

Earth-Based Mindfulness and Meditation

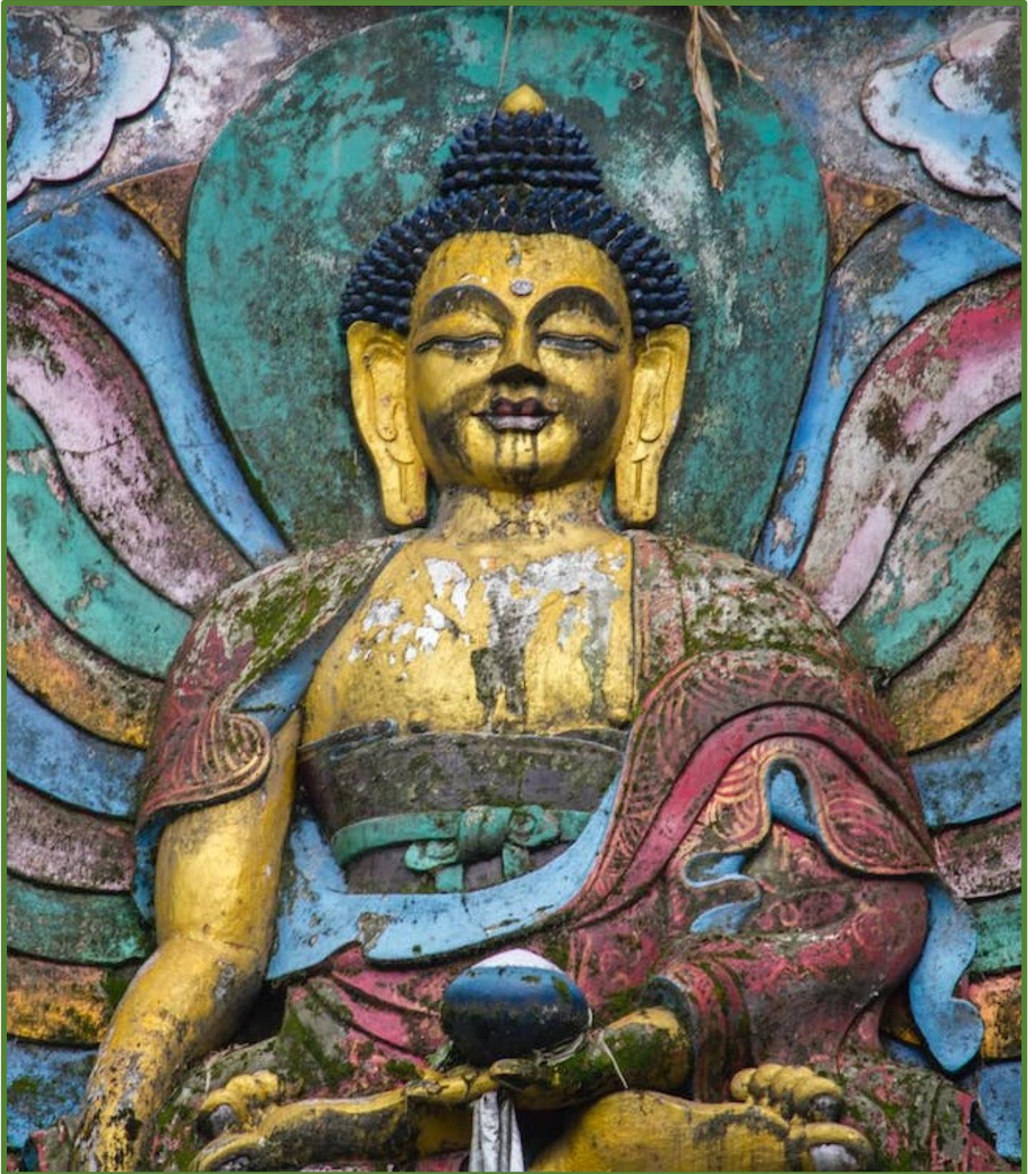
An Exploration of Ecodharma Practices

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Introduction

The world is ever changing in the face of multiple crises: global heating, climate breakdown, habitat destruction, species extinction, racism, economic inequality, and more. Each threatens our well-being. How might meditation teachings and mindfulness practice address these intersecting problems and aid those working for a joyful, healthy, and safe future for all?

The BESS Family Foundation launched our eco advisory committee project in August 2022 to explore the domain of mindfulness and meditation practices that are earth-based (here, referred to as *ecodharma*). A primary goal of the project was to understand how the foundation’s resources can be used to support work at the junction of climate change and mindfulness and meditation. We sought to understand what *ecodharma* is and to explore: *Does ecodharma, as it is defined here, even exist?* As a funder, we wondered if *ecodharma* practices should be considered separately from mainstream mindfulness and meditation practices. What promises do these earth-based practices hold? And where do challenges lie in realizing the promise of *ecodharma* to reduce suffering?

BESS Family Foundation convened a group of mindfulness and meditation practitioners, who are leading efforts at the intersection of mindfulness/meditation and the environmental impact of climate change and biodiversity loss, to serve on an eco advisory committee. The group¹ met online over the course of one year and in-person at a 4-day retreat in March 2023 at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Committee members were interviewed one-on-one by fellow committee member, Brian J Nichols, Ph.D., over the course of the year. See *Appendix for details*.



¹ Dekila Chungyalpa, Jeanne Corrigan, Bonnie Duran, Margaret Fletcher, Susie Harrington, Kaira Jewel Lingo, David Loy, Brian Nichols, Lama Rod Owens, Tim Ream, Nic Redfern, Kirsten Rudestam, Ven. Santacitta Bhikkhuni, Deborah Eden Tull

This document highlights aspects of what was learned through this project and is designed to share some of what appeared to be most notable as we explored the field of ecodharma. It is not intended as a comprehensive resource but rather, as a compilation of learnings based on discussions with a select group of experienced practitioners.

We focus primarily on *practices*, since they are useful both to illustrate what ecodharma is as well as to illustrate how it can be put to practical use.

All members of the eco advisory committee also stressed the need to address racial injustice and inequality as critical for making progress to address the ecological crisis. We discuss here some of what these practitioners shared with us on this topic, though our primary lens is narrowly focused on ecodharma and understanding what practices, activities, or teachings have been found to be effective in supporting people to process difficult emotions associated with climate change. Therefore, we begin by discussing the term ecodharma; we build upon this with a discussion of the intersection of ecodharma with race; we follow with a discussion of practices, and then of areas where ecodharma can be strengthened; and we conclude with some of the ecodharma challenges that we are facing today.



What Is Ecodharma, Anyway?

Ecodharma is a term often used in American Buddhism to describe work at the intersection of ecological concerns, and mindfulness and meditation. The word dharma can be translated as “nature” and can be understood as synonymous with “eco,” so does the full term have meaning? And what does it mean?

We think the answer is “yes,” that ecodharma is an important and useful term because it highlights the need to integrate ecological responsibility with dharma practice.

*Kaira Jewell
Lingo*

It's a skillful means to emphasize something that's already at the heart of what spiritual practice is and needs to be. That addition of 'eco' is needed because we forget that our spiritual practice needs to be about both engaging on behalf of all of life, all of the humans we share this planet with, all of the other species, all the water, all the air, all the soil, all the future generations. We forget that if we see ourselves as somehow separate or above those various forms of life, that's really detrimental to us and to our own progress on our spiritual path. Although it's not saying anything different than Dharma, we need more of a reminder because of where we are today.

