



One Earth Sangha

The Sacred Work of Listening, Loving, Responding

Eco-Chaplaincy as Compassion in Action

This is a transcript of a talk given on June 25, 2023 to participants in Listening, Loving, Responding - Eco-Chaplaincy as Compassion in Action, an EcoDharma Exploration led by Kirsten Rudestam. Listen to the talk [here](#), or watch the full program recording [here](#).

Here, from the respective patches of Earth holding us and the histories of the lands that we are on and that support us, we ask: what is it to chaplain one another, human and non-human, through the eco-social crises of our times? What does it mean to chaplain one another? What is it to be an eco-chaplain in these times?

Yesterday, I was teaching an all-day training for the eco-chaplaincy and we did a lot of work on storytelling, the beauty of storytelling and story-catching, being a listener, and what it is to listen. So I thought I would start this talk with my own origin story of eco-chaplaincy, which was me finishing my PhD at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2016. I was there working on Indigenous water practices and water justice and equity. At that time, I had been teaching in the fields of environmental studies and sociology for ten years or so, and I was finding it just heartbreaking to work with primarily young adults in these fields where we heard a litany of problems and not a whole lot of solutions. My own resilience started breaking down in the face of this curriculum and content that I was teaching and, in my students, similarly, I could sense the despair turning to numbness and sometimes anger. I was really sensing: this is not getting us where we need to be. We were loading and burdening people with information about eco-social crises



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without honoring the affective, emotional dimension of learning about where we are with each other and the Earth.

Over the years I had started to work quite closely with Joanna Macy, who founded “The Work That Reconnects,” which is this beautiful collection of practices to help us work with emotional despair and anger and numbness and really transform it into engagement. That was hugely valuable for me and I was deeply nourished at that time by the Buddha Dharma and incredible beauty and refuge. Also, from a very young age, I was exposed to a lot of animist practices and was actually apprenticed by a druid when I was a teenager. So there was all this nature-based work, what it is to really listen to this more than human world that we’re part of and know our own belonging in it. I was coming in with all of these ideas and then I was in this institution where I felt like I was being asked to iron myself out and not know how to really work with these students in ways that I felt like we all need.

When I was finishing my dissertation work I did a retreat at the Insight Retreat Center with Gil Fronsdal, who is one of my close teachers, and he asked me, “So what are you going to do when you’re done with your PhD?” And I said, well, I’ve got all of these strands and I really want to put them together into some sort of offering. And at that time, I was really invested in working with young adults, younger people; I still am and I still do, but that’s not the shape that the Eco-Chaplaincy training took; it’s open to everyone. And he said, well, I have this Buddhist chaplaincy training program, but I’ve always wanted to start a Buddhist eco-chaplaincy training program. Would you be interested in starting? I just don’t have the time. I wasn’t familiar with chaplaincy or with his Buddhist chaplaincy



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program, but my heart just went, yes! (For those of you who know Gil, he's also very good at recruiting people to do things.)

I share this story because it was the beginning of something that continues to unfold in such mysterious and beautiful and incredible ways. And there are a couple of people here who are alumni of the program, and I'll share more about what some people are doing. But I want to keep coming back to this question of what is it to chaplain each other? What do we learn from that? How do we need each other in these times? And one of the first questions that people ask about eco-chaplaincy when I talk about teaching eco-chaplaincy, is what is it? Some of you might know a dear friend and colleague of mine, Sarah Vekasi, who, years ago, called herself an eco-chaplain and went to Appalachia to offer support for those involved in the traumatic witnessing of and in direct action against mountaintop removal. She did a lot of work in really first creating a name for what an eco-chaplain could do or what an eco-chaplain might be offering. So I just want to honor and bow to Sarah Vekasi. But again, I didn't really have a clear sense then. Now I would say that chaplains in general provide spiritual care, typically in times of loss, in times of transition and crisis, and that an eco-chaplain is offering their services and their support in the realm of these more than human challenges. All of the anxiety and the depression and the dread and the anger and the precarity accompanying environmental and social losses, the direct and indirect impacts of the climate crisis on humans and non-humans, the challenges of living a life as usual in the midst of such loss and danger. Chaplains offer spiritual nourishment in these times and opportunities to be deeply listened to and be reminded of our belonging, of our relationship with nature.



