



One Earth Sangha

Session Five: Core Offering

Transcript of EcoSattva Training 2023-24 Video

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Session Profile

Session Five: Making a Home in Uncertainty

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Speakers in this video

- Lama Willa Blythe Baker
- Adam Lobel

Transcript

An Inconceivable Task

Lama Willa:

Hello and greetings to everyone in the EcoSattva Training program. I'm so honored to be here at the invitation of One Earth Sangha, to collectively lean into one of the most challenging issues of our time, the state of the planet. And welcome Adam. I've asked my dear longtime friend and peer Adam Lobel to be here with me and be in conversation. I find a talk goes so much more smoothly when I'm in a relational field. So thank you, Adam, for making that possible.

Adam:



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Thanks for inviting me, Willa. I'm really honored to be here. And so curious what will arise from your teachings and our exchange today. You're one of the teachers that is really leaning into these questions with such fullness of your whole being, and so I'm excited for our dialogue.

Lama Willa:

Thanks, Adam. Me too. In the session before this one, we explored Reckoning with Entangled Structures with Dr. Larry Ward and Dr. Michael Yellow Bird. In this session, what I want to explore with you all is how we make a home in uncertainty, the bottom of the U. So how do we deal not just with the storms out there, but with the storms in here, and especially this sense of groundlessness that we face in relationship to climate change. We are in unprecedented territory. We're in an unprecedented moment in our planet's history. How do we hold that? And it might sound a little bit like a paradox to embrace and find comfort in uncertainty, but it is what we specialize in the practice of the Buddha Dharma.

So climate change brings up in us the storm of concern, of fear, anger, and urgency. And what may be most frightening about climate change is not just what is happening to us right now, but the anticipation of what is going to happen to this planet in the future. And it's true that urgent action is a priority, but how we act, what ground we come from matters. And it's easy to forget that the speediness and the sense of urgency that we feel about climate change is the agitated state of mind that to some degree, to some extent or another has gotten us into the situation that we're in.

We have failed for decades to slow down and to take stock of our impact on the planet. We've placed a priority on productivity, speed, and consumption rather than pause, presence, and simplicity. So we need to leave behind, at least to some extent, this era of human-doing, this headlong pace that we've been following as a species. So leaving behind that era and entering an era of human-being and being itself, that is how we are, is a radical act. We may not think of that as action, but that is a choice to slow down, to turn inwards and to focus on finding stability in this time of great instability.

And this is a radical act that our Indigenous communities and our Buddhist ancestors, our Buddhist lineage ancestors, have been cultivating for thousands of years. We might call it an art of being. And that art of being is not so much based on a fixed view of reality. It's based on the idea that we always live with uncertainty and groundlessness. It's based on the idea that action can be even more powerful when we come from a place of being able



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to be at home in groundlessness and in not-knowing. And so along those lines, I was reading this Bodhisattva Vow from the Zen tradition the other day, and I wanted to share it with you, that Bodhisattva Vow, this is from the Zen tradition.

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.

Suffering is fathomless, I vow to end it.

The teachings are infinite, I vow to master them.

Enlightenment is inconceivable, I vow to realize it.

So this Bodhisattva Vow really expresses these impossible aspirations to benefit others. It carries with it this understanding that suffering is endless. And in some ways we are facing the same kind of truth that these ancient Bodhisattvas faced, which is that suffering seems enormous, boundless, endless. And it seems like it brings up for us these questions like, as a member of this species, suffering is so overwhelming. Any action that I do, it's just a tiny drop in the bucket. Does it even matter? And am I really able to do anything that will make a difference in the long run? These are the same questions that we're asking ourselves now in the face of climate change.

And in this spirit, we could say that even given that we may never be able to alleviate the suffering of all beings and in our case, the suffering of the planet, even if we're not able to do that, we need to learn to stay and to stay with the truth. Because staying with the truth brings us closer to being of benefit to ourselves and to others. And even when we feel that being with the truth is painful and that moving towards action seems almost impossible, even when we're living with this sense of profound uncertainty, everything we do because of the truth of our interdependence with everything, everything we do matters.

And so the EcoSattva Vow that I wanted to share with you to reflect on a little in this time together is this:

Gaia is in peril. I vow to protect her.

Climate change is relentless. I vow to end it.

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

Awakened love is inconceivable. I vow to embody it.

So really this is this ancient vow of the Bodhisattva just brought up to this time and place. It brings up for me this possibility that we as sentient beings are capable of holding space



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for love and compassion, holding space for kindness and openness in the most dark of times. So Adam, thank you for being here. Do you have any thoughts on this?

