



One Earth Sangha

Session Five: Core Offering

Transcript of EcoSattva Training 2022-23 Video

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Session Profile

Session Five: Making a Home in Uncertainty

[Session Resources](#)

Speakers in this video

- Kristin Barker - director and co-founder, One Earth Sangha
- Lama Willa Blythe Baker

Transcript

Bodhisattva and EcoSattva Vows

Kristin:

So I'm so grateful to have you with us, Lama Willa. There's just nobody better who I can think of to help us hold this particular place in the training. So, thank you so much for taking the time to be with us, and welcome to the EcoSattva training.

Lama Willa:

Thank you so much, Kristin, for having me, and hello and greetings to everyone in the EcoSattva training program. So glad to be here with you in the heart of our leaning in, to perhaps the most challenging issue of our time in our lifetime, the state of the planet. So



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what I want to talk to you about today a little bit, is the embracing, the finding comfort, in uncertainty. And that might sound like a paradox to embrace and find comfort in uncertainty, but in fact, it's what we specialize in, in the practice of the Buddha Dharma.

And if there's one thing that we can be absolutely sure of, it's that nothing is fixed. Nothing is... Nothing has center, and that's a kind of a timeless truth, and existential truth that can really help us when working with the inner climate of climate change. Climate change brings up in us the storm of concern, fear, anger, urgency, and certainly urgent action is a priority. But our action can be even more powerful and effective, when we come from a place of being able to be at home in groundlessness, and uncertainty. So, I was reading this morning and reflecting on the Zen form of the bodhisattva vow, which is:

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.

Suffering is fathomless, I vow to end it.

The teachings are infinite, I vow to master them.

Enlightenment is inconceivable, I vow to realize it.

This bodhisattva vow really expresses, we'd say, at once impossible aspirations to be a benefit to others. And at the same time, the not turning away from the impossible. And I feel like in the case of climate change and the state of the planet, we're in a very similar situation. It's a huge challenge that we're facing, as a culture, as a society, as a species. And as a member of that species, this can seem so overwhelming that even to take any action seems so small, and almost we can bring up in us these feelings of does it really matter? Does it really matter? And am I really able to do anything, that will make a difference in the long run?

Well, these feelings and these thoughts are not new. In a certain way, they're really ancient, and they were the thoughts of the bodhi sophos and the practitioners of the past. And in this spirit, we could say the spirit of the Dharma, in this bodhisattva vow is even given the impossible, even given that we may never be able to alleviate the suffering of all beings, and in our case, the suffering of the planet. Even if we're not able to alleviate that, we need to learn to stay, and to stay with the truth. Even when we may feel that being near that truth is painful, and also moving towards action, even when we have the sense of uncertainty, and not knowing whether our actions will matter.



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And so based on that Zen form of the bodhisattva vow, I composed an Ecosattva vow, that's in the same spirit of that, that I wanted to read to all of you.

Gaia is in peril, I vow to protect her.

Climate change is relentless, I vow to end it.

Gaia's teachings are infinite, I vow to hear them.

Awakened love is inconceivable, I vow to embody it.

Practices for Being With

So we can take on, we could say a commitment to be with climate change. To bring the suffering of the earth close, and to not turn away. But in order to do that right, we need methods to metabolize, we need methods to stay. We need practices that let us be in the middle of this suffering, of the planet suffering, without dissolving ourselves, right? Without dissolving or collapsing, burning out in our own activity. So how do we do that? How do we metabolize? And meditation practices of leaning in, can be really supportive for metabolizing this suffering of climate change. We can use practices of being with. And so I want to talk a little bit about some of that. First, a practice of titration. Having a practice in your life, of knowing when the toxicity is too high for you to be able to function. So, when we come close to suffering, we also need to be wise about how we're close to it, how much of it we can bring in at any given time. That isn't to say we turn away, but we need to have a sense of what is enough for us to metabolize at any given time, and what is too much, what is overwhelming, and to be able to discern that, and recognize that we too are an ecosystem. And we have to keep this ecosystem in some kind of balance.

