Facing Climate Anxiety Through Huayan's Meditation and Interdependence

Abstract

Climate anxiety, characterized by feelings of fear, helplessness, and betrayal among young people facing ecological crisis, poses a significant obstacle to sustained collective action. This commentary argues that meditation practices and the interdependence philosophy of Huayan Buddhism offer undervalued resources for addressing this challenge. Meditation functions as a form of micro peace infrastructure, cultivating emotional resilience, empathy, and cooperative capacity at individual, social, and institutional levels. Huayan's vision of mutual inclusion, exemplified by the metaphor of Indra's Net, provides a philosophical grounding that prevents contemplative practice from becoming merely palliative. Drawing on evidence from the Plum Village Earth Holder Community, this article suggests that integrating inner transformation with collective engagement can help rebuild the trust necessary for escaping prisoner's dilemma dynamics in climate governance and achieving durable peace.

Keywords: *climate anxiety; meditation; Huayan Buddhism; interdependence*

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Young people around the world are struggling. Many feel let down by older generations, anxious about the future, and overwhelmed by the scale of the climate crisis (Hickman et al., 2021). More than a personal burden, this climate anxiety shapes political and ethical life. The spread of fear and exhaustion through a society weakens social bonds, erodes trust in institutions, and makes it harder for people to work together. This commentary argues that meditation and philosophies of interdependence, especially those found in Huayan Buddhism, offer valuable but often overlooked resources for rebuilding the trust that sustainable peace requires.

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The climate crisis has already taken a heavy psychological toll. Extreme weather, unstable livelihoods, and a constant stream of alarming news create chronic stress that wears people down. Studies link climate-related anxiety to depression, hopelessness, and a declining willingness to participate in civic life (Clayton, 2020). People have begun to wonder why they should act if others are not doing the same. This sense of futility leads many to withdraw from collective efforts, which only deepens the problem. Addressing climate anxiety is therefore not a secondary concern, but a fundamental part of building the emotional groundwork that makes cooperation possible.

Figure 1. Climate anxiety is the tremor of a moral awakening. It marks a moment of human self-consciousness. In this moment, we realize that the fate of one mind, one species, and one planet can no longer be separated. Photo by Carl Wang on Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/a-view-of-the-earth-from-space-OCe8cTGymSQ

This emotional strain also has political consequences. In climate policy, the biggest obstacles tend to be relational rather than technological: a lack of trust and disagreements about fairness—who should pay, who should sacrifice, and who stands to benefit. These tensions create a kind of prisoner's dilemma in which each group hesitates to cooperate for fear that others will not (Keohane & Victor, 2016). The result is collective inaction despite widespread recognition of the danger. Repairing this breakdown requires more than institutional reform. Although policies can set rules, they cannot heal the psychological and relational damage that climate anxiety produces. People who are grieving, exhausted, or distrustful need resources that reach deeper than regulation.

Meditation, which cultivates the calm and clarity that help people face rather than retreat from crisis, is one such resource (United Nations, 2025). However, if meditation remains a private coping strategy, it risks becoming disconnected from collective responsibility. Huayan Buddhism's philosophy of interdependence provides the conceptual grounding that prevents this (Huang, 2025), linking contemplative practice to a vision of mutual responsibility and shared fate.

Research increasingly supports meditation's potential to provide this foundation. Meditation programs reduce stress and improve emotional balance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Compassion-based practices increase prosocial behavior; indeed, brain imaging studies show that compassion training changes how the brain responds to others' suffering, suggesting that such training can strengthen empathy (Weng et al., 2013). These findings position meditation as a kind of psychological infrastructure for peace, a practice that supports the emotional conditions on which cooperation depends. For individuals, meditation can turn fear into clarity and purpose. In groups, shared meditative practices foster empathy and reduce adversarial tendencies. Finally, in institutions, contemplative skills may help leaders think more broadly and plan for the long term.

Still, these benefits are not guaranteed. Meditation can become simply a way to cope, helping people endure difficult circumstances without questioning the harmful systems. Simply put, if it reduces stress without encouraging collective action or rebuilding trust, its potential remains limited. What is needed is a philosophical framework that connects inner practice to outward responsibility.

