the ecological Self and the understanding that when we destroy Nature, we are destroying our own human future.[201]

This study shows interbeing is a significant theme of both *Tonglen* and Council rituals. Interviewees all referenced interdependence, and it emerged strongly for me during the Council ritual in feelings of connection with Sand Lizard, with the ancestors and in terms of recognizing the impact of human activity on innocent beings and landscapes.

Final Thoughts Council of All Beings

Having not interviewed any of the other participants of the ritual, I cannot claim my findings were typical of Council participants – this could only be revealed by further study. However, I was deeply moved by my participation in Macy's Council of All Beings ritual. In embodying Sand Lizard and listening to the other beings in the assembly, I found the ritual resembled *Tonglen* in several ways. *Tonglen* is motivated by a desire to relieve pain. Macy and Seed were motivated to create a Council of All Beings because

[197] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope,* p. 72.
[198] Macy and Johnstone, *Active Hope*, p. 72.
[199] Joanna Macy, *Mutual Causality In Buddhism And General Systems Theory – The Dharma Of Natural Systems,* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. xii.
[200] Macy, *Mutual Causality,* p. xii.
[201] Naess, '*Self* Realization' *in Thinking like a Mountain*, p. 29: Macy, *Mutual Causality*,pp. xii-xiii.

of their 'desire that life go[es] on'.[202] Both practices are, therefore, driven by a desire to reduce suffering. Like the *Tonglen* practitioners, my compassion was directed to the nonhuman world, and we were encouraged to witness and acknowledge the pain of the beings present. *Tonglen* has the power to change a person's perspective. This was mirrored in my ritual experience, because, despite preferring individual, unobserved eco-actions, the ritual triggered a motivation in me for community eco-action. The study also showed that, like *Tonglen*, Council of All Beings ritual share a deep-time and interbeing perspective, both aspects of *Tonglen* which encourage development of the ecological Self. Seed, Macy and Fleming believe the ritual fulfils Neass' call for a community activity embodying Deep Ecology perspectives and encouraging individuals to nurture their ecological Self.[203] This latter was something I found was strengthened in me through participation in the Council ritual.

Conclusion

The aims of this paper were two-fold: to explore *Tonglen* practitioners' engagement with the nonhuman world and garner their views on the viability of *Tonglen* as a mainstream eco-consciousness activity; to participate in a Council of All Beings ritual to investigate whether the rituals can be considered a form of eco-*Tonglen*. The study adopted a qualitative approach, combining survey, interview and participant observation.

The potential for a Buddhist environmental ethic based on Buddhist concepts like non-harming and mindfulness has been extensively researched by a wide range of writers such as Allan Hunt Badiner, Stephanie Kaza, Damien Keown and Ian Harris. While contributors such as Badiner, Kaza and Padmasiri de Silva fully embrace the possibility of a Buddhist environmental ethic, others, such as Keown and Harris are more sceptical and warn against over-simplifying Buddhism's green credentials. In Western

[202] Seed, Macy, Fleming and Naess, *Thinking Like A Mountain,* p. 98.
[203] Seed, Macy, Fleming and Naess, *Thinking Like A Mountain,* p. 97.

Buddhist centres, there is an increasing focus on eco-*dharma*, which suggests Buddhist teachers and their students are engaging with the eco-crisis. However, input into the eco-consciousness debate from Buddhist teachers has been limited. The works of teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh and the Karmapa do reach beyond the perimeters of the Buddhist centres and, along with teachers like Roshi Joan Halifax, they identify negative human emotions, like greed and anger (in the form of wars) as root causes of the eco-crisis. As an antidote to these negative emotions, this study found Buddhist teachers are urging students to direct *Tonglen* or compassion to the nonhuman world as a means of generating a more nourishing and healing attitude towards the planet. The Karmapa in particular has developed a dedicated eco-*Tonglen* practice. Compassion is central to Tibetan Buddhism and *Tonglen* is a common practice to develop this quality. Despite considerable research into the relationship between the Buddhist practice of mindfulness and pro-environmental attitudes (for example, Ericson, Kjønstad and Barstad, and Geiger *et al),* at the time of writing this paper, research on *Tonglen* is sparse. Therefore, it is hoped that this paper may make a meaningful contribution to an otherwise under-researched field.