*Dekila
Chungyalpa*

I don't know if I have a phrase or a word that I prefer to ecodharma. I think dharma is eco. Something I absolutely love and marvel at almost daily is how dharmic environmental science is. There is no aspect of environmental science that is not dharma. We talk about ecosystem processes. It's interdependent. Just the relationships like predator or parasite or complimentary or cooperative, they're all actually manifestations of compassion, right? And how empty they are to even have these titles like ‘that's predatory’, because actually you need species to thrive for the other species to thrive.

*Bonnie
Duran*

Ecodharma may be braiding traditional indigenous wisdom with what the Buddha taught. Something like that braiding, I think, is an appropriate way to think about it as well.



Other terms are used², but for now, the BESS Family Foundation, in conjunction with the eco advisory committee, believes that ecodharma is an excellent term currently available for our purposes with the following caveats ~

- ✦ *First, the term carries with it spiritual inferences that may turn off non-Buddhists. This is an important concern and we ask that readers recall that we are using the term broadly to apply also to mainstream secular and Indigenous traditions.*
- ✦ *Second, ecodharma is not naming something radically new or innovative. Doing so would be dismissive of prior communities' understandings of environmental justice and ecological stewardship. It's a convenient word in 2024 to highlight human responsibility for the more-than-human world through the vehicle of Dharma.*



² For example, we see “ecodharma” in use in centers such as the Ecodharma Centre in Spain and One Earth Sangha, which also uses the term ecosattva. Ecosattva is a term that predates ecodharma, and has been used at Green Gulch Farm, part of the San Francisco Zen Center; Natural Dharma Fellowship's Wonderwell Mountain Refuge; and elsewhere to refer to people who are active in ecodharma. Similarly, Plum Village uses the term Earth-Holders to describe those engaging in ecodharma. Broader more ecumenical terms include Sacred or Spiritual Activism.

Race and Ecodharma

The eco advisory committee members generously shared their expertise and practices, pointing to the fact that racial injustice and inequality deeply intersect with the ecological crisis, such that responding to one entails responding to the other. Race, racism, and anti-racist practices within mindfulness and meditation spaces were widely discussed topics within our eco advisory committee and comprised a significant portion of the one-on-one interviews.

Both ecodharma and race are inextricably linked, and our view is that one is not more important than the other. North American practices of mindfulness and meditation, as well as environmental work, seem to be activities tailor-made for the educated white population. Ecodharma has extra work to do to become a bigger tent, welcoming students and practitioners who fall outside of this narrow audience. Healing our relationships with the Earth and with one another is part of the same work.

Like members of this committee, we at the BESS Family Foundation see no way that climate change can be adequately addressed unless racism is also addressed. In community with the eco advisory committee, we learned a tremendous amount about the various ways to welcome everybody to practice, and the work of the BESS Family Foundation has been transformed. We acknowledge that this conversation about race is one the larger dharma community is having and that our focus on ecodharma and environmental justice represents only a narrow slice of the discussion.

The BIPOC community has an important role to play in addressing the climate crisis in North America. Lama Rod Owens believes that this community needs to be welcomed into climate action through BIPOC leadership. One problem, he notes, is that since white climate leadership has been absent from past and present struggles of marginalized people, it can feel like another ask from privileged communities.



Lama Rod
Owens

The concern is that those white climate communities haven't really cared about anything we've been dealing with for centuries. Now we're being asked to care about this thing. That's a contradiction, absolutely. We're all impacted by this, but there's historical trauma that manifests itself as well as distrust and fatigue from yet another kind of ask. So that's it. That's why I always say that these movements have to emerge from Indigenous and Communities of Color.

How can all dharma practitioners welcome and provide support for such movements?

To be appealing to many BIPOC communities, ecodharma needs to reflect back the joy, spice, and colorfulness that many BIPOC communities enjoy. One way of orienting ecodharma in this direction is to focus on the world we want to create: a more just, more diverse, healthier world than we currently have, and to celebrate that vision with related music, dance, food, and more.



Dekila
Chungyalpa

For me, what's really apparent is that when we talk about resilience, it's two sides of a coin, you have the reduction of distress, and the other is the increase of joy. And in BIPOC communities we are very focused on joy. You look at LGBTQ joy, Black community joy, loud joy, very, very loud joy. A shout that we are here, we love one another, and we are happy. We are community despite what happens to us. And how white culture shrinks from all of that. When we talk about professionalism, what we mean is the eradication of all of that. We just want the distress reduction. Joy is left out.

Kirsten Rudestam points to a need to rework our approach to environmentalism. She prioritizes extricating our notions of environmentalism from a legacy of whiteness and from an inherited idea of wilderness as a place where humans are absent, an environmentalism dedicated to preserving an illusion of a pristine raw sense of nature. Kirsten notes that it's clear the environmental issues of our time are interlocked with social justice issues, with histories of racism, colonialism and patriarchy; all of the ways in which the oppression of other people is fundamentally linked with ecological oppression and the ecological health of the planet.

An important step in reaching this goal is to increase the number of BIPOC leaders in ecodharma. The eco advisory committee considered ways to advance BIPOC leaders, including through co-teaching and training. Co-teaching (white-identifying teachers with BIPOC teachers) provides both the benefit of learning from one another, while often providing the possibility to reach diverse audiences at the same time.

Still others find we can have the most impact by training others to lead nature-based retreats.

*Susie
Harrington*

I'm training 24 people to teach nature retreats, and that group has a fair amount of diversity in it. A lot of those people in training have the specific objective of bringing diverse communities into the nature dharma. So that's probably the most realistic way to increase diversity...That's realistically what I can do - train other people to do what I do and, by who they are, they will bring more diversity.



Building trust is always important, but particularly so when working with mixed race groups. A critical component for building trust is modeling openness, vulnerability, humility, and transparency. This starts with teachers demonstrating a clear intention about their identity and their positionality.

*Deborah
Eden Tull*

I think it's important for teachers to be transparent about being in a living inquiry of what inclusivity actually is. Transparency is really important in making spaces available for racially diverse folks. So, I always first take ownership of being a white woman, and naming that my intention is to maintain awareness of the complexities of being a white woman, speaking to the crises of our times, recognizing that I can only speak from the specificity of my own experience as it might resonate with certain universal truths that people from diverse backgrounds share. I also find it important to recognize that I think white avoidance is the tendency of white culture to avoid, to turn away, to avoid the sticky stuff; it is one of the greatest turn-offs for people.

Affinity groups are considered a necessary offering. Affinity groups provide spaces for everyone to communicate without the barrier of unresolved racial trauma. Affinity groups may naturally emerge in the formation of breakout rooms or small groups.

Lama Rod
Owens

I think affinity groups are necessary because there are so many people who can't negotiate the trauma of an unexamined and unmetabolized whiteness anymore; their capacity to be in a relationship and in a working relationship with white identified folks around these particular issues is very limited. ...we have to be concerned with the healing of racial trauma. And understanding how racial traumas directly relate to climate instability... a lot of people who are really engaged in climate change work aren't necessarily engaged around the privileges that are really at the root of climate instability.

