

Eco-Chaplaincy-Joanna Macy - Honouring pain

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October 11, 2026

Keywords: Joanna Macy, *The Work That Reconnects*, Spiral Process, gratitude, honoring the pain, non-clinging, dependent arising, *Sarvodaya*, *kataññū*, *Dharma* eye

So welcome to IMC, and I am just 24 hours back from teaching a week-long retreat in the Sierras at a new retreat center up there called Big Springs Retreat Center. And it's a beautiful place at 5,000 feet, with just endless forests around it. And some of you might know of a beautiful outcropping in the northern Sierras called Sierra Buttes. So it's right underneath the Sierra Buttes, that old volcanic rock that somehow was laid down flat once upon a time and now stands upright in these beautiful buttes that stick up. You can see it from Highway Five, I think, if you're on a clear day driving north. So right there, with spectacularly clean water.

I don't know how many places in California you can still drink the water coming straight out of the ground without it being filtered and chlorinated and everything. Even hiking in the Sierras, most people will filter their water. But it's called Big Springs because all this water comes pouring out of the ground there, out of this maybe volcanic rock, and some people have considered it some of the cleanest water in California. And some people have said that it takes seven days to replace half of the water in your body. So, if water is 70 percent of our body, what you're looking at now, sitting here in front of you, is 30 percent zero water.

And this wonderful exchange we have with the natural world—that air, water, food—so much of the natural world is there for us to somehow participate in, partly through breathing, drinking, eating, to transform us, to keep us alive, to take us in. And, you know, we're completely made up of not only natural material; it's recycled material. And it's these amazing natural mammalian, animal-kind of processes that we share with other animals, other mammals. That is pouring, moving through us and processing all this natural material. And so it was wonderful to be up there for that week, living there in the natural world, living there in the forests and on this natural water and springs coming out. So it's still very much with me.

And what I was up there for doing was teaching a Buddhist eco-chaplaincy training. And one of the things that has been a big part of my life for the last 20 years is steadily entering into this world of chaplaincy training. And chaplaincy is the way of meeting the world with compassionate care, to support people. And now, with eco-chaplains, we support people at the interface with the natural world, and sometimes just caring for the natural world itself, in a way that's a continuation of Buddhist practice, kind of our inner life or spiritual life. And it's just a delight to be part of this.

It's still very much with me, so you're going to have to bear with me as I kind of offer you some of the teachings that were done there. And the retreat was organized. The main organizing principle for the retreat was a fourfold teaching by Joanna Macy. And Joanna Macy was one of the great Buddhist thinkers of the modern world here in the West. She was a Buddhist scholar, deeply studied. She studied philosophy, Western philosophy, systems theory, and someone who studies general systems theory and then begins understanding the teachings of dependent arising in Buddhism sees a tremendous overlap with them.

And she was a wonderful thinker, philosopher. She kind of took that and worked it and developed it. She was very, very influenced by a social action movement in Sri Lanka that was called *Sarvodaya*. *Daya* here means something like compassion or love or generosity, or all of the above, and *sarva* means all. So, compassion for all. It was a wonderful grassroots movement in Sri Lanka, kind of Gandhian-ish, that was really out there to serve people in all kinds of grassroots ways.

And so, out of all that, she came back to the United States. In the late seventies and early eighties, Joanna Macy was very much involved with the nuclear disarmament movement. And from there, I think because of that, somehow she was invited to help some Russian people deal with the aftereffects of Chernobyl. So Chernobyl was this nuclear power plant that exploded and spread lots of radiation across the lands in Russia, back then the Soviet Union. And the story that has been told about the first time she went there was that she offered some kind of compassionate care, spiritual care, something for people who had been affected by that.

It was for villagers who lived in the forest between Chernobyl and Moscow. And when it exploded, a lot of radiation started with the wind being carried to Moscow. So, to protect their populations, these huge population centers, a cloud was seeded so it would rain. And the rain would take a lot of that radiation out of the atmosphere and rain it down on the forests below, the land below. But they didn't tell the forest people who lived there, the villagers who had lived there for many generations. No one told them they were going to do this.

While it was raining the radiation, they should stay indoors. And so, not only were they then very much radiated, but their lands, their forests, their ground, the plants that were growing—they all then became, you know, uninhabitable for humans. So they were forced to move, and they were then forced out of their forests and into cinder block homes someplace in an urban setting. So you can imagine for them how difficult it was—the tragedy, maybe their anger, their pain.

