



One Earth Sangha

Session Three: Core Offering 2

Transcript of EcoSattva Training 2023-24 Video

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Session Profile

Session Three: Meeting Just this Heart

[Session Resources](#)

Speakers in this video

- Kristin Barker - director and co-founder, One Earth Sangha
- Britt Wray

Transcript

Into the Heart of Distress

Kristin Barker:

Hey, welcome Britt. Welcome to the EcoSattva training. We're so, so delighted to have you contribute to this program. In my experience of your work and then doing the work of One Earth Sangha, it just feels like there's a lot of compatible, overlapping territory, ways of looking, and ways of being with-in particular the territory of Session Three, which is where we are in the EcoSattva training-of looking at what is this like for the individual to be encountering this situation, both in terms of its narrative and the geophysical reality that's now just manifesting in our world. Shall I say undeniably. So welcome, welcome, welcome. Thanks for doing this. And I just want to give you a chance to say hello to the



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folks and then maybe say a little bit about how you came to the focus that you have chosen of your work, including maybe, but going beyond perhaps, *Generation Dread*, your book.

Britt Wray:

Absolutely. And thank you, Kristin. I am really honored that you wanted me here in this special offering that you're bringing to people around the ecological crisis, mindfulness, Buddhism, so much wisdom that is desperately needed in the world today to be able to grapple effectively and move forth with these permeating structural traumas that we have to grapple with as a result of the climate crisis, biodiversity crisis, and so much more. So hello to everyone who might be watching this. It's a pleasure to be able to talk with Kristin in front of you and be able to be in some form of engagement, at least in our minds, despite me not being able to see you live right now.

And to answer that question, how I got into this work, it really is because of my own confrontations with really impairing climate anxiety. I like to talk about climate distress and eco-distress as an umbrella term because it's often so much more than anxiety that people report feeling when facing up to the climate crisis. Yeah, there's anxiety and grief and dread and outrage and sadness and maybe a feeling of helplessness, guilt, shame. And I've certainly cycled through all those things.

So a few years ago, I went through profound levels of distress about the climate crisis that started impairing my ability to concentrate, my ability to just have fun and enjoy the world. I would say impaired functioning, which is when you know something's a real threat to your mental health. And I became laser-focused on all the bad news and the scary scientific reports. And I fell into a deep crevice and hole of pain where it was just so difficult to rip myself from it and focus on all the positive and glorious, joyous things that are also part of human existence. Even as things do weaken and crumble structurally or life support systems fall into disarray, I wasn't able to balance that negativity with the positive experiences that are also here in existence.

And it was really brought on by my desire to get pregnant and my science communicator career and taking in a lot of really just upsetting reports all the time, and grappling with the implications of climate science and other forms of conservation biology data. Mainly noticing the lack of effective action to govern and to hold power in legislative assemblies in ways that are aligned with what the science says must be done to protect the future, as a place where people can thrive, and the more-than-human world. And then wanting so



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badly to bring a child into this situation. I couldn't just waltz into it. I had to really, existentially, deeply examine what it meant to do that and how I could parent in the climate crisis. I wasn't really sure what that meant or looked like.

And so it sent me on a deep investigation of the psychological impacts of the climate crisis; just because of my compassion for people who might be going through similar rounds of pain around reckoning with loss and outrage about the perversity of the systems that we're living in and the abuses of power that are ongoing. And I was really in search of some kind of guidance on how to deal with this anxiety and grief, and I couldn't find it really anywhere. And it's not that it didn't exist, I was just new to this space of looking at how our minds are being changed by a changing planet. And so I went out to write a book that I needed to read.

And through looking at this kind of reproductive anxiety question, it's now really common to hear young people saying that they feel hesitant to have kids because of the climate crisis. But a number of years ago when I started feeling this way myself, it wasn't, and I felt really deviant for even asking the question or it was very socially isolating to put that question forth. The norms weren't really there yet to legitimize it. And so the work was really created from a place of trying to help shift into norms whereby people can express these fears and concerns and find others who will validate them and hopefully then constructive coping and acting from there.