And then the second practice for metabolizing, to learn when in relationship to climate change, into the issue of climate change, to be able to at any given moment, turn your gaze inwards, to turn the gaze inwards, and look at what is the weather going on within right now, in relationship to climate change. What is the weather inside right now? What storm is brewing here? And learning to meet what is coming up, your reaction, say to your reaction of sorrow, how to meet that sorrow in your body. And to come alongside that, make room for it, breathe room for it, and embrace that feeling of sorrow with care and attention, and to be with that to befriend.

So this is a really important practice, if you're going to stay near the issue of climate change, we each need a practice of befriending the storm that arises when we're near that



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issue. And to learn too, that that storm is not your enemy, that storm will eventually become the cause, and the trigger for your self-compassion, and for your compassion to others, and your compassion to the planet. That invites you to take a stance of welcoming and kindness to your own feeling. So that you can be with the feelings of others, and their responses, their reactions, their anger, their sorrow, in the face of climate change. You can be a refuge to them as well, but we have to start to be refuges unto ourselves, to be staying near this issue.

So to be in the body, to meet the crisis within yourself, to learn to turn your gaze within. So titration, being in the body, turning the gaze within. Same for me, that's how you meet the emotions in the body first. The gaze is a part of that. You turn the gaze within, and you feel the storm within, and you embrace, befriend it within. And third, are practices of metabolizing. Practices of metabolizing, meaning to stay with your inner storm long enough to let that break open in you, this heart of compassion, and realizing that your pain making the connection. That whatever pain you're experiencing, whatever sorrow, whatever fear, whatever rage that you're experiencing in response to what you're seeing in relationship to climate change and its causes, whatever it is that you're feeling, others feel also.

So letting that awareness of your own inner truth, your own feeling truth, connect you to others, not become a way for you to shut off and become isolated from others, which is often what we do when we're in pain. We close off and we feel separate. Pain can really make us feel separate. But metabolizing means recognizing that the pain that you're feeling is a very human response, and a very normal response to this real situation, and let it connect you to others. Just as I feel anger, so do others. So allow that to create a thread of connection between you and others, who are going through the same pain and suffering that you are. And act on their behalf.

So then when you're acting, it's not me against the others, it's me with the others. And recognizing that the pain that you feel, and the anger that you feel, the hurt that you feel, as a species of this planet, is also being felt by others, and even die, we could say the perpetrators, so to speak. The ones who are ignoring climate change, the climate deniers, they too are suffering, and we'll be suffering, and we'll gradually understand the connection between climate change and their suffering. They may not understand now, but it will be unavoidable at a certain point.



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The Space of Not Knowing

So, understanding that that's the big picture, that we're all in this together, is a way to metabolize. Bringing it near, staying with. And part of that, of course, is the uncertainty. We don't really know. We don't know the outcome of our actions, we don't know even what is going to happen to the planet. Yes, we have the science. Yes, we have some very likely outcomes, but the truth, is that deeper truth is that we don't know. And that being able to stay with the not knowing, with that openness is really important. Because, in the words of Suzuki Roshi, I love what he said about this, "In the mind of an expert or, "the mind of a beginner, there are many possibilities, "in the mind of an expert, there are few." And I think there's some real wisdom in that, that we can take for our practice in our activism in the face of climate change.

We want to remain open, especially if we are activists on behalf of the planet, we need to remain open, we may not know what is the best and most effective way to use our time and energy. So we remain open with a question, what is the most effective and best time and way to use my energy that we can sit in the question? And the question can reveal so much to us, a lot, as time goes on, for what is my role in this situation? What mantle do I need to carry in the situation? The open question. So, how do we create a space within ourselves of becoming comfortable with not knowing. So first, we have to find the space of not knowing.

What do I mean by find the space of not knowing, so our habitual way of being, and the way we're trained to be from the time we're children in the West, is we are trained to know. We are trained to learn, and to accumulate bodies of knowledge, and our success, and our sense of identity, rests for many of us on this notion of what we know. And, the accumulated sense of that, accumulated knowledge is how we define our identity, and how we define our success. In eastern traditions and in contemplative traditions, there is an alternate place to rest, and that is this place of letting go of everything that we think we know. And practice of meditation, a practice of ongoing deep, ongoing and deep practice of meditation, eventually opens us to a space, in which everything that we thought to be true, we see arising like clouds, and dissolving like clouds, that are accumulated, even our accumulated knowledge is contingent and relative.