Tonglen practice relies on an understanding of key Buddhist concepts like interdependence and the Two Truths. Arne Naess and Joanna Macy maintain that an understanding of the interdependent nature of existence is an essential aspect of generating pro-environmental attitudes. Macy's Council of All Beings rituals are rooted in the core Mahāyāna Buddhist concept of Bodhichitta and are designed to encourage a more spiritual relationship with the nonhuman.

The study investigated the attitudes and beliefs of *Tonglen* practitioners using a mixed method, qualitative framework, incorporating survey, interviews and autoethnography. I sought to balance my Buddhist 'insider' position by sharing the study with centres supporting four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism. While overall numbers of respondents were lower than anticipated, diversity was achieved in the spread of the type of Buddhism practised. Eighteen surveys were returned and five interviews

conducted. It was significant that all interviewees were long-standing Buddhists who were confident about discussing their *Tonglen* and *Lojong* practice. A couple of interviewees suggested less experienced Buddhist might have been put off through fear they would be questioned on the finer points of Buddhist doctrine. Future studies should ensure the parameters of the study are clearly explained. The small sample group means that the results of this study cannot be seen as representative of all *Tonglen* practitioners, however, the experience of interviewees meant they were able to clearly articulate their beliefs concerning *Tonglen's* relevance to the eco-crisis.

Although many themes emerged during the interviews, for ease of reading and because of the limitations of this paper, just six themes were discussed: 'Practice for Nature'; 'Turning towards'; 'Transformation'; 'Deep-time'; 'Interbeing'; and '*Tonglen*: An eco-consciousness resource?'

Practitioners in this study revealed they regularly include the nonhuman in *Tonglen* practice because they believe this is a natural and logical extension of Buddhist concepts like egality of being, interconnection and no separation between Self and others. This aligned with the Karmapa's instructions to include all animate and inanimate beings in compassion practice. Practitioners also showed they are comfortable with turning towards suffering, whether that be their own or the suffering of others. This attitude reflected Chungyalpa's instructions to view suffering with an element of objectivity, so that one is not overwhelmed by the pain being witnessed. Macy and Johnstone have also noted the importance of being able to acknowledge the pain of the eco-crisis, as failure to do so can result in attitudes such as climate denial, which merely contributes to eco-collapse as deniers fail to adjust their eco-damaging behaviours. Although patience and dedication is required to become an accomplished *Tonglen* practitioner, the interviewees believed the practice empowers them to change their perspective on challenging situations. Buddhist teachers like the Karmapa and Thich Nhat Hanh emphasize the value of compassion practices which allow practitioners to turn suffering into motivation to take positive action. This study found concerns aired by Keown and Habito about the inevitability of change and

impermanence do not mean that practitioners necessarily have a nihilistic attitude towards change and destruction of the environment. This study showed *Tonglen* practitioners care deeply about the destruction of Nature and are grateful to have *Tonglen* as a resource to address this issue. They also demonstrated feelings of being connected to life beyond the spatial and temporal confines of their current human form, which makes them optimistic the current eco-situation can improve. Macy and Johnstone and Arne Naess argued that an understanding of interconnected systems is essential to encourage pro-environmental behaviours. Their position is borne out in this study as all the interviewees referred to the importance of behaving ecologically responsibly because of the belief that to hurt Nature is to hurt themselves.

In participating in Macy's Council of All Beings ritual, I found embodying Sand Lizard and listening to the other beings in the assembly profoundly moving. The findings from the participant observation largely echoed those of the *Tonglen* interviews. The ritual directed compassion towards the nonhuman world and encouraged participants to witness and acknowledge the pain of the beings present. Although my experience cannot be compared with that of other participants because I conducted no interviews with them, I did find that the ritual changed my perspective significantly. Preferring individual, unobserved action on climate, the ritual triggered a motivation in me for community eco-action on behalf of Sand Lizard. The study also showed that, like *Tonglen*, Council of All Beings rituals share a deep-time and interbeing perspective.