Kristin Barker:

Yeah. Beautiful. Thank you. Thank you for that. And I love that you are naming this necessity of naming so that we don't feel like "I'm the only one who's feeling this way. There's something wrong with me. Everyone else seems fine." And that's a myth, and a painful one. So what a service to the world for you to investigate that question. And also the particularities with which you identify the various manifestations of the difficulties. All the things that that can turn into. All the ways that it's showing up in your heart. Not simply like eco-distress or eco-anxiety, but really going in and describing those.

Normalizing Ecological Grief

Kristin Barker:

So that brings us to what you maybe learned in the course of writing that book. In particular, what did you learn? What are you learning about how we can relate to those difficult emotions and experiences? How can we better understand and respond to them?



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Britt Wray:

Yeah. So when writing the book *Generation Dread*, I met and interviewed hundreds of people. I met them either in group workshop formats or one-on-one. And so often people would say, "Oh my goodness, someone's figured it out. Humans have actually put some words to these things I'm feeling." They would hear for the first time a word like "solastalgia"—which describes a homesickness that we can have when we're still at home after so much negative environmental change has taken place there that we can no longer recognize it as home—and feel liberated, feel seen, feel understood, feel calmed to know that they are not the [only] ones who are dealing with some kind of pathological strangeness. And often there's a lot of shame that comes with caring so much when you don't see it represented in the flock of humans who surround you and who might care more about getting cheap flights to an all-inclusive vacation than talking about what is happening to the biosphere.

There was that emerging vocabulary around what Glenn Albrecht calls "psychoterratic emotions." He's the philosopher who gave us the term solastalgia. But he really means a variety of states that are felt or perceived of the pain of the earth itself that come in through us because of our interconnection, because we are in deep relationship with natural systems. And therefore, of course, what is trembling within the earth is going to be trembling within us.

And eco-anxiety—when framed not as a mental illness, which it is not, although it can become so severe that it starts to impair functioning and is a threat to mental health—in itself is actually a sign of connection to reality and wakefulness and has been suggested to be a compassionate response. Caroline Hickman, the climate-aware therapist, says, "What if we called it eco-compassion instead of eco-anxiety? How would we relate to that differently?" And I also find when people hear that for the first time, there's this massive ability to just let the shoulders down and like, "Ah, yes, I am seen. I am understood. This is actually a badge of my humanity and proof that my heart-mind is big and capacious, and that's a thing to be proud of."

So there's the psychoeducation piece about having terms to describe this discombobulated sense of pain that we can be cycling through. And then there's also the finding community piece, which comes up again and again. It's the isolation and alienation of caring so much and feeling the grief and anxiety and dread and not having an outlet of anyone to speak about it with. Because sometimes when we try, we might be met with



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another person who tells us we're catastrophizing or being dramatic or that we don't have an accurate read on the situation. Or there's a minimizing of the distress, which also leaves us feeling much worse.

And in order to avoid that kind of uncomfortable and non-helpful encounter, we can keep it in. And that gets doubly enforced by the fact that this is a kind of disenfranchised grief, which psychologists use to refer to losses and grievances that are not recognized easily with others. Like suicides and abortions and miscarriages and other kinds of really difficult losses, which are not as straight and narrow as talking about the death of a loved one that you go to a funeral for and can collectively mourn with others in your community around. So what does it mean to be able to mourn changes in our life support systems, to other species, to a sense of a climate-stable future?

We don't have cultural codes for that, and we can be very easily made to feel like the weirdo when trying to do that with others if we don't identify a safe space in which that distress can be contained and metabolized and composted and explored. But those spaces are existing more and more now because of the rising distress up there. And I think one thing that I've learned from all the people who I interviewed in the book who have insightful things to say about what it means to learn to live with the climate and ecological crises in a more balanced way is that we actually need to feel our feelings fully to completion. Not run away from them. Not have a knee jerk reaction to try and fix them, which especially in Western culture, there's a huge impulse to do. To be able to face the things that scare us most. To be able to — and this is where Buddhism is also very valuable about teachings of impermanence, that we are all of the nature to grow old and die. And that we also are so afraid of climate impacts because they make us think of death and destruction. And we need to be able to face mortality to also harvest insights and our power in the present moment to be who we want to be at this time of so much existential change. And emergent possibility that we can't yet dictate what it's going to look like.

