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Practicing with Rising Uncertainty

Living Conscious in the Web of Relationships

Damchö Diana Finnegan offered this talk to participants in our July 2024 EcoDharma Exploration. Visit the [program page](#) for the full recorded gathering. This year Damchö also teaches a core offering of the EcoSattva training. You can sign-up for the 2024-2025 course year [here](#).

I am speaking to you here with my neighbors, the cacti and the Gila lizards in the Sonora Desert on lands that have been stewarded, cared for, and loved by the Tohono O'odham and the Paso Chiaki. And so slightly rooted wherever we are, I want to think about the tools that Buddhism could offer as we're thinking about surviving, responding to, and experiencing these conditions of uncertainty, change, instability, that's obviously accelerating all around us. And looking at where we are, I would say that the tools that Buddhism offers have had two main applications. Applications that are fundamentally palliative in nature. They're dealing with the symptoms of our disease. And others that are aimed at radical and profound transformation.

And the Buddhist understanding of what we're experiencing in the world is that the suffering, the anxiety, the distress, the harm whose consequences we're experiencing, are all symptoms of a profound existential disorder. And all our suffering is actually a result of that disorder. And it has to do with the paradigm that we're living by. And I'll come to that in a second. But when we look at the way in which Buddhism is being applied in a lot of ecodharma spaces and a lot of other spaces, it tends to get oriented towards more palliative applications.



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Emotional regulation is absolutely fundamental, important, but it's regulating, it's not transforming. And the difference between the palliative applications of Buddhism, and meditation can be used and often is used as a palliative, as something that helps us down regulate that helps us ground, that helps us be more settled in our lives as the way it's applied, not what it necessarily is in its nature.

The palliative is shorter term. We're looking for shorter term effects. How do I respond to this situation? What can I do in this situation? Sort of immediate effect. Whereas the radical and profound transformation is going to the very basis of how we are in the world. And it's a long process. It is addressing a profound disorder that requires a long process of reconfiguration, consistent work against the grain over a long period of time, discipline, and commitment. And not surprisingly, given the society that Buddhism is being transmitted to, we most often hear about and engage with the practices that have shorter term effects whose impact we can see. And most forms of meditation do have an immediate effect of soothing us.

Whereas the longer term vision of what Buddhism is proposing to us has the effect of training us to walk into a place of groundlessness, sustaining us as we move into a space where we are not looking for security from any structures because we don't believe in them, we don't trust them, or they're not functioning anymore for us because of how we're situating ourselves.

And so I think that alone should give us a sense that there could be something useful there in what work do I need to do, or what understanding of who I am in the world could sustain us when we are in a degree of uncertainty, that it does get experienced very often like groundlessness, which most of the time brings up a responsive anxiety because I have nothing to hold onto.



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So if we look at how the Buddha described the relationship between our search for security and our suffering, this brings us to that fundamental disorder that according to these teachings can be addressed. And that has to do with how we understand ourselves to exist in the world, what we understand ourselves to be, and the basic underlying sense that we have so much of the time that there's a me here inside myself that contacts with the world which is out there. Right? You recognize this basic sense of experience. An understanding of ourselves as being something here apart from the other things out there.

This has to do with a sense of being an entity, of being separable, and generates a sense of being separated for the rest of what is out there. According to the Buddha, that's a fundamental cognitive error that permeates everything else that we do that in fact, if we look at what we are, we are more like a cloud of processes that are interacting with other processes all the time. We are just a set of elements or pieces or flows within the entire system of interdependence, which system is the wrong word. Let's strike that. Of the play of interdependence.

And so when we don't see ourselves that way, we see ourselves as a self here. When we look at everything around us, we see it as other, and we also know that we depend on it, it affects us. And so insecurity is a natural byproduct of that. We're looking for security in the sense of self and its structures in a way that guarantees we will never really feel secure. And we build structures in the world to try to generate security and then we grasp onto them. And that is a tremendous source of suffering. And so we can see that if, I have an uncle who lost his arm when he was very young, grabbing a firecracker and this experience ... that limb is kind of there, but it's not there, going through life, missing a limb, according to this



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understanding, we are going through life missing the limb that is our larger self, just not really a self, which are the people we're related to, the species we're related to, the environment that we live in.

And so we feel disconnected from that which is actually part of us. And so there's this persistent sense of lack and confusion and insecurity. And all the strategies that we deploy to control and dominate that which we experience as other, again, generate tremendous anxiety because they are not permanent. And this model implies they need to be stable and permanent for us to feel okay.

And in the Buddhist vision of interdependence, very closely connected to that is impermanence. Because everything is impermanent, sorry, because everything is interconnected everything is also continually changing. And this is not the best analogy, but if we think of the gears inside a clock, everything is interconnected. Everything is being affected by something else and affecting something else. If all of that starts turning, everything is turning. In order to have a moment in which things really abide as they are, everything, all of the gears would need to have stopped.

