



One Earth Sangha

Teachings of the Tree

Sometimes Just Be

Adam Lobel offered this talk to participants in our November 2024 EcoDharma Exploration. Visit the program page for the full recorded gathering: [Deep Roots, Strong Branches: Cultivating a Steady and Loving Presence as We Approach the US Election](#).

And what I want to do now is pick up this image of the tree as a further way forward. So just the context again here with the US elections, I think for some of us there is a sense that depending on the outcome of the election, the world will end or maybe the United States will end, and that would be actually too easy. In fact, it will continue, right? The world and the United States will keep going, and we are going to have to meet that change no matter what the outcome of the election, whether things run more or less as we are accustomed to, whether things are quite different or even violent, but we're not going to disappear. People will still be here, cities will still be here, the land will still be here, and we will not get an escape, one of these escape routes. We're going to remain within a political, challenging, probably inflamed, situation.

So especially those of us who are holding our breath as if something is going to really be relieved, and if we just could hold our breath until we hear about the end of the election and then everything will be clear, that's not going to happen either. And I think this is a broader encouragement for all of us to stay with the trouble of our times, to be in a process of radical change, and to merge with it, to blend with it, rather than to try to fight that change or to deny it, but to actually participate and contribute what we can for the rest of our lives.



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Now, many of us also feel a tremendous amount of powerlessness and that even if we cast our vote, if you are a US citizen, it might not feel like we have that much say. And that's an important truth to recognize actually, that there is a bit of a lie and a deception that our participatory democracies really do invite our voice. It is important to vote, just to be very clear, please vote. But that's a very limited sense of ethical and political power and agency, and many of us frankly have been stripped of that agency. And it is really important to feel some of that powerlessness in this moment and allow it to be a wake up call, especially if that power gets even more reduced in the coming years.

So as Kristin is saying, it's very challenging to be within all of this and to stay with an open heart. What is a contemplative or spiritual or Buddhist or mindful response to the US elections? What does that mean if we're not just talking simply about quelling our challenges or as Marx would say, an opiate of the masses? If we're not simply talking about how do we get by the next few weeks feeling okay, if that's not the limit of our curiosity, what does it really mean to be truly spiritual and responsive in these times over this next month, over these next two weeks? What does that really feel like, look like? And some of us turn to Buddhism and the teachings of Buddhist compassion, meditation, and action, as an answer, hoping that there's an answer. I want to destabilize that a little bit and recognize that not only are there no easy answers, but to go even further, that sometimes modern Buddhism actually acts as a supplement to the problems and challenges of our politics, not as a helpful support. But that sometimes contemporary Buddhism ends up just allowing us to go along with an unjust and violent system without encouraging and challenging and inspiring us to imagine and embody something quite different.



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Why am I saying this? Well, in times of change like this, one of the things that we can do is take responsibility for the small parts of our world that we do have some impact on. I operate within modern Buddhism, and it's the small part of the world where I can recognize sometimes our own complicity, the ways that the wellness industry actually ends up just kind of allowing a default dominant world to continue. How much has 50, 60 years of modern Buddhism really acknowledged racism, climate mutation, systemic economic injustices and violence? How much have we really shown up? Here we are at this moment where we have Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. How has Buddhism been helpful or not over the last 50 years that have led to this current moment? What have we been awake to?

So these are the questions I'm asking myself and I'm sharing it with you to just be clear that I at least, and I think Kristin and I share this, are not coming from the perspective that we have these deep wise Buddhist answers, that if we just follow them, everything will be okay. It's actually deeper than that. And that's as honest as I can be here, instead of assuming the role of the master narrative, that we will give you the path forward over these next few weeks. It's actually much more interesting, where all of us are asking the deepest questions and therefore might have the deepest possible possibilities and potentials.

So within all of that storminess, let's evoke our friend a tree. And I want to draw on some fairly classical Buddhist teachings on working with emotions, some that may be familiar to you, some that may not be. And I want to map these stages of working with emotions onto our friend the tree.

So going deep down into our Earth, our friends and teachers, the trees have these deep, deep roots. And this rootedness is quite profound, right? When you see many



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trees, what you see is about half of the tree and the other half is under the ground in this incredible, almost nerve-like system of underground roots, depending on the tree and the landscape. But if we go to the roots, I want to connect this with those aspects of Buddhist meditation teachings, and working with emotions that point out that we can have a profoundly wise, skillful, and healthy relationship with our mind and our hearts, that there are means to cultivate our attention. As Kristin said, we're often so distracted. We could actually cultivate our attention. We can develop the skills to reach a state of peace and equanimity under almost any circumstances.

