



One Earth Sangha

Session Two: Supplemental Video

Transcript of EcoSattva Training 2022-23 Video

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Session Profile

Session Two: Cultivating the Conditions for Transformation

[Session Resources](#)

Speakers in this video

- Kristin Barker - director and co-founder, One Earth Sangha
- David Loy

Transcript

Kristin Introduces David

Kristin:

Greetings friends. Well, having confirmed our resources and perhaps resolved to take some risks together, we enter here into this downward, inward turn into the U. We'll begin by investigating how we got here. How our belonging, our ability to respond, and our responsibility so much have to do with the way that we look, the way that we see ourselves and this world. And for that we are guided by friend and One Earth Sangha collaborator, David Loy. He is the co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Center, author of the most recent book, Ecodharma, which you'll find in the session resources. And you can also read more about David in the bio section here on this page. So welcome



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David. We're delighted, delighted to have you join us. It's been a long time. We've been trying to invite you into the EcoSattva training, so it's great to have you here.

David Loy:

Well, thank you Kristin. I'm really delighted to be a part of this new EcoSattva training. Talking about the issues as we both know, as we all know are absolutely so critical today and considering what it is that Buddhism has to offer here today.

Kristin:

Excellent David. Again, so great to have you with us as we make this turn into compassionate reflection. So, I'm going to turn it over to you in this exploration of how Buddhism can help us understand what the climate crisis – and indeed all these ecological limits that we seem to be crossing – what are they teaching us? What is it that Western dominant society has conditioned me – conditioned us – to misunderstand about ourselves in our world? What role do Buddhist teachings have, if any, in helping us individually and collectively correct that mistake, those misapprehensions, and perhaps freeing us for the work of healing. Over to you, David. Again, welcome.

Buddhism and Our Predicaments

David Loy:

Can Buddhism really help us understand and respond to the ecological crisis? One possible answer is not. I mean, when we remember that the Buddha, for example, lived about 2,400 years ago in Iron Age India. I mean he, like his contemporaries, and like all of the other traditions that developed later, none of them was confronted by the kind of climate emergency or larger ecological crisis that we face today. But nonetheless, there's two important things there, I think, that really make a difference. On the one hand, from the very beginning, Buddhism has emphasized—a lot—impermanence and insubstantiality, the fact that everything is changing all the time. So much so that we could say the world isn't composed of things, but it's really a confluence of processes that are constantly interacting with each other. And each of those is dependent on other processes.

But the important point here is that that applies to Buddhism itself. We can see the way it's developed, it's transformed. It hasn't just gone to a new culture and imposed itself, but it's interactive. So for example, we see this very strongly in my own practice tradition,



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which is Zen Buddhism, which really developed in China when Mahayana Buddhism interacted with Taoism. So there is this emphasis in the Buddhist tradition on transforming itself according to new conditions, according to new circumstances. And in a way, it seems to me that our present ecological situation isn't simply – as if this isn't enough, you know – it isn't simply the greatest crisis that humanity has ever faced, but I think it's also the greatest challenge that Buddhism has ever faced in so far as it comes to this totally new situation. A modern world that's now globalized, secular, consumer culture. A world that also, ironically, just as we've become globalized, we seem to be self-destructing.

So this is a huge challenge for Buddhism as well as for the whole of our now global civilization I think. So when we look at Buddhism in that light, then we can sort of look at different aspects, different implications of Buddhist teachings and what I'd like to do today is sort of single out what seems to me the most fascinating or the most extraordinary of them. The fact that there is this amazing parallel between what Buddhism traditionally says about our individual predicament, our sense of separation and how we respond to that or not. And our collective situation today in relationship to the biosphere. So Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, famously said that we are here to overcome the illusion of our separateness. And it seems to me it applies on both levels. Traditionally the way Buddhism developed in Asia was very much focused on the individual level, how it is that we need to practice in ways so that we realize our non-duality or our non-separateness from other people.