Adam:

Yeah, thank you Lama Willa. I mean, right now I'm just so filled with and moved by this EcoSattva Vow, which feels like it goes right to the heart and right to our planet. And thank you for that. And it felt to me like receiving that vow in the context of what you were sharing was so strong, so much love in it and so much concern. And I think the question that's just immediate for me, it's something that I feel and I'm sure you feel and we hear all the time, is kind of getting into how we relate with and face the overwhelm. My sense is that for many of us, our everyday life, even if we're totally ignoring and bypassing what we're doing to our earth and climate change, our ordinary life, our relationships are often overwhelming already. We live in such a confused society. Many people turn to meditation and Buddhism to work with that overwhelm. And then when you add this impossibility that you're naming the vastness of the change, how do we face that overwhelm without completely losing it and making ourselves just almost part of the problem? How do we get real with that level of overwhelm?

Practices for Metabolizing Suffering

Lama Willa:

Thank you Adam for that question. Yeah, right. Because this Bodhisattva Vow is encouraging us to acknowledge that this is huge, right? Huge. And overwhelm is the response when we're facing into something this big. So we do need ways, we need techniques, we need portals to enter into relationship with the truth. And Buddhism does offer us those portals. And while there are many practices that we might turn to, I wanted to share a few with all of you in this course. And I would call these something like practices, ways of staying. Ways of staying with what we are facing, first. Because if we can't stay with what we're facing, our alternatives are to turn away and to suppress, avoid, distract ourselves and ultimately not use our being, our body, speech and mind to engage.

So there are a lot of practices in the Buddhist tradition that can help us with metabolizing our suffering, including anxiety, and in our case now the anxiety that we feel based on what we're witnessing.



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The Practice of Titration

And so one of those practices, one of my favorite practices to mention is just a simple practice, a practice of titration. And I say titration. Titration is a word that comes out of chemistry that has to do with making a decision about how much of something you can be exposed to before you experience overwhelm. So one of the other things that is true about our day and age is our constant accessibility. The constant accessibility of information that is pouring into our screens and pouring into our eyes and triggering our trauma. I mean, we are taking it in. We're taking it in through our screens. We're taking it in through these devices that we have in our back pocket.

We weren't meant as animals to be exposed constantly to those kinds of triggers. We used to live in an age when titration was how we actually lived. Our information and our exposure to trauma was titrated simply by the fact that we were living simpler lives and we were living in the present moment with the world that we were in and the people that we were with. And now we're exposed to the entire world and all of its catastrophes. So we need to make conscious decisions about when is the toxicity too high for me to function? When does it become too high? And so this titration is not an act of abandoning others, turning away from others, but titrating your exposure to packages of information that someone decided should be with us 24/7. And really ultimately we have to decide whether that makes sense for us. So we have to keep this ecosystem, this beautiful, natural, wild ecosystem right here in balance too. Finding a practice of how we're going to expose ourselves in a measured way.

The Practice of Looking Within

And then the second practice of metabolizing that I want to mention is with relationship to the issue of climate change, is the practice of turning your gaze within and looking at the weather that is going on within you right now in relationship to climate change. What is the weather in your heart? What is the weather in your body? What storms are brewing there and learning to meet what is coming up, your reactions of sorrow, your reactions of fear, anxiety, developing a practice of coming alongside your eco anxiety and making room for it, breathing into it, embracing that anxiety with care and attention, learning to befriend that weather inside of you. And that is a very advanced practice actually.

And even though we may think of that as, well that sounds so simple, it actually takes a lot of mindfulness, takes a lot of attention and takes cultivation to be able to meet what's



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inside of you with that kind of love. And so I'm going to call that a practice of befriending. And actually there are many practices within Buddhist tradition of befriending, but I'll be offering you all here in this course a guided practice of that. So you can turn to that and make that a part of your daily cultivation if it speaks to you.

You're learning really when you do a practice like that, that the storm inside you is not your enemy. That the storm actually will eventually become the trigger for your self-compassion and for your compassion to others, your compassion for the planet. So once you understand that process of how you're not just befriending it for your own comfort, and you're not soothing your eco anxiety just to feel better, you're actually recognizing that your eco anxiety is the channel for you to understand and connect to other people and their anxiety and to the planet and its pain. You begin to see how the metabolization process frees you into a state where your heart is not just broken or breaking, but your heart is breaking open. So the only way to see that is by engaging with it again and again by entraining yourself not to turn away and then entraining yourself to walk through the portal of your own pain and go far enough with it. It's a connector and it opens up into love. So that's a particular journey, that may be the whole spiritual journey that we're on.

The Practice of Not-Knowing

Third practice that I want to talk about here is, we could say, a way of metabolizing, is a practice of discovering that things that you think are not all that is true. I'm going to put it like that - a practice of not believing everything that you think. And that isn't to say that our ideas aren't powerful, that the truths that we learn about climate change aren't powerful and very important, the truths of tipping points, the truths that we read about. But there are other ways to understand what is true. And some of those ways are not so connected to thinking as they are to opening up into the field of being. And that field includes our senses and it includes the wisdom of the body, it includes the wisdom of that which is non-conceptual, the wisdom of our profound and natural interdependence and oneness with each other.