Deborah
Eden Tull

I give people the opportunity to be in BIPOC breakout rooms. If there are certain things we're discussing, if we're on the topic of power, for instance, or a topic that is more explicitly triggering, then I would put people into affinity groups; there are certain structures for safety that I would follow.

This is but a subset of the complexity associated with race that the committee discussed. Please refer to these and the many other great resources available for a full discussion³.



³ Among the amazing resources available, we admire all of the following: “Radical Dharma: Talking Race, Love, and Liberation” by Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, Lama Rod Owens and Jasmine Syedullah, “The New Saints: From Broken Hearts to Spiritual Warriors” by Lama Rod Owens, “Mindful of Race” by Ruth King, “You Belong: A Call for Connection” by Sebene Selassie, and “The Inner Work of Racial Justice: Healing Ourselves and Transforming Our Communities Through Mindfulness” by Rhonda V Magee.

Ecodharma in Practice

We face a difficult emotional landscape in North America in 2024: eco-anxiety, eco-grief and solastalgia, and overall, pervasive feelings of inequality, injustice, fear, sadness, powerlessness, despair, anger, and more. A focus of this project was understanding what practices, activities, or teachings have been found to be effective in supporting all people, facilitating the ability to process these difficult emotions. Processing difficult emotions is a priority because until people face the painful realities of climate breakdown and associated crises, they are unlikely to engage in constructive and proactive responses to any particular situation or crisis. Denying, avoiding, ignoring, distracting ourselves, or otherwise burying our heads in the sand will not help. It is easy to be mired in present and future threats which can lead to feeling, yet often to embodying, a sense of urgency. This is exactly what we do not need. Fear and a sense of urgency can cause more damage, as fear is a terrible motivator of change and urgency blocks the needed creativity.

Lama Rod
Owens

People don't necessarily get scared into changing since fears are connected to trauma. A lot of activism and a lot of change theories tend to be divorced from trauma theory. People complain about why things aren't changing, even if they're doing all this work, because you haven't consulted the reality of trauma and dissociation. It's hard for people to change if they're disassociated and disembodied.

Deborah
Eden Tull

Something I feel that is no longer helpful is the approach that affirms the urgency of it and the doom and gloom of our situation. That is not useful. One of the greatest symptoms, or saddest symptoms of the Great Unravelling⁴ is the kind of psycho-spiritual weight of this focus on fear-based mentality, urgency, and insufficiency. And it isn't the only approach to times of great change and times when conscious response and action are needed. That's why the related field of Sacred Activism and Spiritual Activism is emerging from a starting point that is different than fear. It enables us to tap into a deeper power, a shared power.



*That different starting point
is joy, connection,
community, safety,
love, and justice.*

Early on, our eco advisory committee told us that cultivating an embodied understanding of the human-Earth connection, interdependence, and non-separation were key to addressing the difficult emotions associated with climate change. Prominent aspects of this cultivation are mindfulness / awareness of our deep interdependence with the natural world, as well as love and gratitude. While many people may have a cognitive understanding of interdependence with the natural world, for this to move us to action, to be transformative, the fact of interdependence needs to also be known in the body.

*Brian J.
Nichols*

I was having a conversation with one of my Anishinaabe colleagues about this [interdependence] because it came up in my Chinese religion class. It's been a theme. The Indigenous and Chinese traditionally do not see a separation between humans and the natural world. We are of the Earth; we come from the Earth. It sustains us; we give back to it because of that, ritualistically. It was white European colonizers who had a very different ideology that they just assumed the way things were-- to be separate.



The practices here offer many ways to cultivate this understanding of interdependence. How the practices are offered begins with understanding what people need and where they are coming from.

*Margaret
Fletcher*

For different people, it will be a different sequence of events... That means that some folks really need to learn how to touch joy and gratitude; they're so depleted. To get some benefit from the Dharma has got to come first. Otherwise, it's just going to make things worse. For some folks, they're more ready, or they're there, they're more strong. They can see the problems, they can see their own suffering, and they can turn towards the difficult as their first move. It isn't one way or another.

*Ven.
Santacitta
Bhikkhuni*

Because of karma, we have different work with different situations. We all have different early childhood scenarios, and different early wounding or trauma. One person might be more under the influence of abandonment, and another one has been intruded upon, so that makes for a very different personality structure. Then you need different practices in order to allow that to unravel itself because we can't just like bang through it; that's not going to work. We have to honor the past in order to open up.

The Earth-Based Body Scan

Mindfulness of body through body scan involves mindfulness of the whole body, this Earth-body. Using the term "Earth-body" helps remind us that we are of the Earth, made of the same components of the Earth.

Jeanne Corrigan suggests guiding people very slowly, carefully through the territory of their bodies.

This practice is integral in *recognizing your heat, coolness, here's weight, here's the way that your body reads in the field of gravity; we call that weight; it's very direct.*

Elements Meditation

Many teachers suggest meditating on the four, five, or six "elements" (Earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness) as an effective means of cultivating a sense of connection and interdependence with the more-than-human world. Paying attention to these different aspects of experience, in particular to the material experience of the four great elements, internally and externally, cultivates a sense of connection and kinship with the more-than-human world. Ven. Santacitta Bhikkhuni points out that meditating on the elements can lead to gratitude, a sense of deep time, and joy, and Bonnie Duran points out the compatibility with Indigenous traditions, including Indigenous Sun Dance.

Susie
Harrington

It's such a great avenue for creating interconnectedness. It's intellectual, but also direct.

Tuning In to Mother Earth

Thich Nhat Hanh has taught that the only way we can survive this perilous moment is if we can fall in love with the Earth, our mother. We are called to remember how beautiful she is and how she provides everything for us. We approach Earth with awe. This dissolves the sense of separation, the sense of domination, the sense of being over and above.

A way to practice this in meditation, which Kaira Jewel Lingo regularly offers, is to remember a time when you were inspired by the natural world, or other beings, when you experienced a sense of oneness, connection, love, awe or beauty.

You relive the moment so you can feel it again in your body, sensations, and mind, mindfully savoring that moment to really give it time to sink into your consciousness. If time is available, it is helpful to form small groups for each person to share their experience of falling in love with the Earth. This includes falling in love with all beings on Earth, including all human communities.



Lama Rod Owens speaks of tuning in to the consciousness of Mother Earth in order to better understand how to live in balance and not be in a relationship of domination. This method includes deep listening, a form of mindful, open, loving receptivity. Both Bonnie Duran and Jeanne Corrigan point out the compatibility of deep listening to Mother Earth with Indigenous ways of knowing.

Connecting and Convening with Nature

Several teachers talked about the importance of simply spending time in natural places, wild places, and walking in the woods. The role wilderness can play in wellbeing and the cultivation of insight into interdependence and impermanence cannot be underestimated.

Several participants noted how spending time outside fosters a sense of belonging, respect, awe, and mindfulness. Being in nature can help to release obsessive thoughts, reduce anxiety, let go of or work through difficult emotions, and move out of one's own ego. Tim Ream believes that in certain cases, this practice can precipitate a kind of "eco kenshō," or awakening to being part of and not greater than or other than the natural world. Spending time in nature can take many forms and is most effective when combined with intentional mindful awareness.