This paper explored whether *Tonglen* offers a path towards environmental healing and investigated whether the Council of All Beings rituals can be considered a form of *Tonglen*. While this study has shown that it has potential as a path to eco-healing for *Tonglen* practitioners, it is questionable whether it would be accessible to a broad cross-section of the community in the same way that, for example, mindfulness has been. Although this is something that can be explored in further studies, this current study suggests that *Tonglen* requires a much deeper grounding in Buddhism's core concepts of Two Truths and interdependence than the less complex practice of

mindfulness. This study did, however, suggest that *Tonglen* might be applicable to wider-scale action on climate within Buddhist communities through the organization of activities such as a global day of *Tonglen* for the environment, as suggested by A1. When I first began practising *Tonglen* two things struck me very strongly: firstly, the power of this discreet practice to connect very deeply with others; and secondly, its power to transform even the most challenging situations at an invisible level, changing the landscape for me as practitioner, as well as the object of my compassion practice. In terms of these two aspects, the Council of All Beings rituals can be considered as manifestations of *Tonglen*. The Council of All Beings was a powerful and transformative experience for me as a complete newcomer to Deep Ecology activities. I became so deeply invested in Sand Lizard's suffering and happiness that I made a decision to take action to protect the species locally. In its simplest form, this is what *Tonglen* does – it opens up the space to connect with another being, animate or inanimate, allows the practitioner to understand the suffering of that being and, in doing so, stimulates the desire to take action to relieve that suffering. In this sense, the Council of All Beings might provide a valuable and accessible alternative to *Tonglen*. This study has shown that *Tonglen* practitioners have reservations about the viability of the practice as a mainstream ecological activity. However, the study has also shown that *Tonglen* has the potential to be a very useful resource for promoting eco-consciousness within Buddhist communities because of its ability to cultivate compassion for and connection with Nature, as well as offering vital protection against feelings of eco-stress and eco-anxiety.

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Appendices

Appendix One

Survey Questions

1 How do you describe yourself?

Male	Female	Prefer not to say	Other

2 What age category best describes you?

3 Do you live in the UK?

Yes	No	Prefer not to say

4 Do you consider yourself a Buddhist?

Yes	No	Maybe	Unsure	Prefer not to say

5 If you do consider yourself a Buddhist, which path of Buddhism best describes your practice?

For example, Mahayana, Theravada, Vajrayana, Zen, etc.

6 If you consider yourself a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, which school of Tibetan Buddhism do you follow?

7 If you answered 'Other' to the above question, please feel free to describe the school of Tibetan Buddhism you follow.

8 If applicable, how long have you been a Buddhist practitioner?

9 Do you believe that practising compassion is an integral part of your Buddhist practice?

Yes	No	Maybe	Unsure	Prefer not to say

10 Do you practise Tonglen or Loving Kindness?

Yes	No	Maybe	Unsure	Prefer not to say

11 to what extent do you agree with the following statement:

The practice of Compassion can help us deal with the challenge of a changing environment

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Unsure	Prefer not to say

12 Do you believe the natural environment is under threat from human activity?

Yes	No	Maybe	Unsure	Prefer not to say

13 do you believe your Buddhist practice might offer some solution/s to the challenges of environmental change?

Yes	No	Maybe	Unsure	Prefer not to say

Appendix Two

Interview Questions

1. Thinking back to when you first practiced *Tonglen*, what was that experience like for you?

2. What motivates you to practise *Tonglen*?

3. Have you ever included the nonhuman world in your *Tonglen* practice and if so, what has contributed to your understanding of interconnection and interdependence?

4. How do you feel personally about the environmental changes we are witnessing, for example, habitat loss, pollution, etc.?

5. To what extent has *Tonglen* helped you develop a sense of resilience to the environmental challenges we are facing?

6. In what ways do you think *Tonglen* can offer insights or solutions to environmental challenges?

7. What contribution do you believe an individual's personal *Tonglen* practice can make to global environmental challenges?

