



One Earth Sangha

Session Two: Core Offering

Transcript of EcoSattva Training 2023-24 Video

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Session Profile

Session Two: Preparing for the Journey

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Speakers in this video

- Damchö Diana Finnegan

Transcript

Offering Our Presence to Earth

Damchö:

Very warm greetings and thanks for letting me accompany you on this next step of the great transformative journey that we're taking. There are lots of different ways to think about what this journey is about and I thought I'd share with you one way that, within the community that I'm part of, we've been thinking about it, and that's in terms of this being a journey that we're taking to accompany a loved one that we've discovered is ill.

So the journey could be the journey of accompanying them, of being present for them during their illness. Maybe at this point of the EcoSattva journey, we're getting ready to start out on the trip to be with our loved one, which is the whole earth, it's all beings who



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we've discovered are ailing. And we undertake that journey with this with this sense that we're hoping deep down it's not too bad that maybe there's still something that could be done. But beneath that, a suspicion that this is actually very, very serious. We're not sure what we'll be able to do about it. We don't even know if there is anything that we can do about it, but we're going to be present. We're obviously going to be there with our loved one in their time of difficulty. And many times we do depend on that loved one. And so the sense of fear, and the sense of love, and the sense of need, and wish, and hope, that's all bound up together. All of that has a place on this kind of a journey. But beneath it all, we know even if there isn't anything that we can do, we are going to show up. We have to be there.

Then we also can imagine that when we gather around our loved one who's unwell, there are going to be many of us. There are many of us who love her. There are many of us who are concerned, who are moved to sit at the side to act, to join forces, to think about what each of us could contribute, how we might be able to do something. At least we leave the suffering and maybe to find some sort of way to change the course of what our loved one is going through. And so at this point of that kind of a journey, we want to be sure we have everything with us that we might need. We're sort of packing our bags, we're sort of checking, what are we going to need, what do we want to have handy?

Anchoring in Meditation

And since we're taking this as a spiritual journey and we're seeing our accompaniment of the earth or our action in favor of the earth as part of a spiritual practice, that's where we can turn first to think about what are the ways to train in being present that we might need, knowing that we are going to need to have our ability to turn towards suffering, to be there when there is suffering, to not turn our head away. We're going to need that ability to be very, very present. And in some ways, anyone who's practiced Buddhism for any length of time is already going to be familiar with that turn towards. Sometimes we don't stay there as long or as well as we want to, but we know that that's part of the commitment, is to look at suffering. And then we can look at the causes and we can go from there. But that very first step is the point of entry into a Buddhist path.

And so how do we anchor ourselves internally when we know we are in the presence of something that's going to shake us, that's going to move us, it's going to be difficult to see. And that's a moment to ask what ways does my meditative practice support me in that? And to be thinking about, I really want to see that as a resource, I want to draw on it as a



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resource, maybe I want to renew that element of my practice as a resource to have that handy. And the anchoring in ourselves, anchoring in our practice, anchoring in meditation is part of another key piece that we're going to want to have really handy on the journey, which is our emotional resilience, our ability to notice what's going on inside us and tend to it. All of the different forms of wisdom that we've developed, all of the different specific practices that the different Buddhist traditions and different Buddhist teachers are transmitting — those are all really valuable pieces for us to really know where that is for ourselves.

And another piece that if we imagine our journey — and maybe this analogy doesn't really work for you — imagine it as a journey where you want to end up ready to act and sustain action in an area and in a time where that's going to be difficult. Whether you think of it as our earth is suffering, she's suffering, all the beings that depend on her are also suffering. How am I going to turn up for that? What can I contribute to that? How do I hold myself in the presence of that? What could I offer to it? However we think of the question that we're asking ourselves at this moment, which is, how am I going to make this journey? What is going to sustain me? What am I going to need for it? What do we as human beings need to move together through this?

Personal Ethics of Care

One key piece that we can look at as well is our sense of connectedness. Now, when we talk about turning towards suffering and being present when things are difficult, we are talking about being able to stay connected. Being present is being connected to whatever is there at that moment. And this can suggest what are the ways of being and acting that flow from connectedness? And how do I start having them really very intentionally on my radar as things that I'm going to want to be holding onto, or taking inside myself, or just having present.