So sitting in that uncertainty, being able to hold the tension of the anxiety, being mindful of all the emotions that are moving through us in a way that they can reveal their insights about how much we care. And also the power we have to be in the moment to come together with others, to belong in a deeper way, to love, in a more profound sense, to connect our capacities to positive change-making in the world. Because, and what Buddhist teachers have really impacted me with is this power of being able to touch the end of things in order to then come alive in the present moment. And there's always that



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beautiful dynamic of touching grief to be able to survive it in the present moment by loving what remains even more fiercely than before. That it expands our loving capacity.

So long, long-winded way of answering you, Kristin. But it's really, really important that we can stabilize an environment to hold us to do work with our emotions, which is scary and uncomfortable. And not try to paper over the feelings, but truly allow them to move through us so that they can guide us with whatever we do next. But it doesn't need to always be about turning anxiety into action or harnessing and transforming for positive change. It can also just be about being in it and then allowing the wisdom and insights to emerge from that space.

Kristin Barker:

Yeah, I hear a lot of beautiful dharma, a lot of beautiful Buddhist wisdom in that, in terms of the skillful means of holding the difficulties, setting the conditions for a container that can hold them. And then being able to move in and be with and not reject or neither collapse into. These are the risks that we have, that we need a considerable amount of resource, including our practice and each other. So I think you're speaking to that in beautiful ways.

Understanding Collective Trauma

And I'm wondering — I also hear references to things that we have learned about trauma itself. How can we — or what do we need to understand about what trauma psychology, even if it's sort of lowercase "t" trauma. It's not like there's big overwhelming external physical trauma. And then there's kind of more subtle forms of trauma that seem to me to really apply in this space. And I hear that in some of your sharing there. I wonder if that's the case and if you can identify the particular lessons and insights that we might take from trauma psychology.

Britt Wray:

Yeah. There are of course different types of traumas that threaten our sense of safety, threaten our existence; forms of abuse that are very hard to recover from, which connect with what we're dealing with in the climate crisis. And there are forms of trauma that are very different.

So where a certain type of sexual offense, let's say, might've been a one-time, horrific occurrence that occurred in a person's past that they have to, in their healing process,



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find ways of learning it's not still happening to them and that they are actually safe in order to recover. That's very different from the kind of trauma of being a person of color living in a racist white supremacist society whereby the affliction is not happening one time in the past, but it is happening all the time ,everywhere in different valences, sometimes very egregiously, sometimes extremely subtly, micro-aggressively, all of which though can be very harmful. And this is not something by which there is a simple intervention to do a few times and overcome. Not saying overcoming trauma is ever simple, not to try and minimize that very difficult work. But there's a process of needing to learn to live with and strengthen and empower and nourish oneself with the protective factors that allow one to thrive, even amidst oppressive systems, which is tapping into a kind of collective trauma space of these structural external sources of threat that then hurt groups of people.

And of course, so many people who have long lived under existential threat and oppression, living under an authoritarian regime, dealing with genocide, intergenerationally, as many indigenous peoples have; slavery, holocaust, ongoingly, there's so many collective traumas. And the climate crisis has been suggested to be the first kind of collective trauma that actually touches us all, regardless of creed or caste or other forms of intersecting identities because it is so all-encompassing and permeating to the complex biospheric systems in which we're all living.

But of course, we will be and are being impacted very unequally. And climate injustice is super rife. But it is permeating into all aspects of human existence and affecting our institutions and our health systems and our psyches and the resilience of our cities and so on and so forth. And so there's a — similar to the trauma of being a person of color living in a racist society or being a woman living in a patriarchal society — there are ways of fostering protective factors and reckoning with difficult truths. And then finding ways of connecting to source and cultivating joy and being able to fill up our cups enough so that we can deal simultaneously with all the suffering that's part of that traumatic collective scenario that we need to learn to do if we are to live skillfully in the climate crisis. Which means living skillfully with collective trauma.

And this is why it's not just anxiety about a potential uncertain future that could come that is freaking people out. It's already here, it's already happening. We know that it's getting worse, which is why a dread of something that is somewhat certain and happening is an interesting word to use instead of the kind of open idea of anxiety that may or may not have an object.