But I think we can say it's really our same predicament today insofar as we, as a now global civilization, feel that we're separate from the rest of the biosphere. So what I'd like to do is to spend a little time—well, offer a talk in two parts. First of all, give my sort of way of presenting our usual individual predicament in a way that I think will highlight the parallels with our collective predicament today.

Starting out with what is certainly the most important concept in early Buddhism, that is to say Dukkha. I'm going to assume that most people watching this are familiar with the term, but of course it's the one usually translated into English as suffering. That only works if we understand it in the broadest possible sense, right? Not just suffering, but dissatisfaction, anxiety, dis-ease. I think all of those are included. In the early teachings, the Pali Canon, they talk about different types of Dukkha, but the one that we want to focus on today is the Dukkha connected with a sense of separation, or as we would say, the Dukkha connected with the delusion of a separate self.



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And in fact, if I had to pick out one statement, one proposition, one Buddhist claim, that's the one that would really stand out for me the most. The connection that Buddhism emphasizes between Dukkha, dissatisfaction, suffering in the broad sense, and the delusion of a separate self. By which I mean, of course, the feeling that there's a me sort of inside here, maybe behind my eyes or inside the ears looking out at you, looking out at the rest of the world outside. So it's a matter of separation. And when I think the Buddha was critiquing the delusion of self, I think because the self implies a non-self, it only has meaning in relation to a non-self. It's a kind of a dualistic concept, right?

Self and other, whenever you talk about self, there's an other, so what I think he's really doing, what the Buddha was doing was critiquing this delusion of separation. Here I think we can benefit from something that 20th century psychology has learned, right? I mean child psychology, it's pretty obvious that infants aren't born with the sense of separate self, right? It's something that develops as we grow up and as we are socialized. So the sense of separate self, it's a psychological construct in the sense that it's made up of the way that mostly habitual ways of thinking and feeling and acting and so forth. It's the way that they work together and reinforce each other. That's what sort of sustains the sense of separateness.

But it's also a social construct in the sense that it's part of our socialization, right? As we grow up, we learn to use language, we learn to use words like I, me, mine, you, yours, and so forth. And also we learn to identify with names, right? So maybe one of our parents looks into our eyes and says our name and we learn to see ourselves as they see us. We learn to see ourselves as other people see us. This is part of that socialization process. And to be human is not just biological, it's to be socialized in this way. And of course, to a large extent, is absolutely necessary in order to function in modern society. Nonetheless, from a Buddhist perspective, there is a Dukkha built into this.

When we look at the way Buddhism analyzes the sense of self, it kind of deconstructs it in different ways, but I think the basic teaching is fairly straightforward and simple. It's that because the sense of self is a construct, because it basically doesn't have any separate reality of its own, it means that it's inherently uncomfortable. It's inherently insecure. It's insecure because there's nothing there that could be secured. And this points I think to one of the great secrets of life that the way we all experience this insecurity is as a sense of lack. By which I mean the feeling that something is wrong with me. Something is missing, something isn't quite right, or especially, I think I'm not good enough.



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A Culture of Lack

But this is where it starts to get really interesting. So we have the sense of lack, but lack of what? And this is where society kicks in that we are conditioned by our culture, by our society in various ways to understand what it is that we lack. I mean, a thousand years ago in Europe for example, there was a Catholic church that basically had a kind of religious explanation. You've sinned, you inherit the sin of Adam and Eve and you've sinned yourself. But if you do what we say and do penances and pilgrimages and so forth, then you'll go to heaven after you die and everything will be okay. Your sense of lack will disappear. But in the modern era now, we have this situation where that explanation doesn't convince us so much and we're much more individualized and so we experience this sense of lack in a much more secular way so that we have to find ways to resolve the problem on our own. And our society again, conditions us in various ways to understand what it is that we lack.