If we are unable to be outdoors, we can use mindfulness and memory to "touch the Earth." Using memory to remember "the home place" can help us find nourishment or solace or direction. The Buddha did this with the memory of sitting under the rose apple tree as a child.



Jeanne Corrigan suggests a ritual structure with "I see you Mara, Touch the Earth, Go Forth" practice. Mara represents obstacles to enlightenment. Touching the Earth and saying "I see you Mara" refers to the capacity to see clearly and work with the subtle forces of delusion, symbolized by Mara. Practitioners dispel Mara's influence and are able to go forth to awakening. As a ritual structure it is adapted to see the difficult emotions or harms, to connect to the Earth, to draw strength from the Earth, and to go forth to engage in the work of healing and repairing or building. Jeanne uses this as

a practice to enable us to say, "I see you" to all our difficult emotions. Using the stability of mindful meditation to behold what is there, be it anxiety, destruction, pain, whatever is there. If outside we can touch the Earth, to witness our seeing of "Mara."

Readily accessible practice opportunities include a birding walk, a flower walk, being mindful of sensations, and having a regular "sit spot." Variations on practices in nature include the following:

- ❖ Earth-based mindfulness practices using grounding, nourishing, and connecting were emphasized by Kirsten Rudestam and Lama Rod Owens. Grounding includes recognizing that our bodies are of the Earth and can include connecting to ancestors and future beings (deep time). Connecting with ancestors and teachers may be nourishing. This is followed by deep listening to the land, trees, plants, rocks, water, wind. Kirsten advises having a daily sit spot outside for a few minutes to observe with all one's senses. By returning through the year, one is able to observe changes and develop greater intimacy with a particular outdoor space.
- ❖ Nature retreats or bringing mindfulness to the experience of being outdoors, helps enhance awareness and experience of natural features. Adding gratitude practice helps cultivate connection of love for the Earth. Retreats may include rituals for climate disruption. For example, each person has a pile of stones. They place stones naming a feeling about climate change, then place a stone for what we felt would be nourishing (going forth).
- ❖ The *Satipatthana Sutra* can easily be taught as a nature-based practice: contemplating internally and externally, arising and passing away, dwelling without clinging. Jeanne Corrigan suggests that this can be done naturally and easily outdoors in a natural area.

*Kirsten
Rudestam*

A more structured approach to being in nature includes nature-based rituals using the following general structure: setting an intention, going into the more than human world with an open question; asking consent; encouraging humility, openness, and invitation; listening to nature; then coming back, sharing a story and being witnessed in community.

- ❖ Experiencing every aspect of the natural world as alive and aware is a part of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist worldview accompanied by animistic rituals. As Dekila Chungyalpa reminds us, such a world view and rituals can be a source of comfort and joy.
- ❖ Mark Coleman, while not a part of our eco advisory committee, offers many of these practices and more in his teaching. <https://markcoleman.org>

The Brahmaviharas

Several teachers mentioned meditation with the four *brahmaviharas* (friendliness/*metta*, compassion/*karuna*, sympathetic joy/*mudita*, equanimity/*upekka*) as a way to generate more expansiveness, ease, joy, equanimity, and empowerment. As our connection to the Brahmaviharas grows through practice, we are better able to see ourselves and our connection with the natural world regardless of our external challenges, issues, and hardships. Our ability to cultivate loving-kindness can lead to a balanced compassion for our Earth-based existence and practice.



A simple practice, for example, can be merely a reflection of our attitudes to ordinary, everyday life. Seeing something that makes us happy in nature such as a squirrel gathering nuts or a butterfly can elicit lovingkindness in feelings of appreciation and goodwill. If the squirrel or the butterfly befalls danger, we may feel compassion: a sense of kindness, caring, and a sincere wish for their safety. As either scamper or flutter past us, we may feel joyful, happy, grateful for the sharing of the experience. And when the sun begins to set and the squirrel and butterfly depart, we can feel the Brahmavihara of equanimity: we can clearly love them both, and love the experience with a sense of calm, understanding, and peace that all is as it should be.

Incorporating Tonglen as Ecodharma

Both Susie Harrington and Dekila Chungyalpa advise that an advanced practice that can be helpful is Tonglen (taking and giving). This practice involves visualizing taking on the pain of others and offering them relief. At the same time, one cultivates a sense of emptiness or no self to become a conduit of great compassion, relieving the suffering of others, giving aid, solace, respite, or whatever is needed.

Dekila Chungyalpa suggests reversing the traditional Tonglen practice for eco-activists so they take compassion from the world and give away their suffering.

This is particularly important because so many eco-activists are burned out and need to soothe themselves in order to live peacefully. For many, it is important that they are able to breathe out their suffering and breathe in relief. Reversing the order is usually done after practicing in the traditional order, as illustrated here in this three-part series. It is suggested you spend a few minutes for each of these sections.

Breathe in oxygen from all the
plants

Breathe out gratitude

•

Breathe in the Earth's pain
Breathe out healing

•

Breathe out your suffering
Breathe in the Earth's healing



Relational Mindfulness and Ecodharma

Deborah Eden Tull maintains that dissolving our separation from Earth begins with our relationship to ourselves. Discovering how to center ourselves in a sustained accepting and loving way enables embodied deep listening. Eden emphasizes the importance of embodied deep listening to help repair and enrich relationships with oneself, with others, and with the Earth. Embodied deep listening helps process difficult emotions and dissolves the bubble of separation, leading to a "we consciousness," and a realization that we are all in it together, the world is our sangha.



Deborah Eden Tull feels there is a direct relationship with Relational Mindfulness⁴ and nature.

Relational Mindfulness is an invitation to a partnership with nature.... a phrase I like to use is rewilding our perceptual lens; it's so important in this time to just get people out of their heads and down into their Earthly bodies and to recognize all of the resources and resiliency and connection with every realm, and relational intelligence that going down into our bodies allows.

⁴ For more on the practice of relational mindfulness, see Deborah Eden Tull's [Relational Mindfulness](#), Wisdom Publications.

Another example of a *Deep Listening practice* was shared by Kaira Jewel Lingo, who describes the practice of *Touching the Earth* developed by the Plum Village Earth Holders⁵.

We touch the Earth to all the different plant species, the animal species, and the human species. Prostrating on the Earth, we express our regret, express our sadness for the ways that we have... contributed to harm and we make a clear commitment not to do this anymore. It's a communal practice; and while it can be done individually, it's very powerful when done with others. I've practiced it with others, and people were in tears; they were very moved to reflect on how they had been part of the destruction to the many different manifestations of our Earth community. And also, how empowering it is to visualize how we can be part of healing and restoring the life in and around us.

Nicola (Nic) Redfern is applying the practice of Insight Dialogue⁶ to explore ecodharma.



As a relational meditation practice, Insight Dialogue brings multiple benefits when looking at the many crises we are currently facing, since so many of them emerge, in essence, from a breakdown in relationship with ourselves and with the earth.

⁵ <https://earthholder.training>

⁶ <https://insightdialogue.org>

Nic
Redfern

Insight Dialogue helps us integrate Dharma teachings into our daily lives in a powerfully embodied way by actively combining meditation, Buddhist teachings, and the immediacy of interpersonal relationship. Bringing wakeful awareness right into the heart of communication strengthens our ability to act with respect, humility, ethical alignment, and ultimately calls forth our appreciation of our inherent kinship and interdependence.

