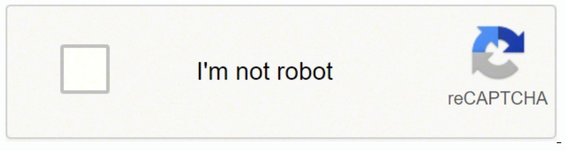

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Learning to die in the anthropocene quotes

I am a bad Buddhist. I don’t meditate every day, and some weeks, I feel lucky if I find the time to meditate at all. I go to zendo in rare spurts, a few weeks on, months off. I kill mosquitoes, flies, and moths. I drink, though no longer to excess. I’ve managed to rationalize continuing to eat meat. I’m often impatient and snarky with people, angry at them for blocking traffic, for being rude or thoughtless, for moving through the world in a haze, unconscious of the life flowing around them. Look out! Look up! Just look! I want to shout. I am suspicious and proud and sometimes cruel, inconstant in my compassion. I don’t steal and I don’t lie, but I’m vain about that; after all, honesty is one of my best qualities. And yet for all my vanity, I’m a hypocrite, too: I dissemble and misrepresent and omit. And then there’s the whole “I” problem. Not only do I fail in all these all-too-human ways, fumble the dharma, wander from the Buddha way, spread unnecessary suffering and sometimes even wallow in it, but I feel guilty and ashamed that I—marvelous “I,” wonderful “I,” oh-so-special “I”—have fallen so far below my image of myself, this ideal of a perfect Buddhist me, the beautiful butterfly “I” that will erupt when I become a bodhisattva. So far below! And even more: I’m guilty about my lack of devotion. “I” have career plans, worldly ambitions, hopes for the future outside and beyond achieving spiritual enlightenment. I believe in this “I.” I won’t give it up. I want this “I” to succeed, in this world, in this particular cycle of pain and illusion, even if it means—as it does—making decisions that I know full well contradict the dharma. The path is clear, but I do not take it. The light shines, but I turn my face away. I remain willful, ignorant, suffering, anxious, dissatisfied, every day tying myself to the wheel of samsara. I know it. I keep doing it. Another confession: I’m a bad environmentalist. I teach at Wesleyan, and I drive there from Brooklyn once a week, some two hours each way, adding my little bit to the mass of atmospheric carbon dioxide heating the planet. I’m flying all over, too, for academic conferences, journalism assignments, and a book tour: this year alone I’ve flown to Greenland, Russia, Canada, and Ireland, in addition to less polluting trips to the west coast, Miami, Texas, and so on. My partner composts her food scraps, dragging a bag of coffee grounds and onion skins to the park every week, but I don’t bother. I recycle only when it’s convenient. I buy coffee in cardboard cups and throw the cups away. Related: 100 Best Climate Solutions and Why They’re Going to Work Perhaps worst of all, I eat meat. Not just sometimes, not on rare occasions, not only expensive, “sustainable,” organic, but almost every day, and from the worst places: tuna and salmon from the corner sushi restaurant, turkey sandwiches from the bodega, beef in my Pad See Ew from the neighborhood Thai place, a whole roast chicken from the grocery store. As with my failure to be a bodhisattva, I know it’s wrong, but I do it anyway. There is absolutely no way that eating industrial meat is ethical, whether from a standpoint of compassion toward our fellow sentient beings, a perspective concerned with minimizing greenhouse gases, a point of view concerned with environmental and economic justice, or even the bare hope of sustaining human life on earth. This all strikes me as pretty ironic, since I just published a book that tackles global warming as an ethical problem, and does so from a position that could be seen as more or less Buddhist (though I consider my position less Buddhist than pantheist, in the tradition of the heretical Jewish philosopher Benedict Spinoza). That book, Learning to Die in the Anthropocene, argues that we need to make a full ethical reckoning, in the deepest philosophical and existential sense, with the unavoidable fact of catastrophic climate change. Anthropocene is a term some scientists and thinkers have advanced suggesting that human beings have entered a new geological era, one characterized by the advent of human beings as a geological force. The problems we’ve created by transferring vast amounts of carbon transfer from underground into the sky are going to affect life on earth for millennia. Within a few generations we will face average temperatures 7 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than today, rising seas at least three to ten feet higher than they are now, and worldwide shifts in crop belts, growing seasons, and population centers. Within a couple hundred years humans will be living in a climate the earth hasn’t seen since the Pliocene, three million years ago, when oceans were 75 feet higher than they are now. Once the methane hydrates under the oceans and permafrost begin to melt, we may soon find ourselves living in a hothouse climate closer to that of the Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum, approximately 56 million years ago, when the planet was ice free and tropical at the poles. We face the imminent collapse of the agricultural, shipping, and energy networks upon which the global economy depends, a large-scale die-off in the biosphere that’s already well underway, and our own possible extinction as a species. What’s even more shocking is that it’s probably already too late to stop it, even if the world’s