For example, growing up in the United States when I did, I think we all pretty much learned pretty quickly that we don't have enough money. And in a way, it didn't matter how much money you had, it wasn't enough. And you didn't have enough of the consumer things, the toys, whatever that went along with having lots of money. So I think that's pretty built into American society. But there's some other, I think there's lots of other ones, but a couple of others worth mentioning, especially given all the time we spend now with looking at screens one way and another.

Screens tend to reproduce the same people. We tend to see the same A list, Hollywood celebrities, the same politicians and so forth. And because they sort of are so omnipresent, in contrast to them, we feel insignificant. We feel anonymous, we feel literally that we're nobody. And so one of our 'lack projects', of course, can be the desire to become famous. I think that's a very powerful one. If somehow we can have enough of a reputation, then we will somehow feel more real.

I call these 'lack projects'. Okay. Or sometimes reality projects. Because another way to understand the basic problem is that we don't feel real enough. We don't feel substantial enough. And of course, Buddhism says we're not, in the sense of being a separate entity. So, the problem with all of them, unfortunately, is that because they're basically just symptoms of the fundamental delusion of separateness, because the desire for money, the desire to become famous, because those are the symptoms, it doesn't matter how much



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money we get, it doesn't matter how famous we become. It'll never be enough to fill up this void that we feel at our core.

And it's such a tragedy to see how our society conditions us to play games in a way that we can't really win. Although of course, we have an economic system that benefits from that, that benefits by persuading us that the next thing we buy is somehow going to make us happy and fill up our sense of lack.

Let me just mention two others briefly that I think are important. The idea of romantic love or the idea that somehow if we can just find that person out there, that perfect person sort of waiting for us, destined for us, then somehow we will live happily ever after, as all of the fairy tales end. Which is not an argument against romance, but if there's this expectation that the other person is going to fill in what you lack, then it places a real burden on the relationship in a way that I think makes things more difficult.

Another final example, and again we could go into lots, but...bodies. Our bodies are never good enough. Traditionally there's more weight here on women's bodies and women are expected to be more beautiful. Just to recap a little bit, the delusion of separate self then, because it's inherently insecure, we have this sense of lack that we tend to misunderstand. We think that what we lack is something out here and if we just get enough of it, we'll be okay.

The other point worth mentioning here is that I think this distorts our experience of time. Because in the moment, right here and now, if I just am who I am right now with this sense of lack, well the present isn't good enough. Here and now isn't good enough. All of these 'lack projects' or 'reality projects' involve a kind of future preoccupation. It's like maybe I don't have enough money now, but when I get all that money, then I'm going to be okay. And what that does I think is it tends to devalue right here and now into a means so that we're going to use the now, which is never good enough, in order to get this in the future. And once I have it then everything will be okay. The irony again, is that we never get to that future. We never get to that future where our sense of lack is filled in.

Okay, going on here, the wonderful thing about Buddhism of course is that, in a way it's a 'lack project', but it's a 'lack project' that can actually work. And if you think about meditation in terms of what I've just been saying, we could say that if the sense of self is a construct, right? If the sense of self is sort of shadowed by this sense of lack or inadequacy, what's going on when we're meditating?



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The Delusion of Separation

Well, when we're meditating, those habitual ways of thinking and feeling and acting that I referred to, which compose the sense of self, those still arise, but we don't identify with them or the mind doesn't hold on to them in the same way. So this kind of letting go of them. And so you could understand meditation as a kind of deconstruction of the sense of self, and therefore a deconstruction of the sense of lack. I think it was Chogyam Trungpa who famously said that, "Enlightenment is always an accident, but meditation makes you accident prone."

In Zen for example, we talk about the path as forgetting the self, that our meditation is a way to forget the self. And when we do that, when we wake up, then we can have this realization of non-separation or non-duality. So my favorite version of this, well, two versions, first of all, Dogen who famously said after his own awakening, "I came to realize clearly that mind is nothing other than rivers and mountains and the great white earth, the sun and the moon and the stars." I mean, think about that. Mind isn't, it's not here, it's all this. But actually my favorite version is the Neo-Vedanta Nisargadatta who put it beautifully when he said, "When I look inside and see that I am nothing, that's wisdom. When I look outside and see that I am everything that's love. Between these two, my life flows." Beautiful.