And so when we look at the subtlest form of the teachings on impermanence or the transitory nature, what it's saying is that it's not just birth and death as beginning and ends. There's no abiding in between. There are no two consecutive moments that are the same. Causes and conditions are arising, and in this moment they yield this result, but they're already changing in the moment that we identify a result. And we are geniuses at creating a false sense of permanence, positing a continuity when everything is in transition, at creating entities when there is really just



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process and focusing on products and casting process into the shadows is the entire impulse of capitalism. So we've built a system that is doing the same.

When we live in a world in which everything is processed, everything is shifting, everything is changing, and our sense of wellbeing is constructed to find things that at least relatively are stable, that we can hold on to, 'this I can count on', we are guaranteed to live in distress. And we're being confronted with that fact right now in a very forceful way because the relative stability has shifted out of the timeframe that we expect things to change. We don't expect the climate to change this quickly. We don't expect ecosystems to disappear this quickly. We don't expect so many species and habitats to disappear. We don't expect our life to need to change so quickly.

And so how do we start? What are some of the ways that we do begin to experience ourselves as interconnected? We get glimpses of this when we leave behind manmade structures and go out into the wild and experience ourselves as part of the natural world, the more-than-human world. And many, many of the practices that are Buddhist or Buddhist-adjacent that are being deployed, involve meditating in a place where we can experience that sense of connectedness. However, the paradigm that we're deploying reactivates and very quickly we end up in an extractive relationship where nature is the tool for me to soothe myself.

We embed our experience of connectedness or we reinterpret it for ourselves as nature's here to soothe us or as a resource for our wellbeing. But if we open ourselves fully to what is going on in that ecosystem, we can learn maybe all that we need to know. We can experience that the only stability or resilience comes from being able to adapt, to flow, to be open so we can respond without grasping.



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And I think this is something that might be easier to experience for those who have been displaced from power and privilege. When the order of things, when the social structures that have been established do not work in your benefit, your sense of security cannot come from their continuity. Whereas, as people in positions of privilege in the societies where we live, we more or less expect those structures to work in our favor. And therefore we look to them for a sense of security. Whereas if we turn to communities that have managed to stay whole and survive their marginality or their displacement from seats of power, we can learn, I think, that security comes from tending to our relationships, rather than a rule-based ethic, and ethic of care. Learning to live held by the webs of relationships that we're tending and shifting maybe from whatever corner of the web we need to be in. We've developed a network of relationships, so we're more mobile.

A friend of mine who's an environmental scientist and also BIPOC, Dekila Chungyalpa, she's shared with me her observation that white Buddhists tend to engage more with it as a soothing mechanism, which I think is really something interesting to think about. And while it is totally valid to soothe ourselves when the panic is rising and we need to be able to regulate our responses, this is a limited version of what Buddhist teachings and practice can offer us, right? And I really do want to stress that being able to regulate ourselves with all of the tools of emotional resilience are indispensable life skills. But we don't want to just stay regulated while the world around us falls apart.

We want to learn to hold ourselves steady as we seek an effective response, which means connecting, which means being open and present, because our lifestyle is going to change. Either we change it ourselves or we wait and have it wrested from our closed fists. And I think that as we think about a worldview and look at ways



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that we can recondition ourselves to understanding the sense of connectedness, we do find many small moments when what we are experiencing is our interconnectedness.

While the model of self and other and domination and separation is activated, we will not be able to experience anything like the depth of interconnectedness. But if we're attentive to it, it's going on all the time. It is available to us. And when we look at the moment that we're living in, I think we want an idea of emotional resilience that isn't bouncing back to the same shape. That's what resilience is. You come back to the same shape. We want a different understanding of resilience. We want an ability to change shape. We want an ability to understand ourselves differently and to respond and to flow. And maybe we can really accept or recognize that in knowing that we're facing reality, there's a great deal of comfort and peace because there's a part of ourselves all the time that knows that we are not, we're not fully able to be present. And that generates distress.

When we look at the losses that are going on around us and see the suffering that's being generated by this moment, we do very often fall into empathic distress. We feel empathy and it distresses us. And the answer to this is very clear. To move out of empathic distress, we move towards action. We move towards a compassion that is committed to doing something about what we see. And so I just want to suggest, just as an opening to the conversation we're going to have for the next hour, I do want to suggest that on the one hand, our strategies for developing a sense of security could use some questioning. We could ask ourselves what we're doing with those. And on the other hand, turning to relationships as a foundation for flowing with dramatically changing circumstances could be a doorway for us to walk through together.