And this might suggest that we really want to think about what would a personal ethics of care be? What is my way of relating that I would consider ethical, where I'm offering care where it's needed? And personal ethics of care — basically when we're talking about orienting ourselves towards another with an attitude of care, or orienting ourselves towards ourselves with an attitude of care, we're thinking about love. We're thinking about some sort of openhearted willingness to receive connectedness. We can think about it in terms of a practice of loving kindness where we are really wanting to make our loving-kindness or our *metta* big enough to hold suffering. And this is a huge sphere of



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suffering that we're thinking about when we're thinking about the earth in crisis, the earth in a moment of urgent need. That space of holding has to be very big. And we have practices that we can draw on that help us to hold a heart space that's big enough to not be overwhelmed by the fear that looking at the crisis directly provokes in ourselves and in others, the anxiety, all of the different personal responses that can come up. How do we hold them? And when we think about a practice of loving-kindness or *metta* as a way to sustain ourselves through this journey, it's also a form of resilience that will allow us to stay committed and stay connected, to stay present.

And we have so many different paths to learning how to draw on this ability that we have naturally, but that we develop through practice of being present and especially offering a loving presence. And we can think of beauty as a path to love. We can think of being in the presence consistently of something that we recognize a connection to as a way to open-heartedness.

Widening Circles of Kinship

And I want to suggest a specific practice that I've used and I find very effective for myself and I think other people may too. And that is to find one being, one non-human being. It can be non-human animal. It can be any form of flora, of trees, plants, one being in the area where you'll be spending your time during the next months that this journey is going to take place, and make a practice of offering your presence to that being regularly, as if it were your loved one. Maybe you could think as if it were your loved one whose wellbeing is in question, you don't know, you want to hear, you want to listen, maybe you want to communicate something. And the practice — people can use houseplant if you don't have access to an outdoor space — connect, sit, offer loving presence, talk, listen, communicate, observe, care for it. As a practice in recognizing relatedness, as a practice in offering an other-oriented, loving presence in relation to that being, and also as a practice in beginning to have a full-bodied experience of our kinship to other beings.

And that sense of connectedness and that sense of kinship in itself is a resource that we can turn to. *Metta* practice can be an entryway into recognizing, feeling a sense of kinship, of care, of connectedness. And what we also need as a resource in this journey, in this time that we're living in the anthropocene, is ways to find an experience of safety and security when times are changing so drastically towards an uncertain future, so rapidly that we don't know where we're going to end up. We don't know how to stay protected, how to choose the wise course. There's so many forms that can generate a tremendous



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amount of insecurity, completely validly. And so for us as practitioners to know where do I gain a sense of security in what I'm doing, in my path, in what I want to offer? And just generally in this period and in the life that we're leading in this time of crisis.

Finding Our Refuge

And when we think about safety and security in Buddhist terms, that very often is discussed in terms of refuge. And so it's a really good question to be getting clear for ourselves right now and having present, what are my refuges? What really, not just what I repeat as a chant sometimes, but where do I really find refuge? And in Buddhist terms, we talk about refuge in the Buddha, refuge in the Dharma, refuge in the Sangha.

For many people the experience of having devotion in the Buddha, the Dharma or the Sangha, does give a sense of security. We open ourselves in an attitude of trust. And when we have something or someone that we trust, that does help us gain a sense of security. And so I just want to say, because devotion very often has sort of a bad reputation in many contexts, that when we are thinking about where are we anchoring ourselves, trust, reliance, which can move towards faith — maybe faith is a little better than devotion, and then faith, we can translate to ourselves as confident — where do we really feel like, yes, this I can really, really rely on? And for many people practicing the spiritual path, it's the teachings, it's the Dharma. And so if that's true in your case, just have that clear, what does that mean for you? How does that manifest? How do you hold yourself within that space? How is that a resource for you?

And there are also many figures that we can draw on, set aside the question of faith or devotion for inspiration, for a sense of being connected to other beings or having models that are acting in the way that we want to learn to act, or that are manifesting their presence for others in a way that we want to learn to manifest that presence, sources of inspiration.