Wisdom and love are, as we say in Buddhism, wisdom and compassion, the two pillars of the path. And he shows the relationship between them really. And this is where it naturally unfolds into the bodhisattva or EcoSattva path, right? In so far as I forgive myself and realize my non-separation, there's inevitably I would say, a profound transformation in the meaning of my life. Because as long as I have this delusion of separation, as long as I have this feeling, I'm not good enough and I have all these lack projects, I mean inevitably there's a kind of self-preoccupation, right? I'm looking for that which will make me feel better, which will fill up my sense of lack, make me feel more real. But if we can let go of these lack projects by letting go of the sense of self and realize our non-separation, then there's this transformation.

It's not about what's in it for me as somebody separate. It's based on the realization that my own wellbeing isn't separate from your wellbeing. Then this question is, what can I do? What can we do together to make this world a better place? And I think that's the kind of natural direction that our Buddhist practice takes us into. So that's the first part of



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the talk. This is sort of my own way of sort of talking about what I think the Buddhist path is really about. And what I find absolutely fascinating is that there's this extraordinary parallel in that everything I've just said about our individual predicament applies to our collective predicament today. Because we not only have individual centers of self, we also have collective senses of self, right? I'm not just David, I'm a man, not a woman. I'm American. I'm not Chinese, I'm white, I'm not African American and so forth.

We have these group senses of self that often are tribalism, the group inside feel separate from the group outside and better than the separate group outside. And we all know the kind of problems that that feeds into. But the group self that I'm interested in here now is the largest one. That is to say, our now global civilization. Or I guess we can say more generally our species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, that we have this sense of separation from the earth. Hmm?

One of the important, maybe the most important aspects today of our sense of separation from the earth is that we not only feel that we're not a part of anything greater than us, but because of that we don't feel we have any responsibility to anything other than ourselves. You see? Here I want to quote just the last couple of sentences of a book that I expect some people have read. It's by an Israeli historian, Harari, and the afterward is *The Animal That Became a God*. Let me just read the last couple of sentences of the whole book because I think it really kind of highlights our predicament today or the price the Dukkha built into the fact that we don't feel part of anything greater than ourselves, and therefore we don't feel any sense of separation. Sorry. We don't feel any sense of responsibility.

Here's how he ends. Despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and seem to be as discontented as ever. We've advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships, to space shuttles, but nobody knows where we're going. We're more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever. Self-made Gods, we are accountable to no one.

I mean, and that's it. No sense of connection and then no responsibility that would come from connection. We are consequently wreaking havoc and our fellow animals and on the surrounding ecosystem, seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement, yet never finding satisfaction. And then the last sentence of the book, is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible Gods who don't know what they want? I



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mean, I think he's onto something there. He's onto the Dukkha built into the sense of separation. The Dukkha that seems to say, "Well, we're just accidents, a genetic mutation. We have absolutely no role to play. Our lives are meaningless. All we can do is enjoy ourselves, consume while we can, if we can, as long as we can until we die." Right? Is that, I mean, I think that's kind of built into our modern secular consumerist society.

And the question is, is that adequate? Is that something that – or let me say it this way – if that's our situation, is it any surprise that we are trashing the natural world in the way that we are? We feel separate from it. We have no sense of responsibility to it. We have no... There's no particular meaning or destiny, so let's just do whatever we can to accumulate as much wealth as we can, while we can. And the fact that we're using it up, well, so what.

Now returning to the parallels, you'll remember on the individual level, this sense of separation. We experienced the Dukkha, the insecurity, the inherent insecurity of our delusion of separate self as a sense of lack, right? Which we understand in different ways. I lack this, I lack that. Not enough money, not enough fame, not enough power, whatever. Is there a collective version of this sense of lack?