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And as a way of questioning what trauma means for all of us living under this umbrella of it, some of us are completely dissociated from it and not acting on it and sticking our heads under the sand because it's painful to confront the reality. But when we're defending ourselves constantly, it thwarts our ability to act. And then we maintain, with much intense effort, our comfort in the present moment by kind of softly denying what's going on at the expense of the future becoming terrifying because we aren't tapping into strong networks that can help push for that much-needed change that the science tells us is required. So yeah, trauma responses of trying to get out of danger are also I think really tripping us up right now when they are preventing both eyes open to the crisis and allowing us to reckon with the opportunity we have to really step into agency. Because instead we are avoiding the news, the crisis, the difficult conversations, the necessary changes.

Kristin Barker:

Yeah, it's so important to understand even the dynamics of distress itself. So this is where they really come together of having Buddhist ideas of supporting myself in practices that down-regulate. Like knowing the mind that's in an anxious spin. A friend of mine has this saying: "My mind is not my friend right now. My mind is not my friend right now." And it was a way for her to remember to come back to the body and say, "I'm having a lot of thoughts. I can't necessarily trust them." Not to say that my fears — not to gaslight myself, but rather to acknowledge that I'm not in a place to make great decisions or see things super clearly. So job one is the guardian of mindfulness. Like, oh, mindfulness is my friend. I can help steady myself. He used the word steady. So important I can study myself in this moment to where I can now be useful to myself and others and world.

The Dynamics of Dread

So it's such a wonderful coming together, I think, of naming the ways that what we've come to understand in modernity about trauma and the ways that we really need that medicine. And Buddhism also being part of that medicine for what's going on in us. So yeah. You mentioned the word "dread," and I like your distinction there from your book, why you chose that word. I want to invite you to say anything else that you feel like is important. To me that's very apt and very potent. "Dread" is such an interesting term. It implies so much. So if you want to say anything else about that. But also the word "generation" is in there. And there's lots to unpack there in terms of the dynamics of age and age groups regarding the challenges that we face.



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Britt Wray:

So I want to be really clear that what I'm about to say does not mean I am at all supporting the idea that the die is cast and there's nothing that we can do. There's a lot that we can do, and the future is very much still in our hands as to how difficult it will get, how much quality of life we'll defend. Especially for the world's most vulnerable. "Narrative foreclosure" is when we believe that no event that could occur or emerge would have a positive impact on writing that story of the future. And it's just a narrowing of possibility, which is what anxiety and depression do to the mind. It closes-in a sense of capacity, possibility, narratively forecloses you to a doomed idea of the earth becoming hospice and no other way out.

Kristin Barker:

The, "It's too late syndrome."

Britt Wray:

Which is everywhere. And which is super unhelpful as it eviscerates people's sense of agency, self and collective efficacy, the belief that their actions can make a difference when, of course, all of the positive emergence that is before us, that is possible, depends on us being agents and having strong collective efficacy so that we bring it about. That we roll up our sleeves and do to work. That we improve the future.

So this is not meant to be a statement that could at all get us towards some kind of narrative foreclosure of the future. However, dread felt so apt for what I was feeling and for what I was hearing from many people around me when doing the research for the book, because there's this vision of where we're at now and knowing things have already gotten worse. But just every day, all the actions that we're taking mean that it's falling through our fingers. Consistently. Always. Every day that we don't act. More and more is falling away, falling apart. And you feel like a hostage because those with power are not acting or employing the solutions that we have or listening to scientists or being rational. And so you're watching this thing, this collapse in real time, in slow motion, and also feeling restrained.

The helplessness becomes a very difficult thing to contend with. Even though we are not powerless, it's easy and understandable to feel helpless when we aren't the president or head of a fossil fuel company. And it's that interaction between the loss and the powerlessness, which creates a sense of just dreading where you know that's heading. It's



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not a pretty picture that these things accumulate to because what we're talking about are trends. None of this stays static. It just worsens and worsens the more that we don't act. And the double-time danger is that it's not just that we aren't acting, we're adding fuel to the fire every day. So that's the dread, while also feeling like you're a climate hostage, which really just touches the marrow of how nightmarish the scenario is when you truly open up to it.