So Joanna Macy was asked to go and support them. And somehow, out of maybe her Buddhist practice, I'm not sure exactly where this came from, she had the idea that you had to kind of name your pain. You had to sit with your pain, acknowledge it, in order to work with the grief, talk about the grief that people had, talk about the anger people have. But when she brought this idea to the villagers in this kind of workshop she was offering, they got really angry with her. Because they said, "You're here to help us move forward and be happy. Move forward, just do something better and have a better life. We don't want—it's too painful for us to look back at what happened and to live with this deep emotional pain."

So they were pretty angry with her. And there's one woman in particular who was very angry that she would come there to kind of reawaken the deep wounds that they had. And so they stopped for the day and continued the next morning. And that woman who was most angry went home and was furious and lived with her fury through the night. And something, as she lived with it, began to shift and change. Something began to open in her heart.

And she got to see that underneath her anger was this deeper grief. And that deeper grief then opened up. And she was very surprised, as the story is told to me, that as she kind of opened up, she started feeling an amazing kind of connection to the natural world, the world around her, the people, everything, in a way that she had never felt. Intimacy, felt connected to, and felt kind of—I don't know if love is the right word—but felt something very profound, that interconnection to. And she had understood how important it was for her to go into her anger, her grief, in order to be transformed and come out the other side.

So she came back to the workshop and explained what had happened. And that apparently helped all the other people to understand how important it was, and they could see how she'd been transformed—the one who was most angry. And so, out of this work that Joanna Macy did in the Soviet Union and other places, helping people in areas of great tragedy, she created something called *The Work That Reconnects*. It's a wonderful movement to help people do this very deep grief work and reconnect to the natural world. And so she created something called the Spiral Process.

And I think spiral because you do it over and over again, and it comes richer and richer each

time you do it. And it involved four steps in dealing with grief and loss and anger and these kinds of things that go on in human relationship with the natural world, for people who are paying attention to it or for whom it's important. And so eco-chaplains—that's one of the things they're caring for—is people's relationship to the natural world, and often grief, climate grief, climate despair, climate anger—new terms over the last 20 years or so that people have. And so this process was what we organized the retreat around. And so we kind of took people through it, partly as not just teaching them about it. So it was a kind of wonderful retreat for people.

So the four-step process that Joanna Macy has to address deep emotional pain starts with focusing on gratitude. So it's, you know, maybe counterintuitive that you're going to focus on pain, that you'd first focus on gratitude. But to be able to touch into what we're grateful for, what we appreciate, the world is not just pain; it's a bigger world. And the way that we've adopted from other places to refer to the natural world in the eco-chaplaincy program is to call it the more-than-human world. And I think it's very evocative, this phrase “more-than-human.”

You know, certainly many humans live in a very human-centric world. If one representation of that is how much time you spend in front of a screen, if you're in front of your screen, you're really in a human-centric world. Even if you're looking at natural, you know, cat videos or something, it's a huge— And then beyond that, you know, reading the news or the activities we do with other humans, we do things and engage in things that some of it is very natural, and some of it has never been done before until the modern world. And so the orientation is, you know, caring for this human world and this human-centric world without any reference to the impact it has on the more-than-human world.

Which is more, maybe in two different ways. Maybe one is, it's just larger. The human-centric world is a small percentage of what this Earth world is all about. And so to appreciate, there's more going on here than the human-centric world. But also, I like the word “more.” For me, it evokes this idea: there's something greater—not just larger, but greater.

And as soon as they evoke the idea that there's a greater world here than you could imagine if you only live in the human-centric world, for me that reminds me that there's a more-than-human world within me as well. You think that all that is in me is also human? Of course. How can it not be? But it's not the human-centric world of thoughts and ideas and what we're navigating, negotiating, and building, and, you know, trying to get more likes for on our social media post.

We share so much of the natural world with the natural world within us. Our breathing, our

hearts, our circulation system, our neurology—it's, you know, most of what makes us alive and live right now are deeply evolved natural processes. Some of which we ignore, some of which we don't pay attention to, and they atrophy. The degree to which people who live in the natural world much of the time, who grew up in it, the way their senses are attuned and heightened and aware of what goes on around them—some of us who don't live in that world, it's hard to understand how sensitive and alive their senses are. Some of ours have atrophied compared to them.