8. What challenges do you see if any in integrating *Tonglen* into mainstream action on climate?

Appendix Three

Autoethnographic account of Council of All Beings

Preparation

Our instructions were to meditate in Nature to see what 'being' was asking to be represented in the ritual. I went to my local sand dunes at Lytham St Anne's for an hour to commune with Nature.

Our north beach, with its manicured sand, ice-cream vendors and miniature golf pitch belongs to the tourists. But further south, the undulating, untamed dunes and salty half-pebble-half-marsh shoreline belongs to the locals. Since my teenage years, these dunes have always been my sanctuary, a place to connect with sky and sea. Lately, however, these quiet dunes have been attracting more day-trippers. Some leave behind their trash. In recent years, there have been several wildfires caused by carelessly discarded BBQs, so before I even started my Nature meditation, I had decided that my chosen entity would be my beloved dunes. Nevertheless, I wanted to experience the *whole* ritual - this meant waiting to see what 'being' called me.

I huddled down in a sheltered hollow between two large dunes. Although it was only 3pm, the January light was already starting to fade. An icy wind blew in from the sea. Dog walkers hunched down against the wind and

headed home for their Sunday roast. Even the dogs seemed eager to escape the chill. Having already chosen my 'being', I initially felt I was just going through the motions. But the quieter the dunes became, the quieter my mind felt.

'OK, who wants to come to the ritual with me?' I asked the beach. Nothing much happened for a while. I asked again. Unexpectedly, an image of a lizard popped into my head. Other than the birds, the only creatures I knew to inhabit the dunes were the rabbits. A quick internet search on my phone revealed that lizards did indeed live in our dunes, having been saved from near extinction by a conservation breeding project. They were released into the local dunes between Lytham St Annes and Blackpool in 2013.[204] Momentarily spooked because I had no conscious knowledge of our local lizards, I realised that I must have read about them on the Lancashire Wildlife Trust's website. I often read the news on that website and must have completely forgotten reading about the lizard conservation work - I have sarcoidosis and forgetfulness is a symptom I struggle with, so that scenario is entirely possible.

Twilight was enveloping the beach, and I had yet to make my mask. After gathering some dry strands of dune grass, I headed home. Researching Sand Lizard's appearance before painting my mask, I tried to paint Lizard camouflaged against the dunes. I imagined lizards do this. Once the painting was finished, I tied the dune grasses onto the mask with a bit of wool. Time was getting on and the paint was still wet, so I put it on the radiator to dry.

[204] Rare sand lizards released back to Fylde sand dunes – Fylde Council

Signing into the Zoom link at 7pm, I felt self-consciousness about my very basic mask and apprehensive about how much of a sand lizard I would be expected to be. It was relief to see there were only eight participants. Six of us were adorned in something that represented our chosen being. Some had painted their faces, while another one had decorated a headscarf. My mind quickly tried to work out what beings they were from their adornments. Sky, our facilitator, asked us to change our Zoom names to our chosen being and Blackbird, River, Sand Lizard, Sky, Beetle, Mountain, Shell Fungus and Blobfish all appeared on the name tags. That was a nice touch. The atmosphere had changed – it no longer felt like a slightly weird training workshop with participants wearing odd head gear. With the new names, it had subtly become something a lot less material.

Sky opened the evening with a moment of meditative land acknowledgement and gratitude to the ancestors. She asked us to mentally acknowledge the land and ancestors of wherever we were individually based (America, Brazil, Greece, Poland and United Kingdom). American, she acknowledged the land of her local Native tribe, the Nisenan People, offering them gratitude for sharing the land with her people. The watcher in me wondered what it feels like to know that one lives on land taken from others, to be permanently apologetic. Could you ever feel at home living on borrowed/stolen land? Sky's acknowledgment continued and pulled my attention once more. She thanked all the other beings in the landscape, now, in recent history, and from before the time of humans. It was a surprisingly moving start to the ritual. These opening prayers highlighted that the story of the European settlers to America is just one small chapter in the volumes and volumes of Turtle Island's story and,

indeed, of Earth's story. My mind visualized Sky's land before the settlers arrived from Europe, then back before any humans roamed the landscape. I felt a longing to linger in this vision of deep time, this nonhuman world, but Sky moved us onto the next part of the ritual.