Huayan Buddhism offers exactly this: a way of understanding the world that clarifies why interdependence matters and how recognizing it can reshape both thought and action.

Figure 2. Meditation cultivates inner peace. It is not an escape from the world. It is a form of attentiveness. Through this attentiveness, a sustainable way of living on Earth becomes possible. Photo by Jared Rice on Unsplash. https://unsplash.com/photos/woman-in-black-tank-top-sitting-on-brown-wooden-dock-during-daytime-xce530fBHrk

Scholars increasingly see Huayan Buddhism as a resource for ecological thinking. Highlighting its detailed analysis of relationships (both between parts and wholes and among parts themselves), Barnhill (2001, 84) describes Huayan as "the fullest Buddhist philosophy of nature." This "relational holism" affirms the importance of individuals while acknowledging the integrity of the larger systems they inhabit. The tradition's central image, Indra's Net, depicts an endless web of jewels in which each jewel reflects all others. It conveys not just connection but mutual inclusion: everything contains and is contained by everything else (Capra & Luisi, 2014). This view positions human beings within a broader community that includes animals, ecosystems, and planetary processes. This vision echoes environmental philosophy's "ecological self" (Naess, 1989). In Huayan thought, ethical responsibility arises from insight rather than external rules; because separation is ultimately illusory, harming others is harming oneself.

When informed by this Huayan vision, meditation can reframe climate anxiety. Instead of swinging between despair and denial, practitioners can learn to face suffering while recognizing themselves as part of a larger, interconnected reality. This awareness softens the rigid boundary between self and other that underlies competitive, zero-sum thinking—the very pattern that sustains prisoner's dilemma dynamics.

The implications for climate governance are significant if Huayan-informed meditation can loosen the self–other divide. Ostrom (2010) showed that communities can escape collective action traps when they develop shared norms, mutual accountability, and trust: a constellation of attributes

that might be called a "trust ecology." The pathway from individual practice to building this trust ecology runs through several reinforcing steps. Regular meditation reduces the threat-perception and defensive reactivity that make zero-sum thinking feel rational; practitioners become more able to sit with uncertainty without retreating into adversarial postures. When practiced in community, these shifts accumulate into shared norms: habits of listening, of acknowledging interdependence, of holding others' interests alongside one's own. Groups that share these norms are better positioned to develop the mutual accountability that Ostrom (2010) identifies as central to successful commons governance. They are more likely to believe others will reciprocate, more willing to accept short-term costs for collective benefit, and more capable of the iterative negotiation that durable agreements require. Huayan philosophy provides the conceptual scaffolding that makes this progression coherent, offering a unified vision of why mutual responsibility is a more accurate understanding of what the self is and not simply a sacrifice of self-interest or a useful set of mental habits to be adopted and discarded.

Inspired by Thích Nhất Hạnh and drawing on Huayan concepts of inter-being, the Plum Village "Earth Holder Community" shows how these principles can be lived. The community integrates contemplative practice, mindful living, and climate activism (Negru, 2021). Members report greater emotional resilience and stronger motivation to collaborate. Their experience shows that insight into interdependence can translate into the trust and cooperation that effective climate action requires.

Focusing on the inner and relational conditions that make sustained cooperation possible, this commentary extends discussions of climate and peace beyond politics, technology, and economics. While meditation and Huayan interdependence are not instant solutions, and applying them across cultures requires care, they offer something essential: ways to turn climate anxiety into responsible action, restore trust, and see ourselves not as isolated individuals caught in cycles of competition but as members of an interdependent community of life. In a time of ecological crisis and social fragmentation, this shift in perspective may matter as much as any technological breakthrough. ⭮

About the Author

Kao-Cheng Huang. D.Phil. (Oxon.) is a board member and the former chair of the Chinese Vijnaptimatra Association (Taiwan) and a researcher in Buddhist ethics, consciousness studies, and global sustainability. His work explores how classical traditions such as Huayan and Yogācāra can inform contemporary debates on AI ethics, nuclear risk, and environmental governance. He has presented at international conferences on consciousness, peace, and sustainability and writes in both Chinese and English. Profile on X

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