



One Earth Sangha

# Love This Whole, Messy, F\*cked-Up World

An EcoDharma Talk Offered by Adam Lobel

*This is a transcript of a talk given on March 19, 2023 to participants in Love this World, an EcoDharma Exploration led by Adam Lobel. Listen to the talk [here](#), or watch the full program recording [here](#).*

Today our theme is loving this world, to love this world. And I want to begin with a question or contemplation. Let's take "love this world" as a statement. "Love this world," let's say that that is the answer. Let's just say, that is THE answer — definitively, fundamentally, always, forever. "Love this world" is the answer. What I would like to invite us to inquire into and explore together is what is the question to which "love this world" is the answer. What's the question?

This is somewhat inspired by the sacred dharma text known as *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* by Douglas Adams. If you did not read that sutra of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, it has this really funny part of the story, where there is a giant supercomputer that's named Deep Thought. Maybe it's an early form of AI. This giant supercomputer, for over a period of 7.5 million years, contemplated the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything. The one job of this supercomputer was to contemplate the ultimate answer to every question. So for seven and a half million years, it did its algorithms and operations and at the end of this time, there was this big ceremony, and the end result was... 42. That's the answer: 42. Now, unfortunately, over the course of seven and a million years, everyone forgot what the question was they had asked the computer. No idea. They had totally lost the question. So now they have the answer: it's 42. It's basically



## One Earth Sangha

useless. Einstein is famous for saying that, really, what's important is asking the questions. It's the questions we ask, not the answers. And this is true of all genuine contemplative inquiry. So, for today, we have our answer. The answer is: "love this world." And what I want to invite us all to do is to contemplate, maybe close your eyes, take a moment. And if you have a flash of what the question is, I'll invite you to put that in the chat. It'd be wonderful if you could just put it in the chat and I'll read some of them aloud. So, "love this world" is the answer. What is the question?

What am I to do? Love this world. How to save this planet and all its beings? Love this world. What's blocking me from doing that? Love this world. What am I scared to do? Love this world. What are we called to do? Love this world. How to work with grief? Love this world. How should we be in the world? Love this world. What is hope? Love this world. What is the meaning? Love this world. Become more childlike again? Love this world. How do we feel whole? Love this world. How should we proceed in this time from here, now? Love this world.

How to live rightly? How do I serve? How can I help? What is it we will do with this one life? What is my purpose? Love this world. How do I work with climate change? Love this world. How do we look after the future? What is my greatest contribution? How to flourish here and now? What should we do about the multiple crises occurring in this world? Love this world. What am I avoiding in my life? Why live? How do we become good ancestors? What is the wisest response to the state of the world? What is the ultimate realization? Love this world. How to be the light in the dark? Love this world. How do we connect and open our hearts? Love this world. So let's just feel this together for a moment, whatever it is that you're feeling. When in despair, when all seems lost, when fear rises, when exhausted – love this world.



## One Earth Sangha

Thank you everyone. Beautiful to feel. In a way, I think that's really it. That's the compass in our heart. That's the way the compass orients towards a love of this world. And it's my experience that that is actually very natural, it's very easy to love this world, it's not a big project. We don't have to necessarily develop this incredible spiritual or psychological capacity or courage or... It's not just Buddhist, it's not just contemplatives. I even think people who — some of us on this call tend to think of as against the environment or not in favor of policies and dimensions of protecting the planet. People we might think of as on the Christian or conservative right, or the Republican Party, if you're in the United States, or whatever projections we have about the people that aren't in favor of the Earth. I would say that for those folks, the same love is there as well.

Love this world. And I think it's there in bacteria. I think bacteria love this world. They're very communal, bacteria. And I think that when we wander the land, you can feel the love, even if it's uncanny and sometimes unexpected, that our bodies love this world. Our bodies in their somatic attunement as we move through space, as we see and gaze out into any space around us, as we listen to sound, our bodies are actually biologically bodying forth millions of years of evolution that have allowed the sense organs – our eyes, our ears, our skin – to be in contact with the specific ecological niche that we are in.