And so it begins with gratitude. And part of that gratitude is the gratitude for the natural world, that so much of what we need to be alive is given to us kind of freely all the time, regularly. One of the most important things we need to be alive for the next few minutes is to be able to breathe, and that's been given to us. Where does it come from, and how is it given to us? Because of these amazing natural processes that we're participating in, the oxygen-carbon cycles that go on, that have to go on.

There was a time on this planet of ours that there was no oxygen, and there was no life that we know of today. It wasn't possible. And then, very slowly, I think the first amazing thing that somehow happened was some kind of unicellular organism. Somehow it evolved to photosynthesize. And then very slowly, because of photosynthesis, oxygen began to appear in the atmosphere, and that allowed so much more oxygen-based kind of life to grow and develop. It's amazing that we're participating in this.

Water—where does that come from? How do we get water that's clean enough for us to drink? For some of us, some places in the world, it's very hard. Food—there's so much that cares for our life. And to not see it only as a consumer, only as something you deserve, you pay for it, you get it, and acquire, acquire, acquire, acquire more. But rather to appreciate how much is provided, and to have a deep appreciation and inspiration and gratitude for that.

And one of the things that does is that it allows, in the Buddhist tradition—we don't start looking at our pain by looking at gratitude first, usually. But if there's anything comparable in Buddhism, we start preparing to look at our suffering by being generous. Generosity. And the connection between generosity and gratitude is intimate. Where giving and receiving goes around and around, there's reciprocity. We give, and there's gratitude. We receive, and we're grateful.

Giving and receiving, receiving and giving, happen all the time. You know, it's represented for me with the idea of just breathing. These wonderful plants that are around us—you see out the window there, the tree—it's there taking in carbon dioxide and producing oxygen, which we need in order to breathe and be alive. Where does that carbon dioxide come from?

A teeny, probably a teeny percentage only for that tree, but it's coming from us. We take in the oxygen and we send out carbon dioxide.

So there are so many ways in which this stuff is reciprocal. So in Buddhism, we tend to start with generosity. But generosity in Buddhism, as it is always, I think, with the word generosity, is voluntary. It's something that has to be inspired from the inside, that is wholesome, that does something, that cleanses something, that opens something, that warms something inside of us. That it just feels like love, or feels like joy, or it feels like it's very nourishing to be generous.

In the same way, to have a kind of pure gratitude, not a gratitude that makes you obligated to return, but a pure gratitude that just also is nourishing, is inspiring, is like opening. It's kind of because it partly opens us beyond the small, little human-centric, egocentric world that's so easy to live in. So, in Joanna's work, we start with gratitude and spend time. So up there in the Sierras, it was very easy to spend time walking around in the trees, plants on the ground, in the mountains, and be directed to kind of see what you're grateful for and how you're grateful, and to feel it there in the natural world.

Something could relax for people that sometimes doesn't relax ever in a human-centric world. For some people, the human-centric world is always a place of danger, is always a place of tension and problems and mystery and challenge. And some people only find their solace or their inspiration, or they find themselves even, by going into the natural world for a period of time and having all the challenges of the human world kind of fall away and feel like they belong. They belong here. They're fully human. They're allowed to be who they are.

Some people feel accepted. It's odd kind of language. I mean, some people will roll their eyes when they hear this, but that doesn't—you can roll your eyes all you want. It doesn't take away how some people experience this. That they'll experience that the tree accepts them. That they can be who they are 100 percent. The tree just is willing to be there with them and accept them as they are.

The waters, the water coming out of the ground, flowing over the ground at Big Springs—it's there to accept them. The big buttes will accept you. And because some people never experience this in their life, to be in a place of gratitude, to feel that acceptance and then to feel grateful. In Buddhism, in Pāli, the word for gratitude usually is said to be *kataññū*. *Kataññū*. *Kataññū*. I think it means something like knowing what has been done.

So, acknowledging what has been done. And when we acknowledge what has been done

that benefits us, that's gratitude. And what happens in you if there's no fear, no obligation? You're not required to do anything in return. You can just relax into that and feel the goodness of it. Something happens that shifts and prepares us for the next step of Joanna Macy's work, which is to feel our pain, emotional pain.

