



One Earth Sangha

Caring for All Our Relations

An Ethic of Shared Responsibility

Zhiwa Woodbury offered this talk to participants in our November 2024 EcoDharma Exploration. Visit the program page for the full recorded gathering, as well as additional resources: [What Now? A Relational Approach to Building Solidarity](#).

So now that we've marshaled our resources and grounded our practice in Earth, I'd like to pivot to caring for all our relations and focus on what I believe to be the ethical foundation for resolving climate trauma in the long term. It's an ethic that is sorely lacking in our culture, and at the same time, it's recognized by leading ethicists as necessary for us to effectively address global warming and species extinction. This ethic is referred to as shared responsibility for the climate, and it has been championed by Professor Allen Thompson from Oregon State University, who is the editor of the Journal Environmental Ethics.

The best way to understand this ethic is to contrast it with the prevailing ethic in our society, which is referred to as distributed responsibility and is reflected in our notions of legal liability. In other words, the idea that corporations are to blame for the climate crisis and we are powerless because we're just one person, one family, or one community.

Shared responsibility for the climate by contrast, is the ethic that prevailed during the Great Depression and during World War II. Instead of looking backwards to apportion blame, our sense of shared responsibility is forward looking. It recognizes we're all in this together, and we must each one of us meet the urgency of the



One Earth Sangha

crisis by asking a simple question: what could I be doing that I am not presently doing?

Distributed responsibility has given rise to a victim mentality when in fact we are the perpetrators of climate trauma and it fuels a culture of grievance when we see the results of this coming to fruition in this week's election. Shared responsibility for suffering also happens to be the Bodhisattva ethic: what can I do to help alleviate present suffering and to avoid future unnecessary suffering to the greatest extent possible? And this raises two questions in my mind. First, what am I not doing in my dharma practice that I could be doing, which would help make me a more effective activist or ally of Gaia? And second, what could I be doing in my various circles, my communities that would promote shared responsibility for the climate and for other species?

And it's in answering this latter question that I sense great opportunity in today's world for Buddhist communities to reach out to and build alliances with Indigenous communities. Because guess what? They've been through much worse than what we might be facing right now, and they're still here. And they're rising up to help us come into a proper relationship with Mother Earth in ways that can actually reverse global warming over time.

Bison, American Buffalo, have taught our Indigenous brothers and sisters how to face into the storm in order to move through it. And in the same way, we have to turn into samsara and deal with it because the stakes have never been higher. All sentient beings lives, both now and in the future, hang in the balance.



One Earth Sangha

If you really think about it, this is an amazing time to be alive. It's like we have been transported to a Bodhisattva training ground. Yes, the challenges are great, the suffering is immense, but as Anam Thubten teaches in relation to Tonglen practice, the capacity for our hearts to expand is also great, is also immense. The more suffering we take on, the more we become capable of taking on. And that's why we're here. Climate trauma is our karma. We're all refugees. And our job as Buddhists is to renounce suffering in all its forms and to do everything we can to alleviate that unnecessary suffering.

To accomplish this now in what promises to be a rather dark age of increasing climate and social chaos, we need to focus on building solidarity. As Pope Francis called for in *Laudato si'*, a new kind of solidarity is needed. That could be our calling. What kind of solidarity is needed now? Personally, I believe modeling and advocating for shared responsibility for the climate can foster this new kind of solidarity, especially if we help to center and elevate Indigenous voices in the process. By coming into proper relationship with Indigenous people and communities, we also come into proper relationship with Gaia. It's a reciprocal relationship that holds tremendous potential for healing.

I'm convinced, as is the United Nations IPCC and the global biodiversity framework, that we Western Buddhists have so much to learn from our Indigenous brothers and sisters at this time. And speaking from my own experience, it's always surprising to find out how much our worldviews have in common, how relevant Indigenous wisdom is to my own wisdom traditions, my own dharma practice, and how much synergy there is in bringing these two worldviews together. With that pitch of shared responsibility and building solidarity, interfaith, yes, but especially



One Earth Sangha

with our Indigenous brothers and sisters, I'd like to open this exploration up for discussion.