Our very flesh is loving this world as we eat food, give off waste, as we breathe in oxygen, we are in this entangled, living love and connection with the planet, choicelessly, pre thought. So this love in some ways is the easiest thing, to love this world. And of course, to love just how magnificent one tree is. Any tree, find any tree, spend half a day with that tree, in the city, in a boreal forest, in the rainforest,



## One Earth Sangha

alone, in the desert, windswept on a mountain, one tree and its growth, its life, its decay, its reproduction. Let alone, you know, the wonder of a bird's feather or a spiderweb or honeycomb or coral reefs.

So it's just so easy, we might even say natural, to love this world. And I heard in what some of you said how alive that is for you, this love and even the recognition of how that love can be blocked. I guess what I'm saying here is, this is the easy part, we are in love with the world and the world loves us back. There's a naturalness and an appreciation for loving this world.

If we dig a little deeper, this phrase, "love this world," it's become really significant for me. It embodies a question that is right at the intersection or edge between this natural allowing of love and what we might call resistance. For me, and it isn't true for everybody, but for me, the texture of love tends to have a quality of allowing. To love fully, to love completely has a sense of letting what I love be as they are. I don't need to correct or manipulate what I love. I don't need to control it. It's not the object of my will, but there is a letting and allowing and a deep appreciation for whatever comes forth, that love is total acceptance for the completeness and strangeness, and even the pain, the suffering, the foibles, the warts, the toxicity. That love is kind of boundless, that in a way love can feel very natural in that sense and very complete. And this aspect of love connects with what in western philosophical traditions is often associated with nature, that we think of nature as that which is beyond us, beyond our control, beyond our manipulation. That the natural world is a self-organizing wonder, and it therefore exceeds the part of us that wants to grasp, hold, control and change. And that to love this world, to love nature would be to allow that naturalness.



## One Earth Sangha

But where this meets the resistance, this intersection, this edge for me is when we really let our hearts open, our eyes open, our intelligence open to the depth of the mutation, the eco side, the loss, the destruction that has already happened, that's not a coming catastrophe. Environmentalist language can suggest that a catastrophe is coming. We are well into it. And I don't just mean the hockey stick graph of global warming over the last few decades. I mean 500 years of colonialism, which the anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli refers to as the "ancestral catastrophe," that for about 500 years, dominant forces have encircled the globe, destroying habitats, killing off people, extracting wealth, rubber, sugar, gold, silver, shipping human bodies into spaces, turning wild ecosystems into plantations and monocrops, bringing, through the industry, increased toxicity of human-made volatile substances that don't biodegrade, that don't work as part of a reciprocal ecosystem, that we are 500 years into that process that is only escalating.

Here are some of the statistics that I often recite, because they just really affect me: at current rates, by the year 2050, there will be, by mass, more plastic in our oceans than all marine life. By the year 2050, which is not that far away. That's how much plastic we are currently dumping into our oceans, that it will outweigh all marine life, whales, dolphins, plankton. It is just unfathomable to me that that's how much we're distorting our planet. Another statistic that is always penetrating for me is that, when you look at mammals by mass, of all the mammals that are left on the planet, 96% of that mass is human bodies and our livestock, mostly cows.

So that means that we have already dominated and killed off so much of the planet that only 4% of mammals left by weight are blue whales, tigers and lions and large cats, squirrels, wolves, mice, rats, raccoons, platypuses, that they are only 4% of the weight of the planet. It's mostly human bodies and our livestock. So there's a



## One Earth Sangha

level of domination, of change that has already happened that we tend to not even really feel, acknowledge, recognize. It's been invisibilized or pushed aside, it's hidden. We're so used to it, it's normalized, you know, it's like the frog and the pot, as the water temperature rises, you just don't even notice it.

So we are IN this, this is not a coming catastrophe. When I ask, when I really feel into this question, whatever the questions are that lead to the answer, "love this world," somehow it has to be a love of this world that is a love of THIS world. Many of us kind of swell very naturally and spontaneously with the love of a recollected world, a kind of lost garden of Eden, a pure, perfect nature, which is very beautiful, which we should love, which it's good that we love, but it's a really potent, challenging, disturbing, hard question to ask: how do we love the Earth as she is right now? What is that love?