But she does—it's not just feeling it. She uses a very important verb. She uses, before the word pain, rather than just “feel your pain,” she says, “honoring the pain.” Honoring the pain. She adds the word honor. And I don't know all the associations that all of you here have with the word honor—to respect the pain, to revere the pain.

But certainly, I like the word respect. That it is not—it's not just being a victim to our inner life. It's not just having a wound and then kind of being swallowed into the wound or drowning in the wound. It's not being kind of a passive recipient of suffering and pain, and being overwhelmed by it and collapsing with it. But there's something about stepping forward. And maybe this is the kind of generosity piece—you step forward and say, “Wait a minute. The pain is more than just pain. The pain is something important here.”

That the suffering we have is not something to dismiss, not something to ignore. It's not something to get rid of. Take your emotional bazooka and just destroy it and blast it away. It's not something to go to the doctor to get a pill for, so that you take the pill and then, you know, boom, then you can go on with whatever you're doing and forget about your pain. That would do a tremendous disservice to our humanity if the point is just simply never to have emotional pain.

And one of the ways to say this, very important, is that pain, emotional pain, any kind of pain at all, is first and foremost a message that your body, your system, is giving you. And are you ready to listen to the message? Can you discover what the lesson is? What's being told to you? There are people, apparently, human beings who are born genetically without the ability to feel physical pain, and their lives are really hard.

And they tend not to live very far into adulthood because they don't get the message that they've been hurt. And so they'll be hurt and continue life as usual without knowing it, and they can't take care of it and take care of themselves. Some of us only know that we have something wrong with us when we feel internal pain. But if you don't have that internal pain, you just continue doing the same injurious thing over and over again. And so pain is actually—our ability to have physical pain, as much of a drag as it is—our life depends on it. At least most of us here who have gone into some kind of older age, a little bit.

And so to honor that pain means that this pain is more than just pain. Pain is a connection to

yourself in a deep way. It's a message. It's also a connection to the world around you. Maybe it's a very important message from the world itself, because a lot of our emotional pain has to do with the wider world and our relationship to it.

And I think a certain humility around our emotional pain is really healthy. We don't really necessarily know what's cooking inside of us. We don't necessarily know why. I find it somewhat fairly sad how many people will go to the doctor to get a pill for depression. I know that depression is sometimes debilitating and needs medical care and needs pharmaceutical care. But I think that some people have this instinct to get over it, not have it. Let's take the medicine right away.

And sometimes depression is a phenomenally important fallow time, preparing us to look at and work through something underground. Something needs time and place and understanding. And to honor depression, sometimes it's more important than fixing it. To honor our anger—I've been angry and spent time with it and given it time so I can really listen deeply. What's the message here? What's going on more deeply? What needs attention here?

Isn't the anger—don't kill the messenger. What's the message? And with anger, the message for me has been fear. Often it's been fear. Sometimes it's been sadness. Sometimes it's been a feeling of threat. And then the question is, what is being threatened?

And not a few times, when I find I could look underneath the layers of anger at what was being threatened, I had to put a big question mark on that. Really, Gil? Is that what you're allowing yourself to be threatened by? Maybe that's not really the heart of it. What is needed here? So, to honor the pain, just the very beginning to do that, to respect the pain, begins for some of us changing the interpersonal, the inner dynamic that we have with emotional pain than what we had when we're just a victim of it or being crushed by it.

We're actually shifting, moving in a new direction. We're taking some responsibility. We're stepping forward. We're taking some initiative with it. Sometimes some people don't know how to take initiative with their own emotional pain, so therefore they're only the victims of it, or there's someone else who's going to fix it for me. Someone else knows what to do. And I just have to find the right person, the right process, the right something.

But I think without taking some ability to respond or step forward in ourselves, we're not going to find the transformation that Joanna Macy is hoping for, what Buddhism is hoping for from people. And so, this honoring the pain, giving room for it. So in her processes, there's room for people to speak their pain. And her way, in workshops, it's done collectively with a group of people. And it's very different than kind of the Buddhist way generally, or like

around here at IMC, where to honor the pain means just sit quietly by yourself and close your eyes and just purely feel what's there.

And Joanna Macy's work, it's done interpersonally in a community. And something very different goes on when you speak it in the presence of other people. And you hear—and they hear—it. They respect it. They care for it. They understand you. They hold you in it all.