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Those are some of the words that I use, but they don't really answer the what and the how. Even after launching our first program, those of us who were teaching it didn't have a full definition, and we actually invited our cohort to develop their own definitions. We do that every cohort now, and I'll share a few of them that have come up over the years. One is: "Eco-chaplains nurture a sense of connection and belonging to all living beings, tending to the capacities of our hearts to fully meet the loss, blessing and sacred responsibility of being alive in our world at this time." It comes from one of our graduates. And another: "An eco-chaplain is one who listens with an open heart to all the natural world from the smallest ant to human beings and on to the open sky, and seeks to accept all and where possible to transform suffering and harm into peace and goodness through the dharma, ritual, love, and prayer."

I'll just read one more because this is what I'm going to focus on for the rest of our time: "The eco-chaplain meets the joys and sorrows of all beings of our times through the sacred work of listening." The sacred work of listening. One of the reasons I don't have this solid, pinned-down definition, is that Ecosattva and eco-chaplains are in this ongoing exploration, but what we end up emphasizing is relationship. What is it to be in relationship and to respond, with the sense of response-ability coming from that response of being in relationship? Thinking of eco-chaplaincy as a verb rather than a noun also gives us space for people who come through this program. And I don't mean to say that the only eco-chaplains out there are those who come through our program, of course, but they're the ones I'm most intimate with. And they have put together the most extraordinary breadth of offerings: people offering retreats for environmental activists and ceremonies for grief and loss, or one-on-one support for those who have lost homes to fires and flood, or art installations for lost species. And those who are just kind of in the



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back, attending Pachamama meetings, NGOs, and other organizations, and just listening and learning so that when they're asked for support or if there's a need, they're able to step in and they're there. So there are various ways that people are showing up in response and in relationship with this work of eco-chaplaincy.

Let's return to this last definition I read: "The eco-chaplain meets the joys and sorrows of all beings of our times through the sacred work of listening." I'd say that out of the plethora of tools and skills that we include in our program and that I would add to any eco-chaplaincy or chaplaincy tool book is what we have this natural capacity for. And it's listening and it's in some ways deeply radical. It comes up in the agreements. Tashi was speaking to how easy it can be to be imagining the next thing to say or to respond to rather than actually to listen and receive what is happening now and to be in relationship with what's happening now and the healing capacity of that, what it is to not move to fix, but to really create that unconditional space. I love that the word "radical" means "from the roots." From the roots. And it feels like that. That's what we have, this inherent capacity from the roots to be here and to hold each other and to listen. That is where the response, the responsibility and the resilient responsitivity really comes from.

This is something I have learned as a college professor, too. What emerges in a space where this listener isn't moved to fix or to repair or spring into action, but this kind of open attention. As I started to trust myself more and create spaces in the classroom for people to share their affective experience of being in the world of learning this material, these young people were sharing their ambivalence about ever having children or if they want to finish college because they don't see a future for themselves. And then sometimes what it is to have these visions of creating new ways of being in the world and the excitement around that, but so



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much around what it is to grow up in a world where the future feels precarious. More recently, these amazing studies have come out that show that the simple act of having a space to share the challenges, the feelings of loss, grief, fear, and anger, without any sort of agenda around it, that this simple act creates and enhances a sense of capacity and engagement in the world. Actually just simply being listened to in community or even one-on-one mobilizes people and can give a sense of empowerment. It's so beautiful. I'm witnessing it myself, but we're also seeing it in these sociological large-scale studies with young people in particular and climate crisis.

There are two things I wanted to explore around this topic of listening, and they're both interactive. One is that I thought we could just experiment ourselves. There are so many ways to listen. And we all have our own way, from where we listen, how we listen, how we drop into that space. And it's a beautiful thing to actually investigate in our own selves: what's my own way and how does that change, how might that change? There's a beautiful talk given by the civil rights activist Ruby Sales. She has a story about working with this troubled young woman and just asking the question: where does it hurt? Asking just that question: where does it hurt? And I thought we could just explore that. So I invite you, if closing the eyes helps you to listen, close the eyes for a moment. And if it helps to place a hand somewhere on the body, on your heart or your lower belly, giving your body some felt contact, some support to ask this Earth body -- and keep repeating that, this Earth body -- where does it hurt?