We were asked to introduce ourselves as our 'being'. As I listened to Sky and Mountain and Blackbird introducing themselves, I felt like an outsider. A novice. They all spoke so freely about who they were. Even though we were doing the ritual remotely, they seemed to completely embody their beings. Sky was spacious, abundant and ever-changing, Mountain was old and solid and lived in slow time and Blackbird was light and musical, her head movements suggesting a graceful dance from land to tree to sky. Waiting for my turn to speak, my mind was very much in human form, wishing I had done more research and made a better mask. Selfishly, it was a relief when River seemed as self-conscious as I felt – awkward and dammed, not a gentle flowing river at all. Blobfish did not seem comfortable either and preferred to move his glove puppet in front of the camera instead of talking. At least, I was not the only inexperienced participant in this ritual.

It was my turn to introduce myself. Once talking, my nervousness subsided. Taking my lead from Blackbird, I tried to mimic Lizard's little head movements as I spoke. Although I did not know much about our Fylde Sand Lizard, I had spent happy hours in the hot Italian sun at my parents' house watching lizards sunbathing and skittering on the rocks. Lizard was moving into my being. Finally, I was joining the Assembly, instead of simply observing it. After each introduction, 'beings' were welcomed to the gathering by the others. It was a beautiful feeling to hear all the beings say,

‘Welcome Sand Lizard’. A feeling of being accepted and protected, but also a feeling of being part of some eternal bond between all beings of the Earth, like something out of the film, ‘Avatar’.

Sky moved us gracefully into the next section and invited to make the case on behalf of our ‘being’. Each speaker was then witnessed and acknowledged by Council. It was not anger that arose as I listened to Sky’s concerns about pollution or Blackbird’s fears about the loss of her traditional nesting habitats or Blobfish’s worries about rising sea temperatures. Sadness was the overwhelming feeling. All these entities and beings were suffering because of human activity and that was so unfair because they all had a right to live in peace. And all the beings wanted to survive. It was hard listening to all the pain, but it felt like we, the Council, had a duty to listen, to witness their struggles.

When it was my turn to speak, I was surprised at the emotion I felt being Sand Lizard, talking about living in glass boxes while our ‘saviours’ developed a breeding programme to save us from extinction. Then the joy of being free but the dangers posed by other humans, with disposable BBQs and other waste left in the dunes. And the fact that we are now penned in on a small strip of duneland because of huge new concrete shore protection to counter rising sea levels.

As my ‘being’, I was confused. One group of humans are trying to save my Sand Lizard family, while the other half dumps tonnes of concrete to make a pretty promenade where our beautiful wild dunes had once been. We Sand Lizards may be small, but we cherish our lives in the same way human beings do, and while our numbers are up again, the question is - for how long? The words I spoke were not planned; they just flowed. I noticed

that Sky and Blackbird were crying. I was emotional too. A deep well of quiet despair.

This section was the hardest part of the ritual – both as a speaker and as a listener.

Sky moved us on to the healing section, where Council spoke about what humans could do to help. By this part of the ritual, my immersion in Sand Lizard felt complete. No longer watching the humans behind the adornments, I was listening to the 'beings' speak. It was powerful listening to each of us addressing the Assembly. Each 'being' had great wisdom to impart. There was togetherness, and a sense of unity to save the planet. Maybe it was because all of life seemed present – 'beings' associated with the depths of the oceans, the woodlands that adorn the earth, and the air above us. All of life was here and we depend on each other for our survival. It felt real and important. Essential, even. We were performing an ancient ritual, one that we had been doing since the dawn of time.

Closing the ritual, Sky invited us to step back into human form. I did not want to let go of Sand Lizard. It felt like a hard shift to see the humans behind all the adornments again, but I felt warm gratitude to each of them. I knew nothing about any of them, not even their names, but we were a Council, unified in our desire to save this beautiful planet. I felt a lot of love for my little lizard, not ready to say goodbye so soon. After a final contribution about action we planned to take, and a final gratitude meditation from Sky, in just three short hours, it was over and I was back in my room, instead of the virtual Round Table of the Council.