Meditating together on the impacts of the polycrisis provides witnessing and accompaniment as we face challenging emotions. This gives us the opportunity to co-regulate one another's nervous systems, and reduces our feelings of isolation as we experience the grief, outrage, numbness and depression that the ecocrisis can evoke.



Over time, as we bring this mindful awareness to one another and to the earth, we come to see conditioned patterns of domination, extraction and separation. These can gradually be replaced with more healthy relationships reflecting reciprocity, interdependence and care for the whole.

Remembering Our Ancestors

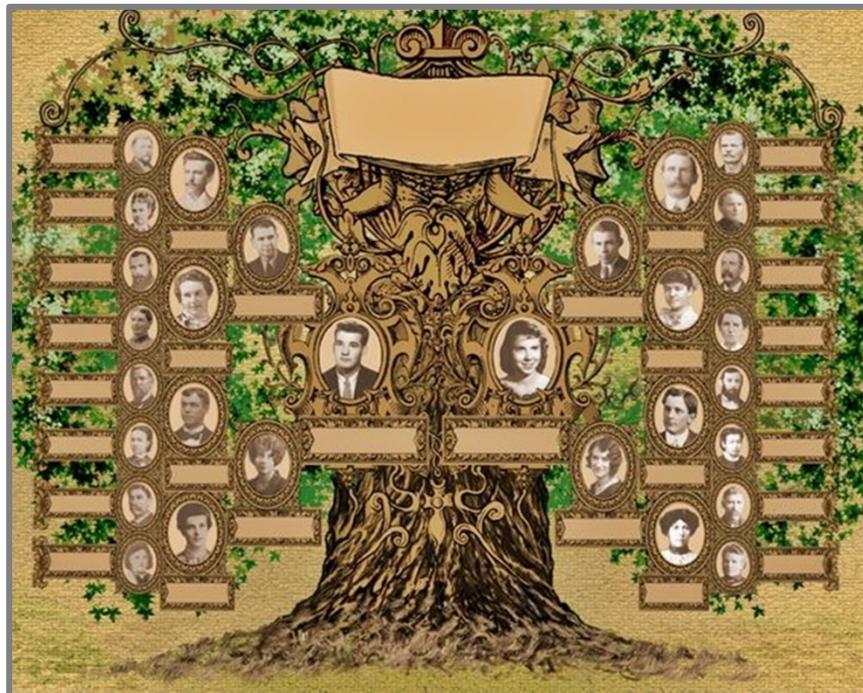
A priority for Ven. Santacitta Bhikkhuni and Lama Rod Owens is ancestral work.

Ven.
Santacitta
Bhikkhuni

Our ancestors, not only human but also animal, plant, and mineral ancestors, take us directly back into the planet itself. Our bodies are actually more than 4 billion years old and all the stuff which make up these complex bio computers, which we call our bodies, are literally made of the stars. This perception inspires a deep sense of ancestral line and opens the door into a new way of self-understanding and cultural narrative. We are heirs of the resilience and the trauma of the generations which have come before us. We are literally standing on their shoulders and when we die we have the opportunity to become good compost for the flourishing of the next generation. I feel that's a responsibility. When I'm dead, I'm going to go be part of that line, back into the soil. Then I feel like, 'okay, I can do this, I can be composted for the next generation'...and that's all which is required. There is less of a hubris in terms of what we need to achieve as individuals.

Lama Rod
Owens

That's one of the biggest things that we can offer to this idea of ecodharma and to climate instability, and to justice and equity as well, is to really start going back and metabolizing the trauma of oppression that our ancestors have engaged in until we unravel whether we will continue to benefit or not benefit. On my end, I've had to go back and really metabolize the trauma, genocide and oppression and everything. It's been really intense work, but it has allowed me to experience a certain kind of freedom to be more myself in the world. When I say more of myself, I mean more authentic and much less interested in overconsuming and dominating the world because I'm in so much pain.



Individual Actions

Many of us have been told that individual actions cannot make a difference, but that is not true. Our committee felt that it is important to examine our individual consumption patterns.

David Loy

I think we can say generally that the Buddhist path is really incompatible with a life devoted to consumerism, and seeing that, how do we reduce our own individual consumption and lower our carbon footprints? If we're not going to be hypocritical, we need to think about that. Think about diet, think about transport and so forth.

Tim Ream argues that while simply renouncing consumerism and modifying our consumption is not enough to address the climate and biodiversity crises, it is still important for several key reasons:

1. It is more in line with the ideals of simplicity and low consumption, and the low impact living of our dharma ancestors
2. It can free us from the rat race, allowing more time for practice and activism
3. It prevents teachers, leaders, influencers and others who live aligned with their values from appearing hypocritical
4. It is painful and dissonant to hold strong values for protecting the Earth while living in a way that is so unnecessarily harmful. That causes us to turn away from the crises.



Susie Harington raises the benefits of renunciation and contentment.

Another fundamental one is the quality of renunciation, not as a sacrifice, but actually as cultivation. I tell students at the beginning of almost every retreat that the second precept of not taking what has not been freely given is my favorite precept because it is an invitation to contentment. It's saying you don't need something that's not already here. In a really deep way, we've got a culture that cultivates greed. It's very radical and subversive to cultivate, at every moment, the idea that, no, you already have what you need. That you don't need something else to be happy feels like a very important cultivation for our time.

Related to this sense of contentment to counter greed and consumerism are the feelings of joy that come in the experience of beauty and pleasant environments.

Ven.
Santacitta
Bhikkhuni

What's important is the power of art and the power of beauty to inspire a sense of joy—a lightness of mind and inspiration to create pleasant environments where the mind feels uplifted.... It's more like a subtle joy, which also comes from aesthetics, beauty, art, and a sense of community and creating a field of like-minded minds, which is something you can almost touch, but you can't really pin it down. It can give you wings. It can really uplift and create architectures of healing where emergence can do its job.

With the Aloka Earth Room⁷, Ven. Santacitta Bhikkhuni has created “a place where people are supported to experience emergence in a collective vessel and where the power of beauty and symbolism is a lubricant force to enable that process.”



⁷ <https://alokavihara.org/aloka-earth-room/>

Animistic Wisdom Traditions

An unexpected theme that emerged within the eco advisory committee was the intersection between Indigenous animistic traditions and ecodharma. While almost everyone interviewed had something positive to say about Indigenous knowledge, those with the deepest engagement shared training and/or practice lineages from Indigenous cultures.

*Kirsten
Rudestam*

I fold the animist learnings so much into my Buddhist Dharma practice that I have a hard time sometimes disentangling the two and wondering, 'What's the Buddhism here? And what's the Animism here?' To me, they support each other so deeply.

Bonnie Duran notes, "*Buddhism fit in incredibly well with traditional practices that I did.*" Points of compatibility between Buddhism and Indigenous traditions include valuing and cultivating non-conceptual forms of knowing and somatic knowing in and by the body, deep-listening, and mindfulness. Other points include animistic understandings of nature, perceiving the natural world as a source of teaching, and ethical concern for all beings.



Imagination and Story Telling

Imagination and storytelling are key aspects of practice in ecodharma. Our imaginations can be directed to imagine better futures.