And as you ask yourself that, maybe pay attention also to how it is that you listen, in a felt sense or in images, in words. As you explore this, where does it hurt and how is it that you listen, is there a sense there? The question and the contact of



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listening, just even in our own being, is there a sense of something being met there? Is there a way to hold that? Maybe there's no sense of hurt and that's fine, that's wonderful. Then holding that sense of contentment, how do we feel that? What is it to just meet our own selves, not needing to fix, just meeting our own selves? As you're ready, you can transition. Simple practice. And the question of how can we bring that, that simplicity of meeting, of listening into all of our relationships. Chaplaincy, eco-chaplaincy pivots around that healing space of listening, often where it hurts but sometimes where it is celebrated, the joys and celebrations of life, the nourishing aspects of being alive in the world.

So that's the first practice. And then the second piece that I want to speak to... there's this aspect of chaplaining one another in these times and then this confidence in responsivity, we don't even have to demand it, that being in a space of being met can bolster a sense of support and connection that we need for our own resilience in moving forward together. The second piece is something I take more risks with. So I feel like I'm taking a little bit of a risk with this, but it's how do we also listen, hold space, stay in relationship with this more than human world. And I use the term "more than human," which comes from a number of different people, including David Abram. It's really to gesture that humans are very much part of this world and all of our non-human kin, the rocks and the clouds and the lizards and the morning doves on Tashi's balcony. These are all of our relatives in this world, as many Indigenous elders have so generously taught us. How can we fold that into our own practices of listening? And there are some stories by Robin Wall Kimmerer, who is a biology professor and Indigenous elder teacher. In her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she talks about asking her class of biology students, do you love nature? And they all raise their hands and say yes. And then she asks, well, does nature love you? And I can't remember exactly, but I think maybe one, if



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one, student raises their hands. I'm not sure what we would say in those situations ourselves. I think there's a very strong message of how could nature possibly love, love me, for example, who takes up so many resources in the world compared to others. There can be the whole litany. Robin Wall Kimmerer, though, was surprised by this. And she talks about this incongruity as a sign of how, in dominant Western culture, we've grown up lacking this sense of reciprocity, that there's this whole flow of exchange that is possible and is not just possible, but that's our birthright between ourselves and this more than human world that we're so deeply embedded in.

I remember when I was invited into an apprenticeship with this druid, this druidical training. So much of it was very physically demanding. We would run up riverbanks barefoot and be timed on how long we could stay in cold creek water. And this was a year-round training, but so much of it was actually learning how to listen. Really, I'm giving myself over to this idea that I actually could have conversations with lizards and hawks and listen to the Earth and be listened to, love the Earth and be loved. Now I have the sense that believing we can only be in communication with other humans is an impoverished way of living in this rich embedded ecology that we're part of.

Robin Wall Kimmerer writes in that beautiful book: "We can't meaningfully proceed with healing, with restoration, without re-story-ation. Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them?" Our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them? I don't know if anyone's familiar with it but there's a children's book by Byrd Baylor and Peter Parnell called *The Other Way to Listen*. It's beautifully illustrated and it's this older man who is teaching this young child about how to listen and the man tells the



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child: "When you know the other way to listen, you can hear the wildflower seed bursting open, you hear rocks murmuring and hills singing, and it seems like the most natural thing in the world. Of course it takes a lot of practice and you can't be in a hurry. Most people never hear these things at all." It's such a beautiful book.

This is my prompt and my invitation is how we might cultivate this listening, this capacity to listen. And I hold this as an eco-chaplaincy skill or offering. What is it to learn to listen from in that same unconditional, open way where there's a curiosity not only about what it is to listen, but how do I listen, from where? And when we're talking about the more than human, that opens up a whole new breadth of how do we listen? I mean, what does that even mean? What does that look like? What does that feel like for each one of us?

I'll share one more story to send you off. There's an Indigenous scholar of Cherokee ancestry who goes by the name Four Arrows. When he teaches his college courses, on the very first day, he'll ask all his students to go outside on the college campus, if they're able to do so with their bodies, and to hug a tree. And they kind of roll their eyes and everything, but then they come back and they sit back down and he says, okay, now I want you to go back out again, but this time I want you to ask the tree for permission first. And he says, these are people who, like so many of us, are trained in Western dominant culture. We're not very conditioned to imagine that we can be having these conversations. But they come back visibly moved, palpably moved by a simple invitation to recognize a capacity that we can have for this kind of relating to the more than human. So this is kind of like my Four Arrows experiment of going out and seeing what we can learn about listening.