Now, I rarely teach like this. Kristin will laugh, but I rarely will emphasize this level of peacefulness and equanimity and even wellness. But it is so true that all of us who have been exposed to profound meditation teachings have access to something very, very precious. And when things get challenging over these next few weeks, these deep roots are really, really powerful and necessary.

So these are ways of working with emotions that see so-called negative emotions or klesha, attachment, aggression, ignorance. See those as aspects of mind that can be tamed and instead to cultivate resilience, mindfulness and depth in our experience.

A few years ago, or actually within the last maybe two years, I was interviewed on a podcast for Extinction Rebellion. And because I'm known as involved with a lot of ecological activity and action, the interviewers assumed that I was critical of Buddhist meditators who in the midst of all of our crises and challenges would go on deep retreat, right? They assumed that I'd be critical of someone going into a cave for 12 years to meditate and that instead we should be active and going out and changing the world. But actually I said no, I think there's a really important



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role for profound mystical depth and these deep roots, even in our times; that creating a gap and a distance between the speed and the crisis mentality and sinking into something more profound, even over these next two weeks. These deep roots are really how the tree is able to stay alive, how the tree is able to maintain its being. So I encourage you to practice. I encourage you to make more time for sitting and for working with your minds over these next few weeks. Don't see that as just bypassing. Be as profound and wise as you can be within the storm.

So the strength of this approach of the rootedness, of course, is this capacity for self cultivation and training our being, and the equanimity that might arise, and the space for a vaster perspective. But there is a shadow or a weakness to this rootedness as well, which is, just like those roots, we could literally bury our head in the sand. We could literally hide in the Earth and not see what is going on, which could be a kind of spiritual bypassing or an entitlement or even a coddling. And I think Kristin spoke to this quite a bit already, but there's ways that many of our Buddhist communities have this kind of aesthetic or culture where we're supposed to be calm, we're supposed to be peaceful, and that can really suppress the pain, the rage, the fear, and lead to a false kind of modern Buddhist mask where we're trying to live up to an ideal. And I don't think that's helpful to anyone. I don't think it's helpful to ourself, to others, or to our modern politics.

So how do you find your way between the roots being just a kind of bypassing versus the roots being something that is the profound foundation and ground of your being? What's the difference between hiding and depth? And in a way that's not a question anyone can really answer simply.



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I was recently at an event with Bayo Akomolafe and I was struck by a Nigerian proverb that he shared. He said, if you have come here walking straight and upright, my wish for you is that you leave with a limp. If you have come here speaking clearly, my wish for you is that you leave speaking with a lisp. Evidently, this is a traditional Nigerian proverb. There might be some challenges with ableism in this proverb, but what struck me was how radical that perspective is. At least in many of the Buddhist spaces that I'm in, the idea is we think we are coming in walking with a limp and our practice is supposed to make us walk straight. We're supposed to clean ourselves up, feel better, leave refreshed. What if it's the opposite? What if what's needed is an encouragement to be a bit broken? How do we navigate that? This is the shadow side of these roots.

Alright, I need to move a little quicker. So I'm going to go on to the second step of working with emotions, which is connected with a trunk of the tree in the storm. Which of course, trees are able to not be uprooted, not just because they have these deep roots, but because they sway, because they can whip and move in the wind. And any tree that's too brittle and too upright will not be able to survive a storm or a winter. So the trees also need this flexibility. And this is another stage of working with emotions which isn't so much seeking calm, but actually understanding the emptiness of emotions. That emotions are dependently originated phenomena. They're the result of causes and conditions coming together. Some of them are their own personalities, some of them things going on in the world, some of them random events. And the result is the arising of something that seems like a solid emotion. But with our practice and with a Buddhist psychology, you can see that actually emotions are themselves made of space. That there's a lot more room and possibilities, that mind is vast, and that the reality we're part of is mysterious.



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And that uncertainty, not knowing what to do about this election, not knowing if we should be panicking and outraged and running in the streets, or if we should be calm and peaceful, that very uncertainty is teaching this swaying open truth of emptiness. Emptiness, not in terms of nihilism, but in terms of going beyond our concepts, our hopes and our fears. And whatever happens in this election for the rest of our lives, all of us on this call, no matter how old we are, the next few decades are going to be a time of tremendous uncertainty. So cultivating the capacity to tolerate that openness and uncertainty, to stay with that quivering heart, is part of the swaying teaching of the tree. So the tree teaches us with roots, but also an openness, a swaying, going beyond our hopes, fears, and expectations.

A lot of us still have this sense of negotiating with reality. I hope the person I want to win this election wins and if they don't, it's all over. As opposed to a vast mind, we'll see that right after the election there was going to be another crisis, whether that's a hurricane, a superstorm like Helene running through North Carolina, whether that's climate refugees, whether that's a massive heat wave that kills millions. We are in a time where we need to cultivate this ability of a vast mind free of those hopes, fears, and expectations. So this is the swaying of the tree.