*Deborah
Eden Tull*

Let's put our imagination consciously to use and work with future beings or ancestors to really imagine what a world living beyond fossil fuels feels and looks like, a world where we're actually living in a respectful, reverent, reciprocal relationship with Earth looks like... I find those practices increasingly important... inviting people actually into a field of play together, and a field where they're saying, we're saying, let's go far beyond the cognitive mind into the field of possibility... Play is an important component to get beyond our limiting stories.

*Brian J.
Nichols*

One way of approaching it is to imagine what that better future looks like and say, that's what we want to work toward, rather than running away from catastrophe, it's something that people can sign on to.

A body of rituals used by many of our advisors are those associated with Joanna Macy's⁸ The Work that Reconnects⁹. These rituals cultivate somatic knowing, which is critical for moving into action. One example is the Future Beings ritual where people partner up and imagine conversing with a being from the future, asking intense questions related to acting on behalf of life.

➤ People go to deep and profound places....I hear from people even months later. *Deborah Eden Tull commenting on the Future Beings ritual from The Work that Reconnects*

⁸ <https://www.joannamacy.net/main>

⁹ <https://workthatreconnects.org>



An easily accessible practice that Margaret Fletcher suggests is dedicating the merit of practices to future generations. This thought of those generations to follow—children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews—can help encourage practitioners to take action now to benefit those of the future.

Margaret
Fletcher

May any merit attained be shared with all future generations. Through this goodness may all future beings be liberated from suffering.

Acting without attachment to results is important as well,
in order to avoid burnout and despair.

Part of cultivating imagination is being open to a future of unknown possibilities; letting go of past models and leaning into emergence with beginner's mind or "don't-know mind." Tim Ream points out that it is manifest in examples of non-linear change.

Tim Ream

I experienced it personally when I was a Peace Corps volunteer in southern Africa, the way Apartheid fell so fast. One minute, Mandela was a prisoner for 30 years; a couple of years later, he was the President of South Africa. I was in southern Africa for two and a half years, and I was confident that there was no way Black people would get the vote without a huge amount of bloodshed. That seemed so obvious to me, and I was wrong.

Beyond the Individual

The eco advisory committee agrees on the need to move beyond the myth of the individual, and with it the idea of a heroic savior figure which is central to the ideologies that have led us down the path of individual distress, Earth-body confusion and stress, and eco-destruction. As Thich Nhat Han once predicted, "The next Buddha will be a Sangha."

A practical side of getting beyond individualism is cultivating robust communities that can provide needed emotional, material, and spiritual support in addition to countering debilitating individualism. Communities are also needed as spaces for sharing knowledge and resources, and planning and engaging in actions to protect and heal life.



Kirsten
Rudestam

Robust communities would be *working communities that are culturally and racially diverse, that have really good guidelines for communication and for working with conflict, and that are able to think and work collaboratively on projects at different scales.*

Dekila Chungyalpa notes that simply doing eco-projects
together is empowering, healing, and energizing.

Challenges for Ecodharma

There are multiple challenges to pursuing a more widespread understanding and practice of ecodharma. Below we identify a few of the challenges facing ecodharma practice today.

Find Inner Peace or Face Uncomfortable Facts?

Perhaps the number one obstacle we see to bringing ecodharma into many communities is the reason so many come to practice in the first place. Often, we see people going to Buddhist centers, taking mainstream courses like Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and using meditation apps to de-stress, to relax and to find comfort. They simply have little interest in facing uncomfortable facts around injustice, ecological destruction, and climate disruption. The level of discomfort required to face the truth can seem antithetical to the goals of meditation. But, as Dekila Chungyalpa and Lama Rod Owens both note, attachment to comfort is an obstacle to the promise of meditation to help practitioners to see clearly and to reduce suffering.

Dekila
Chungyalpa

This idea of comfort and stability is not going to last. We really have to get people comfortable with impermanence.

Lama Rod
Owens

To bring justice back into traditional Dharma means that we also have to begin to value discomfort again and not see discomfort as something that should be avoided or that we're trying to overcome. My practice of Dharma is to hold space for both comfort and discomfort, not to privilege one over the other. Even though I do enjoy comfort, I also know that if I'm enjoying the comfort and have no sense of discomfort, there's something wrong.



Dissociation with the Greater World Issues

A related problem occurs among practitioners who simply want to dissociate their practice from socio-political issues.

Jeanne
Corrigal

I think there are people that don't want to be political and they don't see why meditation has to be political. I think that is in our community. They don't see any connection and they feel a little bit resentful about being prodded out of their comfort zone. Nonetheless, Jeanne sees many people discover that when eco-concern is brought in and addressed, people are wanting to talk about it. It's on people's mind and they need an avenue. I find if you open it up, there's kind of a relief. So, I bring it into Dharma talks more.

Addressing Fear

One of the obstacles to more engagement is the lack of safe spaces where people feel free to confront their feelings about the climate crisis and all the other crises they are facing simultaneously.

Jeanne
Corrigal

I think that what's keeping a lot of practitioners from getting off the cushion, is that they don't have a place to say how scared they are, and how overwhelmed they are. And I think they need a place to say, 'I'm really scared.' To say, 'this is how it is for me.' And that's what I think meditation can provide-- a place that people can say, 'I see you' together [I see fear, anxiety, grief, injustice etc.]. That's what I see at the moment. And I think that, if they can lay down some of that anxiety, eco anxiety, and have a sangha to lay it down with, I think that will free up some energy to get off the cushion

How Best to Provide Conflict Resolution?

An important issue that dharma practices in general, and ecodharma practices specifically, can effectively address is the inevitable conflict that arises as people confront the inequality in our world systems. Buddhist teachers and practitioners are in a position to contribute to de-escalation and conflict resolution, providing the ability of not seeing things as dualistically as the traditional capitalistic system does.

However, there will be people on all sides whose actions are rooted in anger and violence. This group has wondered how we might hold and validate a multiplicity of worldviews.

How do we handle the people who are doing the violence?

As a community committed to non-harming, how do we ensure that we ourselves listen deeply and offer respect even to those who are themselves harming others?

These questions remain alive.



Mindfulness and Meditation Teachers

Every one of us knows how hard it can be to face the ecological situation and to hold it. Perhaps it is especially difficult for dharma teachers and other faith leaders, many of whom are facing the situation with open hearts and are feeling it so deeply. These leaders have to hold space for themselves, all while holding space for their students and all beings.

Dharma and mainstream mindfulness teachers can benefit from the understanding and support that come with the ecodharma practices described here. Our eco advisory committee has told us that the support provided by others in the community has been of critical importance.

How can we support our teachers and faith leaders as they support us?



Avoid Clinging to Tradition

Tim Ream believes it is important *not* to cling to tradition, as it can be a barrier when such radical transformations are needed.

Tim Ream

...to say it in the strongest way, traditional Dharma is a barrier to ecodharma. And what I mean by that is if people are clinging to tradition, just like clinging to anything else, they are potentially blocking transformation. And if we will think for just a few minutes about what's happening on this planet, and what we're doing as far as sustainability and what we're leaving to future generations, if we believe even the conservative scientists about what's coming and climate change, and species extinction, we need to transform society. So, we cannot simply rely on tradition, even a tradition that's not from the United States of America, not from Western thinking. If we rely on that tradition, we're in so much trouble.