Knowing that kind of oneness isn't an idea, it can't be gotten to through ideas. It can be approached through developing a relationship with the non-conceptual space of your present moment experience. And meditation helps a lot with that. When we start to meditate, when we start to slow down, when we start to look within, we notice that we're much more than what we think, that there are places of refuge in us that are more than



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that. So that was a long answer to that question, Adam, and I know you also engage with these practices, or these are familiar to you too.

Adam:

Yeah. That's a really helpful threefold and there's a lot of depth in each of them. I think what's kind of peaking my curiosity, hearing about those three practices and related practices is some sense of it takes time and patience and like you were saying, slowing down. And I feel like all of us are in the midst of these dominant systems that make that kind of time and slowing down next to impossible. Like you were saying, we're surrounded by all of these screens and constant deluge of information and the virality and velocity of what we're getting hit with all the time. And it's almost like at this exact moment when the earth is asking of us to really show up to titrate and metabolize and meet it at exactly that moment, we have all these dominant systems in place and structures that make that next to impossible.

We're so tired at the end of the day, we just would rather put on Netflix than actually work with our heart and metabolize as you're suggesting. So within all that, if we're talking about being EcoSattvas, we began this training by looking at true refuge and what it means to take refuge, which is the support for our Bodhisattva Vow in Buddhism. And I'm wondering how do we discern, how do we navigate and find true refuge when frankly sometimes it feels like our body is saying, I just want to watch Netflix. I can't take it anymore. Where is true refuge within all of this uncertainty, overwhelming trauma?

Resting in Uncertainty

Lama Willa:

This is a good question. How do we find true refuge? And so yeah, we live in a time when our being is being called into all kinds of possibilities of distraction are available to us, let's say. And so how do we find refuge? And one of the ways we find refuge is beginning to understand that there are places of rest within ourselves that can help us hold the truth without fear of the truth. And for myself, one of the powerful places of refuge that helps during these times is the space of not-knowing. And in this Bodhisattva Vow there's very much this sense of not placing your trust in being able to accomplish something or even to change anything, but placing your trust in the power of open and available, no matter what is actually happening.



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In Buddhist practice we call that the space of not-knowing. We've taken a lot of refuge in knowing the answers. So we have science that tells us how climate change is going to be and we have some very likely outcomes. But the deepest truth is that we don't know how all of this will play out. We don't know yet what our role will be. In fact, at any given moment, we don't know if we're going to be alive tomorrow. We think we know, but we actually don't really know. And so being able to stay with this place of not-knowing can be profoundly productive in a time like this, in a time of great fear, in times of great darkness, in times of great challenge.

There was a great Zen master, Suzuki Roshi who came to the United States in the sixties and opened the door of the dharma for many people in our country and in the world. And he used to say, *in the mind of an expert, there are few possibilities, but in the mind of a beginner, there are many possibilities*. So I love that quote because I think there's a lot of wisdom in that. And we can take our practice into the space of activism when we understand that our beginner's mind, that is the mind that doesn't believe it knows everything, opens us to all the different ways we could be of benefit during a time of crisis. So space of not-knowing, and Adam, any others?

Adam:

Well, it's such a big shift from that part of us that wants to know and wants certainty and wants a guarantee about how we should be within these polycrises and how we face climate change. And we want that ground under our feet. And I'm almost getting the sense as you're teaching here that the climate when seen from the perspective you're offering, this uncertainty of climate change and of ecological loss, it actually can be an enhancement or a deepening of the process of awakening, of moving into that true refuge of not-knowing because it's almost forced upon us. As a human species and as a civilization, we just don't know. So it's starting to become really strong.

Lama Willa:

Thank you for mentioning that part. That's a hard one sometimes for people to really grok or it's a hard thing to say to your ordinary person, oh, this is such an opportunity. This climate change, it's such an opportunity. It's so ripe with possibilities to awaken. But that is actually how we see it as practitioners of Buddhism, is that this is the moment we were born for, the moment that calls us into relationship with our challenge is the moment that will awaken us to a higher state of consciousness. So it's true in a way that it is a time of great possibility. That's a very radical statement to make. And I think it can be made in



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some contexts like this one. Those of you who have come here are clearly interested in looking at what's happening here and in finding the power of that.