And I think there is. I think as soon as we ask the question, I think it's pretty obvious. I think it's our sort of collective preoccupation with never enough economic growth and technological development. I think that's our collective 'lack project'. I mean, if you think about what every government is obsessed with, it's increasing GNP. And not only governments, you know? Not only do consumers always want to consume more, corporations, they may be profitable, but they're never profitable enough. Their market share is never big enough. Their stock price is never big enough. But this kind of future, again, notice the parallel. Or with what I said earlier about now is never good enough with 'lack projects'. We're aiming at something in the future. But here's the question. Why is more and more always better if it can never be enough? Is this the kind of trap that we are in?

Not just individually, in terms of individual lack projects, but can we say, "Is this our collective 'lack project' today?" I mean, economic and technological resources can be really good as a means to accomplish what we want to accomplish. But because as Harari says, "We don't know where we're going, we don't know what we should be doing." I think what, in effect, has happened is the means have become the ends. Just the more and



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more and more and more is somehow enough by itself. And I think we can understand the ecological crisis in those terms.

As Naomi Klein put it, we have two systems. We have an economic system that has to keep growing if it's not going to collapse. And we have the biosphere, all the ecosystems of the biosphere. The one has to keep growing, the other basically doesn't. Sooner or later, those two things are going to come into connection or clash with each other, and I think that's happening right now.

That's a way to understand what the source of the ecological crisis is and as Naomi Klein also said, only one of those systems can be changed. It's not the biosphere, so. Okay. I hope you're with me so far. The parallels sense of separation, the Dukkha built into the sense of separation, and the lack project that so often, both individually and collectively, just makes things worse.

Relating to the Earth

Buddhism offers us a solution, right? A way of deconstructing the sense of separate self as happens in meditation, for example. What's the equivalent for our collective sense of separation? Return to nature? Interesting thought. Returning to a hunting, gathering lifestyle. I mean, that ain't going to happen, is it? But actually there's a fascinating parallel here, another parallel with Buddhism. Because Buddhism emphasizes from the very beginning, it's not about getting rid of the sense of separate self. You can't get rid of it. Why? Because you've never had it. All we've had is the delusion of separation. And the same thing is true here. We can't return to the natural world. Why? Because we've never been separate from it. If you don't agree, please stop breathing for four minutes and see what happens. Or stop drinking water for a week and see what happens. Right?

I mean, so often because of our language, we think of ourselves as on the earth. We think of the environment as a place where we just happen to be. But in fact, our relationship is much more intimate, right? The earth isn't just our home, it's our mother. And we never really cut the umbilical cord. When you think about these systems, air, water, food, well, stuff comes in, stuff comes out. We're part of these much larger natural systems.

I wonder if this realization is built into Buddhism from the very beginning. According to the early teachings, right after his awakening, the Buddha was challenged by Mara. Right? The kind of demon Mara, the sort of representing negativity or evil, whatever. But



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Mara said, "Hey you, you think that you're awakened, you're enlightened now? Well who authenticates that? Who verifies that you're actually awakened?" And interestingly, the Buddha in a famous pose, touched the earth. The earth is my witness. Wow.

What does that mean though? What does it really mean? To say that we are part of the earth? Rather than understanding ourselves as simply an accident of the way that the earth has evolved, that the biosphere has evolved, could we understand ourselves as a way in which the earth is becoming more self conscious, more aware of itself? If we can understand ourselves in that way, I mean, one of the really important things I think is that that would embed within it a sense of responsibility, right? If we are part of the earth, becoming self aware, we are how the earth becomes self-aware, then we're not just something in here, but our bodies are integrated into these systems as we know. And then, doesn't this provide a kind of answer to that fundamental problem where we don't feel that we're a part of something greater than ourselves? How powerful. What would it mean if we actually realized that we're part of the Earth and in terms of how we would relate to the Earth. Yeah.