Kaira Jewel Lingo
reminds us that
Thich Nhat Hanh
would say if you
want to be safe, you
should make those
around you feel
safe. If we want to
be safe, we should
ensure that the
world around us is
safe. Such an
approach has
universal
applicability.

Introducing Non-Buddhists to Ecodharma

A significant challenge is broadening the appeal of ecodharma to bring teachings and practices to non-Buddhists.

David Loy

I see ecodharma as a natural development of the bodhisattva path. And that's the single most important thing that Buddhism has to offer. Combining the focus on individual transformation with seeing that not only are we not separate from other people, but that our own wellbeing, our own awakening, isn't separate from other people or from the biosphere as a whole. So, there's naturally a two-sided practice, where we work on transforming ourselves and work on contributing what we can for larger social transformation, because they really are two sides of the same thing.

A simple first step is to beware of language.

Teachers can avoid Sanskrit and Pali and use more neutral language. Several individuals expressed concern about using the term "secular" and suggest it be avoided because it may carry negative connotations. When it comes to MBSR practice, for example, Margaret prefers to speak of "mainstream dharma teaching" or "mainstream mindfulness." The hallmark of mainstream practices is that they are human-oriented and therefore universally valid as based on human capacities to relieve suffering.

While some Buddhist ideas and words may present obstacles to broad appeal, teachers warn that leaving them out may limit the power of the practices.

› *Bonnie Duran* highlights the dangers of leaving ethics out of mainstream mindfulness approaches; doing so limits the potential for healing, opens it to problems. Given the abuses and scandals in medical care (*Bonnie has done research on the medical-industrial complex*), she notes—the Hippocratic oath is not sufficient.

› *Ven. Santacitta Bhikkhuni* reminds us that the teachings of rebirth and karma are important to include as motivation and, certainly, those teachings are fundamental teachings and if understood can provide a powerful incentive for wise and compassionate speech and action. These kinds of teachings are simply "mainstream" for Asian Buddhist communities.

› *Ven. Santacitta Bhikkhuni* also suggests working on the packaging without changing the content. One can, for example, emphasize the need to cultivate compassion for all beings, and the wisdom of interbeing, rather than elaborating on the “path of the bodhisattva.”

Several practitioners also suggested broadening the appeal through presentation by incorporating insights from evolutionary biology, ecology, Earth science, psychology, and so on to enhance understanding of Buddhist views and practices.



When it comes to broadening the audience, some teachers are more comfortable setting aside ideas that are not easily verifiable by non-Buddhists.

David Loy

We should question traditional dualistic notions that encourage us to transcend this world of samsara for a “higher reality” such as nirvana. What we need to transcend is our usual way of experiencing this world, including our usual ways of experiencing ourselves in the world. This includes rethinking how we can understand karma and rebirth today. Our focus needs to be on following the bodhisattva path, here and now.

While transcendence is seen, academically, as denying the value of the world, Kaira Jewel Lingo offers a different understanding. We touch transcendence only through touching this world and its history deeply and being very connected to the body.

*Kaira
Jewel
Lingo*

The emphasis of Buddhism is on the body... and healing suffering in this life, to me...the transcendence comes through the historical dimension with all its worldly limitations; you get to the ultimate dimension of utter freedom only by going through the historical, which is the body, which is the reality of this moment, which is also this moment of ecological breakdown, you don't get to transcendence by trying to go around the problems we face today.



Finally, reinforcing community, joy, and love in practice are also relevant to broadening the appeal of ecodharma beyond the Buddhist community. More community engagement helps bring people in and make the dharma more relevant.

Conclusion

Our hopes for the eco advisory project described here were certainly met. We learned a tremendous amount about the Dharma, ecodharma, and race, all of which has sharpened our funding eye. Equally importantly, the ecodharma teachers and practitioners who participated in our project are part of a community. Members of the committee now feel comfortable and free to rely on one another for support and have collaborated in ways that are new and hope filled. Because of this, we are expanding the community to include many other leaders in ecodharma. Though we could not include here everything we learned, and while we apologize for the wisdom that we could not share, this document fulfills our hope of sharing some of what we now understand about ecodharma. We thank everyone who has been with us on this journey.

We hope that you'll join us in person or online with any of the many wonderful teachers and practitioners who are devoted to reducing suffering associated with climate change, biodiversity loss, and the many other crises our world is facing. Practical information about what steps to take as individuals and as a society can be found in multiple areas, including on Paul Hawken's [Project Drawdown](#) site and the World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) publication [108 Things You Can Do](#).

We are happy to discuss what we've learned and to hear your thoughts, so please contact us at info@bessfoundation.org



May all beings be free

Appendix

The eco advisory committee met from August 2022 to August 2023. Members of the committee represented perspectives from Buddhism, mainstream/secular mindfulness (MBSR), and Indigenous traditions. All members were invited because they are teaching or working at the intersection of mindfulness/meditation and the ecological crisis. Multiple traditions and lineages, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, inform the worldviews presented.

Method and Foundation of the Research

Multiple sources of information were used to formulate and present relevant information in this document including remote interviews, in-person interaction, feedback from our ecodharma retreat, and multiple discussions with subject experts. Online interviews were conducted on Zoom by one of the committee members, Brian J. Nichols, over the first half of 2023. Brian J. Nichols synthesized his observations from this work for us and those observations, along with our own, provided the base for this document.

Eco advisory committee members



[Dekila Chungyalpa](#)



[Ven. Santacitta
Bhikkhuni](#)



[Nic Redfern](#)



[Lama Rod Owens](#)



[Margaret Fletcher](#)



[Jeanne Corrigan](#)



[Deborah Eden Tull](#)



[Kirsten Rudestam](#)



[David Loy](#)



[Susie Harrington](#)



[Bonnie Duran](#)



[Tim Ream](#)



[Brian J. Nichols](#)



[Kaira Jewell Lingo](#)

At the March 2023 in-person retreat, the committee was joined by seven additional leaders in ecodharma