You might say, as you meditate more, you learn more and more to question that your thoughts are true. Yeah, relatively true, maybe relatively you have a name, a job, a spouse,



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that these things are true. But ultimately, these are like the arisings of clouds. They arise, abide and dissolve. Anything that we put our finger on as real, is actually space and openness in its nature. And that's something that I think we can only really access in the realm of a deep, contemplative practice.

Dying into the Present Moment

We can only access not knowing through the most profound self-awareness that discovers there has never been anyone, or anything to be known. So, that's not a conceptual place—that's a very non-conceptual space, to really rest in the not knowing, to find a home in uncertainty is to enter a space, in which, of infinite possibility of this present moment just as it is. That's really what meditation and Buddha Dharma can bring to activism: is the opening up of a new way of knowing, a new way of being, including how we are with this issue, but beyond that, a new way of being that values presence, that values groundlessness, and that values the possibility, all the infinite possibilities present in this moment. As soon as we know something we've closed down, and we've narrowed our options to one possibility or two possibilities, it's possible to dwell in a bigger space with this issue, and also in general. I think that the climate change issue brings up our deepest fears of mortality, and that it's tied into our personal fear of death for each of us.

And, so I do think that the Buddhist tradition, which is so encouraging of bringing death close, not just bringing suffering close, in the way described in the bodhisattva vow, like, let's dive into suffering, let's be near this, let's be near this even though it's impossible, let's be near it anyway, that's the spirit of the bodhisattva. This is impossible and I'm going to vow to be a benefit anyway, right? So that the beauty of that kind of commitment, and that kind of openheartedness, and that kind of, that willingness we can bring to death, right? The interest in being near it, because of a really deep practice of impermanence. If we can bring impermanence to mind every day, it changes us, not actually it becomes less frightening, the more we reflect on our own death, and more at an invitation to enter into the freshness of the present moment, and to die into the now. Because it is just as you were saying, Kristin, we are always dying, we are always dying.

And while we're alive, we can die our habitual self, which is so tied to past and future. The habitual self that is time bound, and that is defined by the sense of fixedness, in both in space and in time, we can let that more time bound self die into the present moment. When we die into the present moment, there is nothing that isn't healed, if I can say that word in that moment. And even the state of the earth, the state of the earth, the earth is,



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there is so much here now. And we often forget the beauty, the splendor, and the resilience that is manifesting in the planet now.

When we die into the present moment, we are more in touch with that side of the planet's being, which is whole and complete, as it is right now in the present moment. And we need to be in relationship to that planet, the now planet, which is also our now body and our now mind. We need to enter into that space, in order to really find joy, for one, in our daily life, but also find those infinite possibilities of how we can help. How can we help?

That question can't be answered unless we enter into the truth of what is here now, just as it is. For me the end of contemplating death and impermanence is freedom. Actually, that freedom is the result of contemplating death and impermanence. It's not sorrow and heartbreak that is the end of that, it's actually quite liberating, because as long as we're alive, and grasping at life, we are afraid of death. When we're grasping at life, when we're grasping at life, we're a little bit behind life itself, we're actually not in it. When we're grasping it, we're not in it. And when we let go of that grasping of the life that we think we deserve, and need, and have, when we let go of that, we're actually living, and in that livingness there is no death in that moment. Maybe death in the future, yes.

Embracing Paradox

Yeah, and bypass, that's the beauty of the Buddhist two truths. I don't think we can hang out forever in the ultimate term. We have to stay aware of that—the relative truths, which are staring us in the face so starkly. But I think that our practice of being with climate change is more powerful when we can bring those two truths together and not traumatize ourselves with the relative truth. To be enough, enough in relationship to the present, and it's infinite resilience we aren't rendered inactive by the magnitude of the challenge that we face. I think for myself, certainly, I didn't feel like I had a home, without my concepts before I meditated, and meditation helps us see we do have a home. There's many homes we can inhabit without our concepts, the home of the body, the home of the natural world, the home of the senses. We have many places to be other than our ideas of what right and wrong.