And one example that many, many people who are practicing, especially in Vajrayana or Tibetan Buddhism turn to is the figure of Tara, Tara of the Acacia Forest. So just to put that there as an option for those who feel this figure who's manifesting in a green body, in a feminine body devoted to enlightened action, who wants to be present, who lives an ethics of care with every gesture of her being, that can be a source of inspiration. Kuan Yin, the female form in which Chenrezig has manifested in East Asian context, the idea of this figure whose compassion is so completely evolved and perfect and present that she,



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he, they take whatever form is appropriate for beings, nothing to hold on to that I need to appear this way. And so Kuan Yin can appear in many contexts, shifting sex, shifting the forms that she takes, to be perfectly loving and present. That can be a source of tremendous inspiration. And that can be a way of taking refuge in the Triple Gem. And I know that you'll have some exploration later of the dark side, the bypass that can happen in taking refuge with different forms, and so I'll leave this in your thoughts, knowing that it will be well tended to later.

There's also the possibility if that's a refuge that you're thinking of having really ready and developed and present for yourself to inspire yourself with Thich Nhat Hanh's suggestion that maybe it's the Sangha that will be the next Buddha. What does it mean to have your community as your source of refuge? To know that you have people that you are connected to, and can more intentionally connect to, who are sharing this path with you, who are sharing this life with you and who are committed to serving as a refuge for one another. How does that manifest for you in your spiritual journey in life and particularly in this EcoSattva journey where we're developing a spiritual practice that allows us to turn up, really fully turn up, in a way that is effective, that's skillful, that's compassionate, that's wise. So what does thinking of your sangha as a refuge do for you?

And when we're thinking about different forms in which the Buddha can manifest for us, and we're looking to connect in a way that brings security and confidence and inspiration, for me, there's a figure who appears in some narratives with the Buddha that I find particularly inspiring, that I want to share with you. And that is none other than the Earth Goddess herself.

So in certain narrative traditions, which are not perhaps the tradition that we've heard first — that are seldom heard — we know the story of the Buddha's enlightenment. Very often we've ended up with this figure in our minds of the Buddha as the solitary meditator and the solitary hero who by the strength of his own mind, determination, *Paramitas*, merit, whatever has gained enlightenment, there's a narrative tradition that explains to us and makes visible this semi hidden presence. We know that when the Buddha is close to his moment of enlightenment, when he's not quite the Buddha yet, he's confronted — this is in the narrative tradition — he's confronted by Mara, by this personification of temptation, of obstacles, of distraction who questions him. And the Buddha reaches his hand down towards the earth in the earth touching gesture, which is the gesture that signals to us visually, that we're seeing a representation of the Buddha at his moment of awakening. And he reaches down and he asks the earth to be his witness.



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And if we have heard any stories about this, most likely we've heard that she appeared and served as his witness. Maybe we heard that there was an earthquake. The earth trembled in six ways. But there's another tradition that tells us she appeared at that moment, she responded to the Buddha's call or the Bodhisattva's call for support, for help, for witnessing, for her testimony. And for her it was a call for intervention.

And in this narrative tradition — I just want to share an image or two while I narrate this story — the Earth Goddess turns up and she sees the army of Mara that's surrounding the Buddha, and she wrings her hair, and a river of water comes flowing forth from her hair, which tells us her hair is powerful. And all of the water comes as this giant stream and it overwhelms and completely floods out the army of Mara who are transformed in their attitude and who start respecting the Buddha, respecting her, and they're no longer attacking.

And here she is much closer. We can see the hair that she's wringing out and we see her sometimes represented dancing. She's in motion, she's in action. And then when we see her in this narrative tradition that's very often represented, for those of you who've been to Thailand, you most likely have noticed murals that depict this perhaps without having heard the story. And in this tradition, often she gets more attention than the Buddha. She's the central focus of these images. The enlightenment story, the moment of awakening is not a single person acting. It's the earth participating. And the idea behind the earth wringing out her hair and being the one who eliminates the obstacles to awakening has to do with the fact that there's this idea, especially in South Asia, that when we make offerings, when we're commemorating an important monument or action or *dana* or offering donation, water is poured onto the earth.

And so there's this idea that's echoed that the earth has been receiving water and she's been holding the moisture of the good acts of the Buddha for all of his lifetimes. And this story is telling us that everything that we've done is recorded. The earth was present, always, in every moment of our life. She was our companion and she is present and holding our actions within herself. This is a very early way to awaken us to what's going on in the climate crisis, what has been going on to yield this crisis. And the Earth Goddess makes herself fully and completely present, and she has the cumulative acts of all of the past lives of the Buddha. And she directs them, because the Earth can direct where water goes, and she directs them in a way that's necessary at that moment.