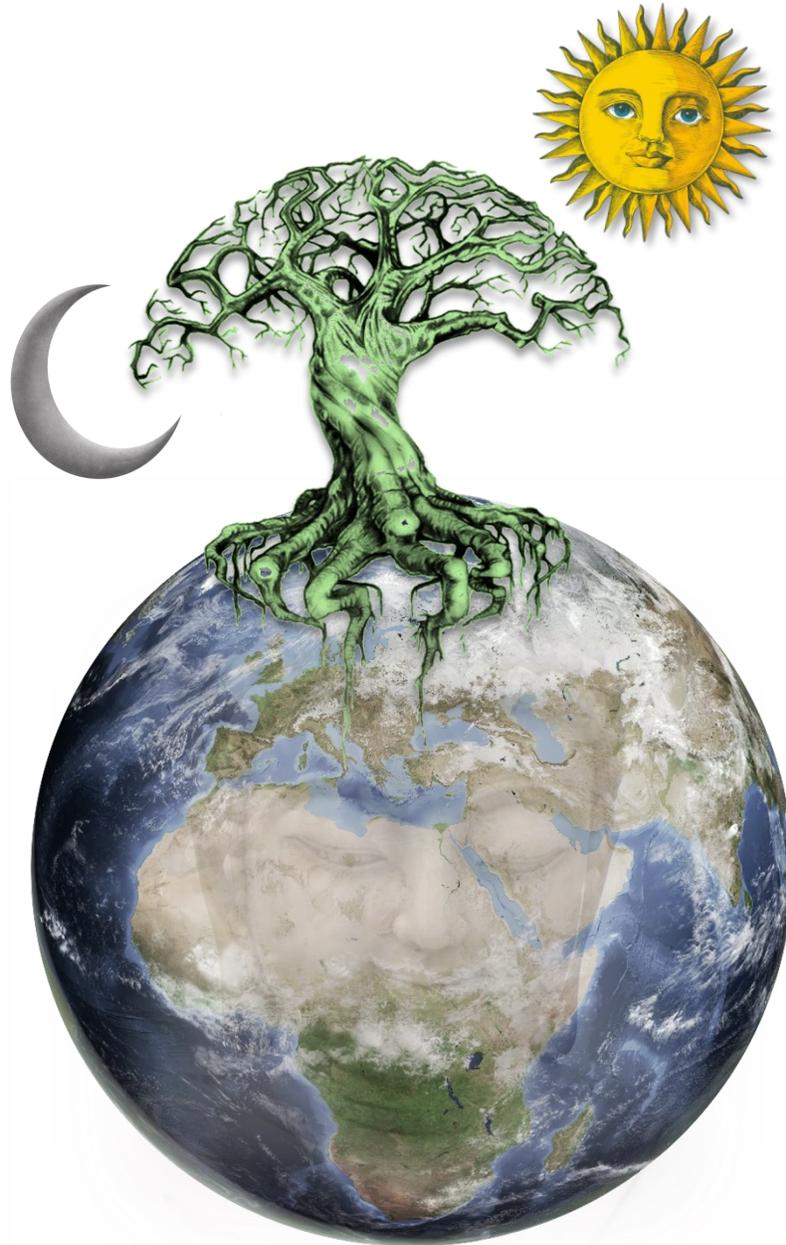
[Lama Willa Baker](#) • [Kristin Barker](#) • [John Bell](#) • [William Edelglass](#)

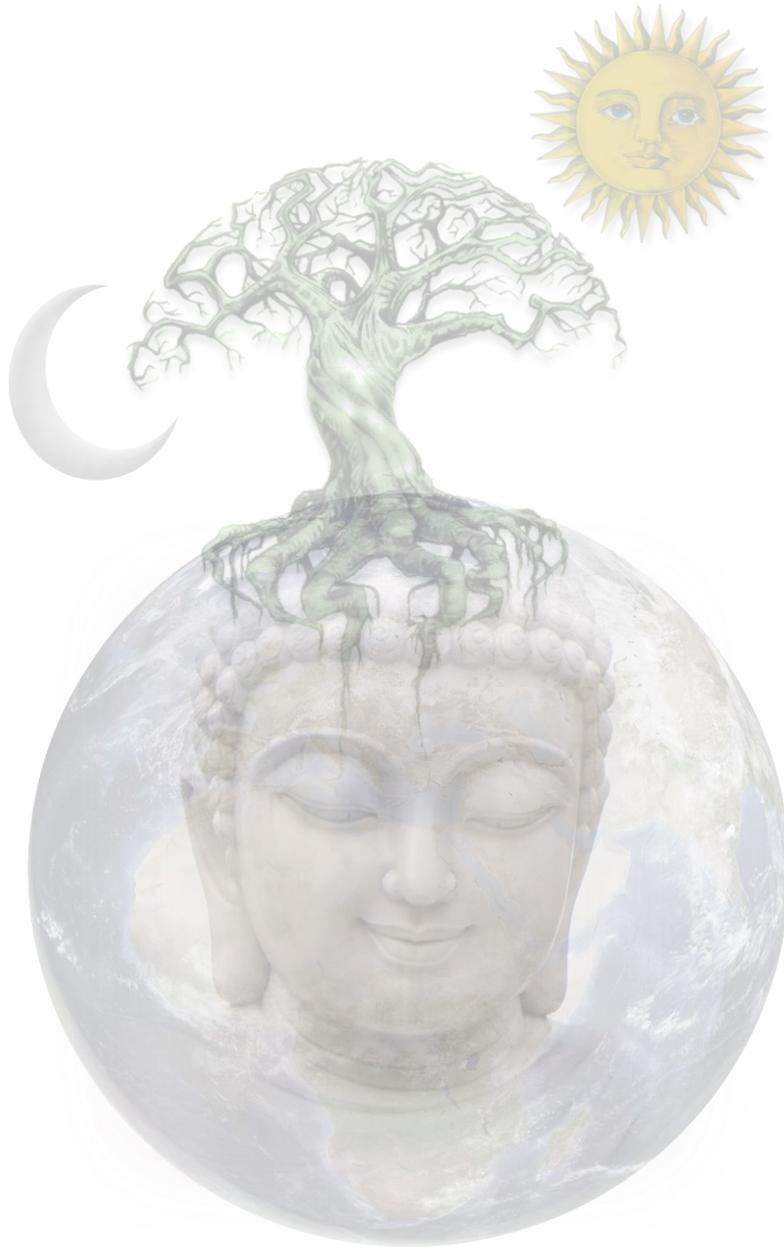
[Kritee Kanko](#) • [Stephanie Kaza](#) • [Thanissara](#)

Their wisdom has contributed significantly to our understanding of ecodharma, and therefore, to this document.

The Interview Questions

1. **Framing and Terminology:** What does ecodharma mean to you? How is it different from Buddha dharma in general? Is there another term you prefer to use to encompass bringing mindfulness and meditation practices to the ecological crisis? This question was asked to examine the broadest contours and understandings of ecodharma, understand if ecodharma was different from dharma and determine if there were better or more inclusive terms available.
2. **Therapeutic Uses / Practices:** What practices or perspectives do you find most helpful in processing climate grief, anger, despair, and growing eco-anxiety? What kinds of meditation are most helpful for you and the communities you guide? Where do you see the boundaries between meditation practices and psychotherapy? We asked this to explore how ecodharma practices could help process difficult emotions and empower people to be more constructively engaged and identify practices found to be most effective.
3. **Anti-Racism, Decolonization, Indigenization:** What strategies have you found most effective for introducing individuals identifying as BIPOC to your teachings, activities, actions, or groups? What are the key challenges in bridging divides between white and non-white communities? Between ethnic Asian and non-ethnic Asian communities? We asked this because we recognize the interconnectedness of environmental justice and social justice and recognize that environmental issues and the distribution of environmental burdens disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including low-income areas and minority populations. Responding to the ecological crisis includes repairing all relations, relations with the Earth, with other species and with all people.
4. **Engaging others:** What are key differences between "eco-dharma" and "traditional" dharma? What are important considerations around secular and non-secular approaches to practice? What are the opportunities for and obstacles to promoting these practices and worldviews more broadly? Asking this we hoped to better understand some of the obstacles to promoting ecodharma ideas as well as strategies for reaching others more effectively.
5. **Promoting Action / Engagement:** What practices or activities have you found to be most effective in confronting the climate crisis? What would you identify as the top three or five priorities for responding to the climate crisis and how might ecodharma help promote or achieve those objectives? Asking this we hoped to learn what are considered most important and effective for making a positive impact.





This document has been read and approved by the Eco Advisory Committee

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