Earth's Immune Response

But, there's one more point to make here. Collective enlightenment. What does that really mean? I mean, Thich Nhat Hanh made the point. He said, "The Buddha attained individual awakening. Today we need a collective enlightenment in order to stop the course of destruction." I mean, when I hear that, I nod, but what does it really mean? Collective enlightenment? Does that mean everyone's got to become a Buddhist? And a majority of people have got to start meditating really hard and become enlightened in the usual sense? Let's hope not because that ain't going to happen anytime soon, if at all, right? But I'm also wondering if that's maybe looking in the wrong place. Maybe that's too narrow in understanding of what awakening might be here.

And what I'm doing is I'm thinking of a book by Paul Hawken, not his latest one, but an earlier one called *Blessed Unrest*, where Paul Hawken is a Zen student. He's also a lecturer. He used to go around talking to different groups about different corporations. I think about how they could green themselves. He would collect all these business cards, and one day I think he started counting them all and doing a lot of research online, and he came to this amazing conclusion. That something is happening now that's never happened before in the history of humanity. That there's a very large number of groups of people, mostly small, but very large number. And I think he originally estimated between



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a million...a million and a half. I think now he would say over 2 million. There's a YouTube talk he gives on this, by the way. And these groups of people are springing up to work for social justice and sustainability.

I mean, almost all of them are nonprofit, right? They're not about making money. People aren't doing it out of ego, out of a sense of separate self. They're doing it to make where they live a better place. And what I was so fascinated by was that he has a whole chapter there comparing this to the immune system of our bodies. And he says, "This is the immune system of the Earth springing up as it were spontaneously to work for healing. To work for social justice, healing, and ecological healing."

Now, if this is true, can we understand this? And as the Earth sort of correcting itself, right? I mean, if we are the immune system, I think we could understand, for example, the EcoSattva path, socially engaged Buddhist groups as small parts of this larger process that's happening. And likewise, when I think about what's happened just in the past year, this shift of consciousness, Extinction Rebellion, Greta... the fact that so many people are realizing that our backs are against the wall. We have to actually... More and more people are realizing things are much worse than they knew before. And also that governments, just by themselves, they're too corrupted. They're not going to be able to do what they need to do because they're so much in service of wealthy, powerful corporations and so forth. So this shift into direct action, I see this as one important part of this immune system.

This is the immune system, socially engaged Buddhists are part of this immune system. And I think the conclusion that follows from this of course, is that our responsibility, today, to the Earth, our mother as much as our home, our responsibility is in some way or other to become part of this immune system. To do what we can, both individually and collectively, to work for the kind of healing that is necessary today.

I do think that Buddhism has something very special to offer here. But I think that'll be coming out later in the course when we talk about EcoSattva path. Other people in the course, we'll talk about in more detail what that involves. But I think, what I love about the EcoSattva path, to conclude what I have to say is, that it highlights the double practice. EcoSattvas like other bodhisattvas, continue to work on their own personal transformation, their own deepening awakening, but they know that that's not enough. That they know they got to get out there and bring whatever equanimity, whatever insight they experience, they need to bring that out into their social and ecological



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engagement. And I think it's that double path that's very, very important and exactly what we need today.

Kristin:

Well, indeed. The integrated path. Thank you so much David. So friends, in our followup conversation, David and I are going to be looking a little bit more into a few elements about the way that we relate to our immediate environment. And if we can invite a kind of immediacy to our way of looking, increasingly unmitigated by our objectifying relationship, habitual relationship, even our language, we might find more of the belonging that we seek. And this felt sense of membership in the Earth. This notion of separation being dissolving into something more true.

In the meantime, I invite you to support David. The teachers that we have in these series are offering so much in the way of generosity just in contributing to the EcoSattva training. So there's a link down below, support session leaders, and for all the teachers, including David, invite you to contribute in a way that makes sense for you. So thank you for joining this video, and I look forward to our next session as our journey continues.

Dana

We hope you have found this transcript helpful. We invite you to help offset the cost to produce this transcript and the rest of the training by [making a donation to One Earth Sangha](#). Whatever you offer will be used wisely and is deeply appreciated.