It's a simple question, but I think it pushes the limits of so much environmental spirituality, Earth spirituality, eco dharma, ecological politics. It's like a pressure point that starts to really ask us, are we able to love? What does it mean to love? How do you love a damaged planet? Do we hold onto the memory, the whisper of the lush, thriving planet? Is that politically potent? Is that memory important? Now, of course, this is not to say that there are not still so many beautiful places that are thriving. In some places there is even more forest now than there was a hundred years ago. There are places that have been beautifully protected, thankfully, thank goodness. There are places that were created as parks, as wildlife sanctuaries. There are people who sacrifice their life, often Indigenous people on the front lines in Bolivia and Colombia, in the Philippines and Indonesia, who are there protecting the last remaining habitats. Marine biologists protecting the



## One Earth Sangha

waters. There's so much beauty that is still here that we can love and celebrate and we must protect fiercely.

But even those protected areas now require human laws and sometimes human force and protection and boundaries to protect. There are whole species that would not live without human intervention, endangered species. Which means that not just the areas that we think of as toxic and wasted areas, but also these beautiful areas are also now dependent on humans in some way. This is very strange. And what I'm describing here is sometimes known as the Anthropocene, a geological age where human animals are a driving force for our ecosystems all over the planet, shaping the actual elementality of our Earth.

And this is interesting because it's a slightly different language than saying, we're disconnected from the Earth. This is showing how enmeshed we are with the planet, that capitalism is not disconnected from the Earth. Capitalism is an ongoing investment and material relationship with minds, with lithium, with timber, with oceans, totally inseparable from and entangled with the planet. So we are transforming and have transformed this world. This is known, for those who use this term, as the Anthropocene, an age where humans are constantly altering the planet in much more extreme ways than we usually allow ourselves to recognize. So you could say, the questions I'm asking here are: how do we love the world within the Anthropocene?

And that might mean loving the world through the Anthropocene until it's no longer the Anthropocene. And we're in what Glenn Albrecht calls the Symbiocene, which might be the next age on planet Earth, an age where humans and all life are in a symbiotic relationship. So to evoke the Anthropocene, this age of human



## One Earth Sangha

mutation of the planet, isn't the end of the story. It's the beginning of a story, the beginning of a story where we once again and in new ways, learn to love this world into a more symbiotic and loving world.

This tension for me is about accepting and allowing our Earth and our love for our Earth, while at the same time protecting, resisting, engaging, participating, protesting, blocking, advocating. The work that I do in this realm has to do with this petrochemical plant that's a half hour from me here in western Pennsylvania. In our region, the Royal Dutch Shell has, over the last few years, built a 10 billion dollar petrochemical plant. It's massive, it's 356 acres, brand new infrastructure. I think a lot of us assume that we're still stuck with the old, dirty, fossil fuel infrastructure from before we understood global warming. Not true. This is brand new, it just opened this year. It will create 1.6 million tons of plastic each year to dump into the environment. Plastic never biodegrades, it just breaks down into microplastics and enters into the food chain.

And it re-enlivens the fracking industry, which drinks up the Marcellus Shale, the dinosaur bones and plant life from 300 million years ago. And then it cracks the ethane byproduct of fracking, turns it into plastics and ships that out around the world to kill animal species, to pollute. Usually, almost entirely, it's single-use plastics that we don't need, for which there are alternatives. The injustice is extreme and people have almost no say in this. There's no democratic process, it's not like the people decided on this plant. And within the first month of opening the plant exceeded its volatile organic compound emission quota for the year.

What we do in our crazy world is that we allow these huge plants to be built and then we say, you can pollute and kill people up to so much, and after that, we're





## One Earth Sangha

going to fine you. So you have x number of metric tons a year of toxins and carbon emissions that you can release. Well, this Shell cracker plant opened up in December and it exceeded its emissions for the whole year within less than a month of opening. And the only thing that happens is the EPA gives some minor fines, which they've already budgeted for. They've already assumed the cost of polluting more than they're allowed to and built that into their profit margins. So this is what's happening right now, and this continues. So how do we love THAT world? How do we love this world? How do we love the Shell cracker plant? That's a wild question that I ask myself. Is the Shell cracker plant this world? Is it this Earth? Is it not? These are the kinds of questions that we as humans, we as practitioners need to be asking.