And that involves learning to turn towards crisis with curiosity and even a sense of eagerness. What can I learn from this and how can I be of benefit? Like the Bodhisattva Vow, oh, this is what I was born to do. I was born to lean into what is difficult. And so I think in our culture, we haven't been raised that way. We've been raised to believe that the challenges and the obstacles are what should be avoided. But actually we look at our life, looking back even on your own life, and we see that the moments that we evolved were moments of challenge. For most of us, when we look back at those moments when we lost someone who we loved, when we had a disappointment or a failure, it's those moments that pushed us to evolve and to become more resilient, to become more curious, to become stronger.

Time and Timelessness

And it does depend on how we meet those moments of course. So when it comes to evolving during a time like this and when it comes to finding refuge at a time like this, another thing I wanted to explore during this session on leaning into facing the not-knowing, the uncertainty is a little bit like how we engage with time. So I think from the perspective of how we as a culture have held time and how we hold time can be something that we may want to explore.

So time is a cultural construct to some degree. And in our culture, time is linear. We measure time with seconds, with minutes, with hours. And that sense of being caught or held or bound in this linear timeline is our Western modern, if you will, construction of time. But it isn't necessarily a given. So I want to talk about that. We've taken refuge in linear time and that's probably sometimes needed because we live in a culture where that's the shared reality. But it's also a shared reality that contributes to our imbalance and anxiety at a time like this to some degree because we see, oh, we only have so much time before this will happen and this will happen. Of course, that's an important way of understanding climate change and understanding our relationship to our reality at this time. But it's not the only way to understand time.

Our Indigenous ancestors understood time in various ways. The Aranda people of Australia, the Indigenous people of Australia, understood time as this timeless space of the ancestors that they called Dream Time. And in Dream Time, the ancestors are always



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present. The field of refuge, the field of loving connection is always present with you no matter where you are. And you can access that time. And when you're in that time, there is no time. It's a time out of time. The same kind of idea, this timeless time exists in Buddhism. In the Buddhist understanding that timeless time is present with you right now as the experience of falling into the gap between the past and future where there is this radical experience of now.

When we have that kind of radical dropping into the now, the linear self dies maybe just for a short time, but we experience a kind of dissolution and we enter a different kind of time where there is no past, the past is gone. It exists as our thoughts and our ideas of what happened, our memories, but actual past dissolved. And the future is this potential that hasn't come yet. And we die into this present moment. And this is something that can happen to us when we're sitting very still, when we're relaxed, when we're paying attention, we notice there is a time that is not linear. It's a non-conceptual, non-linear, radical presence. And when we rest in that, it is a totally different place of dwelling than the place that is recollecting what happened to us, worrying about processing and jumping a little bit ahead of ourselves, into the future and the present moment, we discover that actually it's a big space that we can rest in that is free of anxiety. It's free of needing to construct any way that this is all going to unfold. It's this place of resting.

Life, Death, and Liberation

And I think it's important to discover this because the truth of climate change is bringing up for us our deepest fears of mortality. What are we really afraid of? We are afraid of death. And that's a very natural fear. It's a very natural fear. We are animals. To be an animal afraid of dying is a primal fear. But as we begin to practice more with slowing down and asking ourselves, what is this thing we call time, is there something other than just this march towards the end, we discover that we have access to another kind of time, a timeless now, and we can take refuge there. And that is its own kind of death, we might say, dying of the linear self into the non-linear present moment. And that shows us what's possible with this thing that we call death, that death isn't the end. Death too is a portal.

And of course, I too am grieving the death of our way of life, the death of our planet, the death of our species. I too am grieving. I too am fearful, but I also see that we can begin to relax into a place of greater acceptance of what is happening right now when we can start to notice some of our anxiety about that. Our witnessing of that death is a fear of our own



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death and beginning to grapple with our own death and our own fears of our own mortality can help us stay. When we're talking about these practices of how do we stay, that helps us stay present to what is the reality of what is, without turning away. It's death. It's okay.

Adam:

So I sense that you've brought us into this real deep place of rest in the not-knowing and almost the silence and death of that reality. So that feels like a really potent place to close. And I'm left with a sense of, if I could even use the word peace within all of this. So thank you.

Lama Willa:

Thank you so much, Adam. And just to wrap up or to add to that thread, for me the end of contemplating death and impermanence is freedom. And actually freedom is a result of contemplating death and impermanence. It's not sorrow and heartbreak that is the end of that. That's a part of death. We might say it's part of the process, it's the beginning of that process. At the end of that process, we find ourselves in a place that's liberating because as long as we're alive and grasping at life, we are afraid of death. And that's not really living. But when we let go of the grasping at life, this life that we think that we deserve and that we need, and that we have, when we let go of grasping to that, we are actually living. When we understand that the way that we are now is impermanent, we come alive and we begin living for the future we hope to see. So I wanted to wrap up with that and am just so grateful to be here with you Adam, and with all of you, the sangha, and so grateful that we can be on this journey together. And wishing you the very best as you move through this process of metabolizing and evolving in community. Thank you.

Dana

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