So we have the roots, we have the trunk that can move. The strength of this is a vast and expansive kind of mind attuned to a deep truth that's open and unbiased. But the weakness, potential weakness of this is another way to bypass, to just go to an ultimate perspective. If we're just saying our emotions are empty, it's easy to deny them, to not be able to feel them, to go kind of cold, numb, and to think that the fiery qualities of our emotional life are somehow not spiritual. We get open like a dark space, and that is the risk if we sway too much, right? We don't have enough



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backbone, you could say something gets cut off in our being. So trees sway just enough. Wise trees sway just enough, not too much. So in the teachings on emptiness, they say that the worst kind of sickness is when you grasp at emptiness itself and you see emptiness as the answer.

Alright, so we have roots. We have a swaying trunk. Now we'll get to the flowers and fruits that a tree can bear and blossom and bloom, and that includes, of course, the oxygen that trees offer us. And this third approach, refers to an approach of working with emotions that's held often in the tantric or Vajrayana traditions where the energy of emotions is our richness. That they are filled with intelligence, that if we could stick a straw deep in our anger and drink fully and deeply, there's resources there, that our anger, our fear, our uncertainty, our grief, our heartbreak, these are not just negative qualities to be calmed, pacified or suppressed, but there is wisdom in emotions. Just like a tree breathing in the carbon dioxide and offering back oxygen. And that through the metabolic process of a tree, it is able to bear fruits and offer its blossoms to the world. There's more to say here, but I'm going to move quicker. The strength of this approach is it's quite honest, that we do have an emotional life and free from this more puritanical fear-based approach to emotions that trust tries to suppress them and stay calm.

There's so much self-hatred in modern spirituality, hatred of our own emotions, hatred of our own past, hatred of our own anger. Are we allowed to be angry as Buddhists today? Is that okay? Are we allowed to be angry at the politics in the United States, or is that somehow naughty and not calm enough? There's wisdom in anger.



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One of the things that I think would be most amazing was if our meditation teachings helped support us in expanding our anger, making it bigger, making it stronger, making that blaze hotter, more intense, more potent, so that we actually have something powerful, that the strength of anger starts to show through. It's courageousness. And it's fierceness. This is a flower, fruit of the tree. So that might be its strength. But of course the weakness here, the shadow side that I've personally witnessed in Vajrayana communities is that this can be co-opted by ego. That it's an excuse to just be a jerk or to let our emotions just kind of spill out everywhere and think that somehow it's good practice. So there's definitely a danger and a risk to these types of methods, but especially around anger. I think there's lots to learn from our own personal relationships with anger and fear and seeing the wisdom that's being communicated, the honesty in your own being.

So we have roots. We have the swaying trunk. We have the flowers, the oxygen and the fruits of the tree. And then last and finally, there's a way that a tree simply is. It is just being there, doing nothing in terms of intention or effort or struggle. A Daoist teacher of mine says that a Daoist master is somebody who can enter into this world and not change anything and leave no trace at all and then die. That's what mastery looks like. Which I thought was very interesting because I was raised in a culture where you're supposed to enter this world and make it better, fix everything, add your gift, be a great person, contribute your amazing symphony, novel, NGO work, whatever it is. But it's so interesting to hear this other perspective that maybe the best thing we could all do is not change a thing, but a deep and profound effortless allowing of our emotions of this world, of this Earth and a kind of non-doing or Wu wei, an effortless action. Sometimes our responses to the poly crisis are part of the crisis. Sometimes it's better if we're quiet and still. And that much of the time there's not a storm and the tree is simply being.



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So this approach to working with emotions is one of really hands off and allowing. The strength here is there's a lot of room. The weakness here, the shadow of this approach, of course, is that it just can look like complacency and going back to our comfortable hiding. And it's sometimes hard to tell the difference.

So we have roots, we have a swaying trunk, we have the flowers and fruits, and we have the just simply being of the tree. And in conclusion, I'll just say for me, all four are equally necessary at the right times, at the right moments. And that if I was going to say something practical, I would say over these next few weeks, just be nimble, be curious, be agile with your emotional life. Find out not just the one right way, oh, I'm just going to be calm, or I'm just going to be outraged, or I'm just going to tune out, or I'm just going to freak out. Just find your way to a nimbleness and attunement of your being that is able to be responsive moment by moment to the contexts that show themselves. Sometimes go deep into those roots. Please do. Sometimes bear fruit and rage and be fierce and brave. Sometimes be vast and swaying. And sometimes just be.