And I think it's important to name that because we are so afraid of being negative in public and talking about difficult emotions. And we really like to be hopeful. And we really like to talk about all the constructive, wonderful things that are also part of the human spirit and psyche. But that leaves—more and more as the external obviousness of how bad the situation is piles up—that just leaves so many people feeling unseen. And they don't have an authentic locking dock, a place to find their foothold and get involved in this conversation from a more grounded, rooted, authentically, spiritually open, and real place. So we need to name what people are feeling, and stand in the pain together for it to be psychosocially supportive. For there to be a benefit. Otherwise, people just go more and more into the shame spiral of isolation and separateness. And we have an epidemic of loneliness right now.

The Second Arrow of Suffering

Kristin Barker:

Yes, that seems so related to the kind of worldview isolation that we find ourselves withdrawing into because of that not wanting to name climate crisis in mixed company, where mixed company is anywhere where it's not welcome. Such few sacred places where we can unpack these things, which is kind of what One Earth Sangha is about, is creating the spaces for us to meet with these realities with skill.

I interrupted here because you've identified something that I just want to lift up for folks that there's — and see if this resonates — there's two sources of the heartbreak. There's the primary loss of all that we're seeing, lost, experiencing, quite material in a lot of cases, being lost, and knowing that that trend will continue. That's one category.

But then for me, it was a big moment for me to identify and name for it within myself. The second arrow kind of aspect of this — the "This was avoidable and yet isn't being avoided." And still isn't being avoided. It's like the second piece of it. It's enough to have so much loss. If it was a meteor from outer space and boom, we couldn't detect it, and here it



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is. That would be sort of primary loss, grieving, fear for what else may be lost. But then the secondary piece of, oh, these are my people where my people — I point at myself in particular in the social location that I have writ large — these are the choices that we continue to make. Because in no small part of ways that we can understand having to do with the emotional landscape and the difficulty of all this, as well as just our attachments to safety and comfort in all of those things. But nonetheless, there's this second category of grief and loss that I think needs to be named. And the intensity of holding that for me is at least they both feel very intense.

Britt Wray:

Very well said. So deeply true. That second component is so often missing from the discourse around climate distress. And that's a big mistake. Especially as usually it's young people who are being described as so climate anxious that it's impairing mental health and making them feel futureless. And of course, anyone, and many of us of all ages are feeling this. We just need a certain amount of environmental identity, feeling our connection to the more-than-human world, and remarking, understanding that our own health is tied up with the health of our environment. And then naturally all the distress comes and follows from that. But when we write it off as though young people are just soft and weak because there's some environmental damage and they're being sensitive to that, and they just need to figure out how to take a few pro-environmental actions and join a climate group and then get over their feelings in order to be restored, that is a deep, deep miscalculation of what's going on.

It's not just that young people are so climate anxious because the environment is filled with more and more disasters and degrading and not doing well. It's that those who are enlisted with the responsibility to protect them, the people who run countries, institutions, sectors, are actively not holding up their end of the deal. They are governing in ways, they're making corporate planning scenarios, that turn away from what science says must be done to create conditions in which health can be not only restored but promulgated into the future. And so that is a deep sense of abandonment by adults, by power holders, by the people who are supposed to be in charge. And therefore, we shouldn't worry that much because smart people are working on the problem—that kind of idea to get people to calm down. And things are off the rails in that domain when we look at progress with climate goals and where emissions are and so on and so forth. So that is really psychologically damaging because it's a type of institutional betrayal. And psychologists have studied institutional betrayal in different contexts when power holders and the adults who are supposed to protect people who are dependent upon them for



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their safety because they're minors, let's say, because they can't vote, let's say, they don't have that power yet. And when they see that they are being thrown to the wolves can cause deep psychological damage, anxiety, depression, suicidal thinking, all kinds of things.

What does it mean to confront that much moral distress? A sense of being morally violated day in and day out? When you see what leaders are doing against what all of our best science tells us. When you're a young person and due to natural demographic shifts you aren't yet in a place where you can become that power holder yourself. So yeah, I just think it's really important to talk about that and that the two go together because it's not only that the stuff was preventable in some cases by certain actors, it was deliberate.