political and economic elites were willing and able to radically transform our global fossil-fueled economy, which they’re not. Scientists and environmental organizations have been working to alert politicians to the problem of global warming and to decrease carbon emissions for more than three decades, and emissions have only increased. According to the World Bank, 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit of warming is now inevitable no matter what, even if we stopped emitting carbon dioxide worldwide today. For reasons I discuss in Learning to Die, none of the political or technological solutions on the table—a carbon tax, cap-and-trade schemes, carbon capture and sequestration, decarbonizing the atmosphere, renewable energy, nuclear power, and geoengineering—are likely to work, and almost certainly not quickly enough to preserve global capitalist civilization as we know it. The next several decades are likely to be grim, brutish, and bloody, even nastier than the first two decades of the twenty-first century have been already. Related: Capitalism vs. the Climate The situation in which we find ourselves today is more dire than any other moment in human history, and we simply cannot wait until we become perfect bodhisattvas or perfect environmentalists before we respond. We must act now, as flawed, failed, flailing selves. At the same time, the situation we find ourselves in is beyond our power to change. The planet will get warmer. The ice caps will melt. The seas will rise. The global, fossil-fueled, consumer capitalist civilization we live in will come to an end. It’s precisely in recognizing this paradoxical situation that the insights of Buddhism can help us move forward. If the bad news we must confront is that we’re all gonna die, then the wisdom that might help us deal with that news arises from the realization that it was going to happen anyway. This self, this existence, this “I” was always already dying, always already dead, always already passing from moment to moment in the flux of consciousness, matter, and energy, nothing more than breath. And if I can understand my very own self as impermanent, transient, and insubstantial, how much more insubstantial is a civilization, a “way of life,” a set of habits and structures and prejudices built and believed in and sustained by oh so many insubstantial selves? Breathe in, breathe out. Watch it come. Watch it go. Buddhism articulates the riddle posed by human mortality to human consciousness in a way that shows us that the riddle’s answer lies not in evading the great ending, the terrifying void, but in accepting the truth that our great ending is merely another iteration of the innumerable endings we live through each day. This insight is taught in the four noble truths and in countless koans and dharma talks, and it is experienced in the practice of meditation, whether you practice every day or once a week or once a month. Meditation interrupts the endless feedback loops between consciousness and language, between consciousness and being, not disrupting them as one might with a drug or madness, but opening a space, a pause, a higher order function of attentive compassion. In practice, one learns to accept finitude, mortality, and the great ending, and in practice, one learns to cultivate the patience, compassion, and peace that lead to freedom. I’m a bad Buddhist and a bad environmentalist, stuck in a world that promises nothing but suffering and death, heat waves, resource wars, and rising seas. The odds that I have enough time to attain buddhahood in this life, to become the perfect environmentally conscious bodhisattva, are basically zero. The odds are also basically zero that I, personally, will ever be able to do anything to stop or even slow down global climate change. It’s almost certain that I will spend my life failing at the most important things I can imagine doing—failing my friends, my family, my society, and myself. Then I’ll die. The question I face, the question we all face, the ethical question at the heart of human life and the ethical question Buddhism helps us see at the heart of any possible response to the global climate crisis, is not whether we will succeed or fail, but rather: how will we choose to live out our inevitable failure? Bad Buddhist, bad environmentalist, flawed person, struggling, mortal, confused human ape—now what? The first thing I need to recognize is that this isn’t just my condition but the human condition, and the second is that having a choice at all is a privilege. Only very few of us have the freedom to choose how we fail. The rest have our failures forced on us, and so long as the freedom of the few requires the oppression of the many, freedom itself remains an illusion. When the exercise of my freedom demands my complicity in denying that same freedom to others, I am forced to take on behaviors and beliefs that support enslavement and oppression, and I lose my freedom in the very same moment I think I gain it. Thus we arrive at the paradoxical truth of the Buddha way: the only possible free choice we can make is to choose to work for the freedom of all humankind, indeed of all sentient beings. Failure may be inevitable, but recognizing that is the first step in becoming free. ♦ This essay was originally published on NYU’s The Revealer: A Review of Religion & Media. Reprinted with permission. [This story was first published in 2015]

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