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And this is a story in which the world is participating in the moment of awakening and the personification of the earth. And maybe we feel it's a little problematic to always have some anthropomorphic form of the earth. Maybe we want to connect with the presence of the earth in a different form. But this story is a way to have her present as a figure that we can connect with, we can be inspired by. And this idea of connection in the moment when we need refuge and we need inspiration in this time of climate crisis and ecological crisis, a great deal, as you'll see soon, of the responses that we have are fundamentally fear responses. This is the condition of our lives that is changing in ways that we don't know. And we know many of them will be harmful. We know catastrophes are coming, they've come. And so what are our responses to fear?

Changing Our Stories

And we're so familiar with the idea that the fear responses fight or flight, and maybe freeze, as a third alternative. And there was a lot of research that made that a very popularly understood and accepted idea, and that certainly — those are present as responses. But there was a researcher who noticed that the subjects of research were all men because the researchers thought females, hormones, cyclic, too complicated a variable to include, let's not include them as subjects. And so she consciously took as her research subjects also women. This was Shelly Taylor, a researcher and her research team at UCLA. And she identified other responses to fear, which she called, since fight or flight sounds so good together, she called "tend or befriend", which is caring, turning towards who needs care, who's vulnerable in that moment or befriending, finding yourself, finding a group to be part of. And these, we can see, are very common animal, human and non-human reactions to the presence of a predator. You look for the vulnerable or you find the group and you connect.

And so these are just ways that we can be attentive to what are the paradigms that we're using for understanding our experience and therefore what are the paradigms that we're using in our response to what the climate and ecological crises are awakening in us? And this brings us to the very broad frame of the work that we're doing, which is seeing if we can migrate from the paradigm that has led us to this moment, the paradigm of extracting, the paradigm of hyper individual where we are each seeing ourselves as essentially disconnected individuals who are each jostling for a place, who are competing for resources, who are each seeking to use all within its means to control or dominate the other and therefore extractivist cultures, consumer cultures, where we want what the other has for ourselves.



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This is a paradigm that has dominated our experience and that has led us to a certain mode of relating to our kin in the natural world, to seeing when we divide into “self” and other in this paradigm, “self” is “us”, and “other” is “not us”. If “self” is us, “other” might be nature as a construct, as a thing, as an object that we then wish to control and find a way to relate to that’s best for us, as if we weren’t part of it, as if it were other. And we do the same thing. “Self” can be us and then the “other” can be non-human animals. And Buddhism does participate in this by making a hard distinction between the human realm and the animal realm and we want to be attentive to how we can move away from that. “Self” and “other”, non-human animals that don’t share what we are, or humans — “self” is the kind of human I am and the “other” is the kind of human that I’m not, based on whatever particular attribute I’m focusing on at that moment. Gender, age, race, sexual orientation, class, economics, education, abilities, whatever it is that I’m focusing on, we make through this paradigm of individualism of disconnectedness. The result is the climate crisis. The result is taking and doing things to the earth without recognizing that we are affecting all of ourselves, that we are part of this “other” that we think we can act on with impunity or only for our own interests. So that’s one paradigm.

The other paradigm is the paradigm that’s outlined in teachings on interdependence where no, we don’t have — there are not essential differences that hold us apart. That “other” is dependent on “self”. It only makes sense in terms of “self”. “Other” is a construct that’s related to “self” and therefore doesn’t really exist as “other”, that we are fundamentally co-emerging at all moments. That we are interdependent and we are held apart by our ignorance manifesting as the stories that we tell ourselves about ourselves, in which we are individual characters each playing out our own eco — autobiography, not eco biography — autobiography, held apart by the idea of separate selves, the idea of individual things.

And practices of loving-kindness or *metta* are ways to start to soften and dissolve those boundaries. They are ways to the stories that we tell, attending to the stories that we tell can help us see if we are looking for resources based in this paradigm or our resources, what we’re turning to, what we rely on fundamentally based in a competition, fear, threat, disconnected paradigm. And loving-kindness is one way of responding and one resource that is fundamentally founded in the recognition of interdependence. Our impulse to turn towards the suffering in another is founded in the paradigm of interdependence. Our courage or commitment to act when we see another suffering, knowing that is not another’s suffering, that’s our suffering.