It's like there were corporate planning scenarios of fossil fuel companies that had internal modeling groups on the greenhouse effect and how their products caused it to worsen and to promote global heating in the late seventies and eighties. And their own internal scientists predicted very well what would be happening today. And they have internal memos talking about how this is going to become a catastrophe for a large subset of humanity if they didn't change that corporate planning scenario. And then instead of running with that science that their own internal staff had created and published, they sowed doubt in the public. They cherry picked data, they planted fake experts. They got us trapped in decades of "what about-ism" and putting a climate denier and a climate scientist on a talk show at the same time. And obviously we wasted a lot of precious time when we could have been gently transitioning to the healthier regenerative green climate-just future that we need. And now it's coming in this very crunched format instead, which implies that there's a lot more suffering attached to that transition. So yeah, it's just so important to talk about that because the world has been, it's a crime scene really in the climate crisis. This stuff was deliberate.

Kristin Barker:

A crime scene. So two things here. Just to add a little bit of, I think actually quite necessary nuance to what you're describing here, is that we know that there are plenty of leaders who are trying to sound the alarm who have been. So it's not a wholesale abandonment. But it's critical mass abandonment. It's been, the outcome is one of a different way of saying is just profound corruption of dereliction of duty. These things evoke another aspect of eco-distress, which is maybe we call it eco-anger or eco-rage or something.



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Community Saves

I actually want to bring us back to something that you evoked earlier about the necessity of community in all of this. With a broad view of community that includes the more-than-human world, includes the rest of nature, includes earth, and our sense of earth that actually can be — that must be, I suggest — part of that exploration, part of that questioning of what shall I do with this ignited fire?

So that community is normalizing for us. It is communicating resonance. You're not alone. But maybe also helping to inspire and guide wholesome responses. That it's — again, not just up to this one to figure it out, because I can't figure this stuff out — but there's something about that larger field that I can lean into in ways that maybe my culture didn't teach me how other cultures may be instructive in this way. And, also, the body can be so much a friend in this. So I think that that's where some of the Buddhist sensibilities that I have grown maybe can come into that really important question that recognizes and validates the rage, which is certain kind of intelligence I would suggest. It really does express something very necessary about the wholeness of this and this.

Britt Wray:

Yeah. Yeah. I always am so relieved to just remember and get back in touch with that eternal truth that community saves. It is incredible when we open up to the truth that we are all experiencing this together, we're not alone in this, and how we can stand in that fire together and support each other through it. It's kind of like, okay, sign me up for everything. Whatever may come. We're together in this sangha and this network, in this community, in these reckonings. And even in that place, I can get excited about anything and everything.

One of my readers from my newsletter, *Gen Dread*, shared with me a mantra that she wrote herself from her reckonings with this, when you're going through the distress and the gang of negative feelings and you're getting so depleted trying to make a difference, not knowing if it's ever having the impact you want it to and so on. And she says, "This is my mantra. I am one person. I did not cause this mess alone. I cannot fix this mess alone. I have to live in a society that doesn't support good choices. So I must make compromises. If my mental health fails, I will not be able to contribute or fight. I am not a bad person if I have limitations, and I can't always do more so that others can do nothing. I'm not



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perfect. I'm not pure. I'm not tireless. I'm only human and doing what I can. And then I get back to work."

And it's just this lovely script of yeah, self-compassion. And embracing of the ambivalence of being alive at this time when we're stuck in these structures and systems making bad decisions. And trying to improve them. Getting depleted. Knowing you're not alone. Connecting to the community truth I hear throughout that. Which allows us to be lighter with ourselves and more skillful with how we hold all the pain that this moment presents us with. So thanks for letting me read you MamaSelkie's mantra.

Kristin Barker:

Oh, and what a great manifestation of the necessity of community. Here's you and I in conversation, and then there's this other voice that we're bringing in that we need, that so beautifully articulates the complexity of the situation and also the necessity of "Oh, here's what I need to remember because I am inclined to forget these things, so I'm going to make this a freaking mantra that I can return to remember myself." Beautiful. Beautiful.

Alright, so we will leave it there. Thank you again so much. Is there anything that you want to say to the community to wrap this up?

Britt Wray:

I hope that you have a really wonderful, nourishing, great experience on this journey with a very beautiful shape that Kristin has showed me of what you are learning together over these coming days. So yeah, all the best to you.

Kristin Barker:

Thank you. Thank you so much, Britt. Yeah.

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.