Sometimes it allows things to move through and shift and change, sometimes faster than it is in meditation for people, when their focus is not so full on the whole experience. And so it's spoken. It's felt. There's room for it. It's acknowledged. And then it comes to the third step of her work, which is seeing with new eyes.

And that's maybe coming right out of Joanna's Buddhist background, where Buddhism also—there's what's called awakening the *Dharma* eye. There's having vision, observing, seeing deeply. The language of seeing in Buddhism is, one way or the other, emphasized over and over again as part of that transformational process to come out of that suffering, to go beyond the suffering, to open up into it and beyond, and into freedom, into a whole new way of seeing the world.

And so, just simply seeing, for example, that emotional pain is a process. Emotional pain is something to honor, and it's a process, something to live through, rather than something to fix, something to stop, something to avoid, is to see in a new way. To see in a new way, to understand that the very person who is experiencing emotional pain maybe doesn't have to live in the same identities that we're stuck in in the past. Maybe the identity is that of a victim. Maybe the identity is of being the responsible one, the one who has to fix everything. Maybe the identity is to be the one who is incapable.

And so there's all kinds of ways in which we see ourselves that begin to fall away, that provide us with a new way of seeing. One of the things that I emphasized at the retreat, that with deeper meditation practice, at some point, to see in a new way means we see that it's possible to live without clinging. We have a clear enough experience, a reference point, a knowing of what it's like for the heart not to be attached. I don't want to use the—I want to—it's easier to use the word non-clinging. What it's like to have the heart not clinging to anything, not restricting anything, not tightening down around anything, not resisting anything.

The ability for the heart to be really free and open and clear. To have that, to discover that for yourself, not having anyone tell you you're supposed to and trying to kind of do gymnastics to be that way. But to honor the pain, to sit here and open up and relax and discover what this possibility of non-clinging is—that provides a whole different orientation of how to live a

life. A whole sense of possibility. It gives a vision of what's possible, possible for oneself and possible for others.

And so, in the village, these villagers in the forest of the Soviet Union, they saw that this was possible for their neighbors and their friends as well. This woman came back out of her night of anger and shared it because there was a vision. This is possible. We can do this together. So, to see with new eyes. And then the fourth and final step in Joanna Macy's spiral, she calls going forth.

And in Buddhism, going forth is usually the word used for going to become a monastic, but that's not what Joanna Macy was encouraging people to do at all. She was anything but monastic. She was just a wonderful, dynamic social activist, layperson, Buddhist teacher, who wrote and organized and engaged with the world. So for her, going forth is to be engaged, to step forward, to make a difference in the world, to help the world, to support your communities, your families, your friends, to kind of be there. And this is where the generosity thing comes back.

So I like to think of it being full circle, that it starts with gratitude and moves to generosity, and we have this reciprocity of giving and receiving that goes along all the time. And so, to step forward into the world, not stay, you know, in the human-centric world, but step into the wider world. Go forth, and to make a difference, to support and help people, to make this a better world. And certainly that's what Joanna Macy's life was about. She died about a year and a half ago, and she was one of the big supporters of our Buddhist Eco-Chaplaincy program.

And when we graduated the second or third group, she came and gave that kind of keynote graduation talk. It was quite wonderful. So, gratitude, honoring the pain, seeing with new eyes, and going forth is what I was up to last week. And so I wanted to share that with you. So partly because it's tea time, and you get to talk to each other if you want to stay, and partly because I think it honors this process that I just talked about and what it was like for you, I'm going to be careful and honor you.

You know, this touches on difficult parts of people's lives and evocative parts of people's lives. And so it might actually be helpful for you to have some little bit of safe, self-chosen way of sharing something about this talk with someone here in a friendly way, as a way of introducing yourselves. And how that would work, I would think, would just say something. It could be as simple as, overall, what was it like to hear this? Or, is one of these four steps the one that most inspires you? Oh, that's pretty cool for me.

Maybe you don't have to talk about what's most difficult. You don't have to talk about the greatest pain, but something that was uplifting for you. So we'll take about maybe just a short period of time, maybe about six minutes, to say hello to someone here and share, if you want to, about the talk. And it's a little bit helpful if it can be two or three people, but if you look around, make sure no one's sitting alone, because sometimes accidentally people look the opposite direction from me, and then, what am I supposed to do? So please. And you don't have to stay if you don't want to also. I'm gonna be your man.