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The ability that our practice gives us to stay with the trouble or stay with the truth. Our emotional resilience where we tend to ourselves in our relatedness to others. Our refuge. If we are taking refuge in something that is a source of confidence, that's a valid, reliable source of confidence. And we're taking refuge not as an external force out there that's going to protect me from above, but as a resource that holds me as I hold myself and hold it. And our attentiveness to the stories that we tell ourselves and our attentiveness to the meta narratives that those stories are arising within. Is the meta narrative me against the world, apart from the world, as if I were something separable from the world? Or is the meta narrative — are the stories that we start telling ourselves and the experiences we start giving ourselves — based on those stories and based on our intentional practices, are those stories reflecting an awareness that I — the I is not something fixed. There's no eternal essence that holds me apart. I've constructed a sense of self and we have constructed collectively a meta narrative of separate selves in large part through the narratives, the specific stories emerging from that meta narrative that we're actively telling ourselves or internalizing. So the idea that in reality the self is not fixed, it's a narrative self, that sense that we have of being someone who's there in all our stories, the continuity of a single character, it's the result of the countless and very varied stories that we've been telling ourselves. And we can tell different stories. And that ability is one of the resources that we want to have on hand in this journey.

One of the reasons that we want to really take our time here and think about where do I need to take myself so that I have undergone a transformative journey that will allow me to migrate from one paradigm to another, to learn to act from a different paradigm. And here Audre Lorde's comment that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" can be a good reminder of what we're doing right now. We are very used to working with these within a certain paradigm with tools that are based on a certain relatedness of self and other, of a certain way of understanding ourselves as separate. And those tools are part of the paradigm that has gotten us into this trouble in the first place. We want to really rehabilitate ourselves by intentionally taking recourse to tools that align with a different paradigm, so that we are using other tools that can dismantle and reconstruct the alternatives that we want to be acting from.

Where we want to get in this journey is being able to act and sustain wise, compassionate, effective action that's going to be collective. This is the individualist paradigm, we are going to recognize this is a collective crisis. Our response needs also to be collective, but in order to act that way, we have certain reconstructive work that we are giving ourselves a condition to do. We have a certain way of thinking. We have a



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certain way of seeing the world and talking to ourselves about the world. Now we start understanding the distinction between the paradigms. We start understanding our interdependence. We have a whole lifetime of practice behind us and maybe ahead of us of learning to feel, to really feel our interconnectedness.

Feeling into the Journey

And all of the different practices that I've mentioned from *metta* to generosity, to offering loving presence, to working on emotional resilience, to having clear what our refuge is, to connecting, to thinking about developing an ethics of care as a resource, these are ways that are helping us start feeling that all other beings are our kin. They are our loved one who's in crisis. And we want to be there. Not just we should be there or we need to be there, we want to be there. We naturally are going to be there. And the shift from thinking to feeling, which so many Buddhist practices have to do, how do we get things from the head to the heart? How do we experience the truths that we might recognize first in an abstract sense? How do we experience them in a fully embodied way, involves going from thinking to feeling. And when we are feeling connectedness, loving-kindness, an intense compassion, this naturally leads us to action. And so we want to make the time and the space and to give ourselves the permission to do the work that is going to allow us to emerge as the most confident, courageous, and fully equipped actors — in the sense of acting, not as the sense of being in a play or maybe it is a play — but being fully embodied and effective actors who are acting from the paradigm that we want to be establishing in the world.

And so using the practice, which just to remind you of really inviting you to encourage to think about having that as a practice, to have some non-human being that you're developing a relationship with and experiencing what that relatedness can awaken for you, in you, and in the relationship to the other as a way of experiencing kinship with others. Not as a concept, not as a nice theory that, oh, I love that idea, but as something that we really start to feel so that is where we are acting from.

And so the questions that we can take right now as we move forward to the next step is, what is my story about this journey? What is my story about myself on this journey? What am I telling myself about my commitment to turn towards the earth's suffering right now? What are the stories about separateness and connectedness? What shifts when I recognize the earth as my silent witness and my constant companion in life? How can I experience and act from a sense of kinship with all beings? What are the refuges



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that I turn to when things are scary or challenging or painful? Who or what do I turn to for strength, for inspiration, or for courage?

And so I invite you to locate for yourself all the tools you want to have at hand and begin turning intentionally toward everything that your practice puts at your disposal as we start to open ourselves up to this beautiful, challenging and request that the earth is making of us. To reconstruct from another place, relationship and action in that relationship. And so I invite you to explore your own answers to these questions as we start to do that together. Thank you so much for inviting me into this piece of the journey with you.

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.