So this is a paradox, right? Because we are practicing letting go and being in the space of not knowing, and yet there is a real problem here, and there are real... Our planet is threatened, and the beings in it are threatened. And we need to make a priority of staying



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in touch with our suffering. So, I think the paradox really, which we face every day, in our lives, and certainly, it was a paradox that the Buddhist tradition holds very close, is the truth of suffering, along with the truth of the primordial closeness of freedom, and that both of those things coexist.

That is to say, we do need to let go, and we can't turn away from suffering. And in fact, we need to work, we need to do things, everything we can possibly do in our power, to contribute to a world that is sane and whole, and free of harm. That is our ethical commitment. That's my ethical commitment as a Buddhist. It is the commitment to a hamsa, to being free of harming others, at least as to the degree that I can control it. I think we all have shadow. I think that's important to acknowledge, we have a cultural shadow, and we have personal shadow.

But there's something about learning to hold both of those truths together. The truth of the primordial freedom that is so closely available to us. And, the suffering and the dysfunction, that is the relative truth that we see in front of us, and the suffering that we see in front of us. There is a truth that is whole, and that is bright, and that is present right now. That we can be in relationship with, that can hold the suffering without collapsing and disintegrating with pain itself. It's like, in our practice, we are becoming the holding environment for our own pain, and for the world's pain, a sane holding environment. And if we can create that sane holding environment, it's much easier to act, actually, we're less impulsive and compulsive.

So much more, we can be much more thoughtful about what we do. It's sort of like every Dharma teaching comes down to this, the holding of the relative and the ultimate in some kind of balance that allows for creative, and sane activity that is also responsive to the needs, and the suffering of others. Empathetic, altruistic, those two that balance.

Meeting What is Here

Kristin:

And I also hear there's like, as I hear you speak to this, I also get the sense of what it's... Of in that holding, in that connecting with the absolute level, and then from that place, being in relationship with the relative, bringing the wisdom forward that isn't deeply informed by that absolute is also a... There's a kind of a loosening of the sense of self that goes right along with that, right? It's just not the contracted, that, that self that is kind of



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needing it to go a certain way attached to outcome, it's just in a more mysterious state from that, and much more responsive to what's available, it seems to me.

Lama Willa:

Well, this in the, some of the teachings on the six perfections on the paramitas of generosity, ethics, patience, perseverance, meditation and wisdom, the six paramitas that the in practicing those paramitas, those... I'd say those are the relative positive qualities. And then our commitment to that is really important. And yet—and this is the other part about the paramita teachings. And yet all of those paramitas, are held in the space of wisdom, which means that to you practice them properly, to practice them fully, is to be able to rest in the space that holds those very specific, focused, intention, outcome-oriented, outcome-oriented actions, are held in a non-outcome oriented space of wisdom. If you can imagine that, right? So we do want to be outcome-oriented, absolutely, actually.

But we also don't want to be outcome-oriented at the same time. I mean, from a perspective of a contemplative of a Buddhist, you try to be both at the same time, and that's attending to the relative and the ultimate at the same time. But the actual pain of loss, and suffering, and fear, these are so human and they've been there before. It's old and new at the same time, but I think for me remembering that it's old is important, so that I don't feel overwhelmed like this is unprecedented, to the point where we don't have any way to meet it. We do and can meet it.

And then I will make the excuse to myself. Like I remember making that excuse, well, this is unprecedented, so I can't meet it with my Dharma practice. My Dharma practice isn't powerful enough to address this unprecedented suffering, which I've been there in my thinking, but now I'm not there in my thinking. Right now I'm like, no, the Buddha Dharma does have tools for dealing with the most heart gut-wrenching pain that humans are capable of, like the loss of a child, or the loss of a... Loss of one's country, right? In exile or genocide. These things have been going on for centuries. The planet is, it is... But the planet as we have known it is passing into a new state, and that's the truth that we're leaning into. And this is our particular suffering right now, and we can meet it, we are capable of meeting it, and that doesn't mean making it go away.



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Dana

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