I want to offer just three words to help guide us. And then I want to turn it over to some inquiry to see what's happening for you as I churn the pot here. The first guidance that I think can support us in loving this world is sadness. Sadness. As we know from love, if we love people in our life, we know that there's often a kind of vulnerability, a kind of sadness, softness that can come through love. That love is not only joy. There's a kind of love that's joy, but part of love is also a sadness, by which I do not mean depression, but more tenderness, being softened by love, being humbled by love.

The next word I want to evoke is wonder. I think for many of us who love this Earth, wonder arises so naturally when we're in the mountains, when we are looking out at the desert sunrise or a full moon coming up, when we see the first flowers of spring, there's this awe, there's this sense of wonder at the beauty of this world. And I want to invite us to extend our awe and our wonder to petrochemical plants. It's a different kind of wonder and awe. But as long as our eco



## One Earth Sangha

dharma only focuses on this imagined fantasy of the Earth, and we're not able to incorporate at least some kind of awe, wonder, amazement, pain at the level of toxicity and change, I think we have a very limited sense of wonder. Sometimes philosophers talk about philosophy as cultivating the capacity to be surprised, which I think is a good definition of wisdom. Wise people have the capacity to be surprised. I think a lot of us have lost the capacity to be surprised. So in invoking wonder and awe, I'm also inviting the possibility of being surprised by the planet we live on, really shocked and opened through that love and wonder.

The last word I want to evoke here is trust. This is very, very subtle territory. How do we trust, how do we find trust when we're in the Anthropocene, when our ecosystems are being so challenged? What do we trust? How do we find trust? In many ways, trust is an ecological phenomenon. As animal bodies, we feel settled, our nervous system feels relatively at ease when we breathe clean air, when there's not a fire coming, when the actual ecological region around us is supportive. There's such a deep level of trust that has been part of what's called the Holocene, the geological age before the Anthropocene, that for the last 10,000 years, the ecosystems around human animals have been relatively supportive. You know, there have been a few issues along the way, like saber-tooth tigers and the black plague, Earthquakes, volcanoes, it's not necessarily been smooth sailing, but there have been relatively supportive ecosystems for about 10,000 years, the 10,000 years in which human civilizations have flourished.

Now we're entering an age where that kind of ecological trust is questionable and you can feel it rippling through your own bodies, through our cultural knowledges, our sense of ecological anxiety. How do we discover trust again? Because trust fosters love. How do we find trust in the Earth and the elements? How do we



## One Earth Sangha

attune to and be in real relationship with our Earth? These are the challenging questions that I think are all underneath our phrase, "love this world": this sadness, this wonder, and this trust. For me, this feels like such a political and a spiritual opportunity. Everything is changing. Everything is up for questioning. This is an amazing time to be alive.

When we're in relationships, often romantic relationships or friendships, it's very easy to see how someone does not love us the way we want to be loved. And we often blame the other person that they don't love us in the right way or something like that. There is also the capacity to learn to feel loved, developing the ability to be loved, which we don't talk about very often. It's not just offering love to the Earth, to each other, and to the world, but learning to receive love, learning to feel how much the Earth loves all of us. This endless giving and abundance, it's just so amazing. What every second the Earth is giving: nourishment, food, oxygen support, gravity, beauty. We are living in this gift. Our bodies are the outflowing of this gift. Our very sense and capacity to sense and feel is this gift. Even feeling lonely and isolated is the gift of the Earth.

We are immersed in so much. So part of the way we've been cut off from the Earth is when we forget to feel or we are unable to feel the love of this planet for our own being, and that can help with this loneliness and isolation. Of course, there's so much more that I would love to say and explore, but I think what has happened is really magical and beautiful. So if anything, I want to encourage you to just take with you this very simple phrase, mantra, guidance, "love this world," and learn into that. Let it challenge you. Let it challenge us. Let it awaken us. Let it awaken this courageous, courageous heart to love this world and to be loved by the world.



One Earth Sangha