

Chaplaining Spiritual Community: Ecodharma in the
Anthropocene

Liz Reynolds

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world

but walk slowly, and bow often (p. 123).

“When I am among the trees” - Mary Oliver

Abstract

As climate catastrophe becomes less theoretical and more the reality of our lived experience, there is a growing need for spiritual support and stewardship as the human species continues to earnestly engage with the difficulty and destruction facing Mother Nature and all sentient beings. This paper explores the growing role of eco-chaplaincy within Buddhist spiritual communities, and by extension the necessity of addressing climate catastrophe as the spiritual emergency that it is. As an increased number of Sanghas are focusing on ecodharma initiatives, nature-based wisdom teachings and ecological advocacy, what kinds of shifts are taking shape within American Buddhism as a result? With Buddhist teachings as frameworks, how can the lessons moving through American Dharma communities reverberate and ripple out into our wider communities as the need for restructuring society at every level becomes more critical?

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction	4
	a) Context of Climate Change and Ecodharma	5
	b) Three Tenets and Climate Crisis	7
	c) Situating Buddhist Chaplaincy	11
	d) Climate Crisis as Spiritual Dilemma	14
II.	Project and Findings	15
	a) Methodology and Thesis	15
	b) Background on Participants	18
	c) Origin Stories of Participants' Connections to the Natural World	20
	d) Bearing Witness to Climate Catastrophe in the Lives of Ecodharma Stewards	21
	e) Collective Compassionate Action	24
III.	Themes and Synthesis	28
	a) "Using the Forms to Break the Forms"	28
	b) Confronting Patriarchy within Buddhist Systems	32
	c) Blending of Spiritual Traditions	33
	d) Governance and Hierarchy in Buddhist Community	36
IV.	Chaplaining Spiritual Communities into the Future and Conclusions	37
	Appendix	42
	References	43

I. Introduction

In the moments after Buddha's awakening, he is said to have deliberated about whether to share the wisdom he had touched into. Would there be those who could listen? How to convey this insight? In this fable, Buddha is said to have found his five former companions in a place near Varanasi where Deer frequented. There Buddha gave his first teaching, and it is said that several Deer friends were present and listened along with their human kin (Miller, 2018). In many traditions of Buddhism, there is a refrain from dedications of merit and chants, "Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all." Was Buddha sharing his teachings with just the human species so many centuries ago, or was the entirety of the animal and plant world also included (and also listening)? How have we as humans lost our sense of place within the vast and wild nature around and within us? And how can spiritual traditions move towards centering the non-human world in this age of climate catastrophe?

As our world inches closer to the brink of widespread polycrisis, our human species will need stewards who have worked towards processing and metabolizing some of the immensity of grief, despair, hopelessness, anger and fear that the uncertain future of sentient beings on this planet precipitates. These stewards are also important in bringing healing to some of the separation that centuries of domination and manipulation of Mother Earth have wrought; in this light, spiritual contemplatives of all varieties are uniquely placed as we journey through the Anthropocene. This paper brings into focus a realm that is emerging in response to climate catastrophe called eco-chaplaincy, specifically eco-chaplaincy in the context of Buddhist spiritual community. Questions that this paper seeks to explore include: How are Buddhist spiritual communities evolving in light of current and future ecological devastation? How are stewards of various lineages and communities finding wise action and shifting priorities and

teachings in response to climate catastrophe? How are Buddhist faith communities experimenting with governance and structure to provide the transformations necessary to advance sustainable ecological systems?

a) Context of Climate Crisis and Ecodharma

August of 2023 was the hottest month since society began recording temperatures (NOAA, 2023). Extreme weather events of drought, floods, hurricanes, typhoons, blizzards and forest fires have become more commonplace as society confronts the reality that climate change is not a future phenomenon but a present threat. Climate change is affecting the fabric of our lives in ways large and small because our Earth and the natural world enable and facilitate our lives in every way. There is no scrap of clothing we wear that isn't of the Earth; no shelter we have ever slept under that isn't of the Earth; no morsel of nourishment that has passed our lips that this Earth didn't provide. And the systems that have created, shaped and maintained our societies are woven into our climate catastrophe. Though many point to the Industrial Revolution as the formal beginning of climate change, in exploring the roots of our besieged Mother Earth we can bring to light centuries of patriarchy, capitalism and race-based caste systems that have removed us from our belonging, our membership and our kinship to the natural world.

Indeed, as many of our Black, Indigenous, Latinx and Asian brothers and sisters have persuasively and passionately given voice to, white supremacy can be seen as a mother of climate change (Kanko, 2020). Communities of color here in the United States are always among the hardest hit not only when natural disasters strike with increasing frequency, but they are also the most impacted by environmental pollution like poor air quality and ocean acidification (Patnaik et al., 2020). Though appalling in themselves, these modern-day consequences result from the even larger "mindset of domination that has enslaved, ridiculed, minimized, silenced or

made invisible the bodies and/or minds of BIPOC”¹ (Kanko, 2020). It is this mindset that has made possible the clear-cutting of forests, extinction of our animal cousins and ultimately the existential threat of climate change that we all face, as Kanko argues. From this vantage point, the need for deep investigating, uprooting and restructuring of the very bases of our society becomes clear, and the true complexity of climate catastrophe is most evident.

In much of her writing on this topic, Joanna Macy along with Chris Johnstone (2012) label our current dominant narrative “Business as Usual,” and note that the defining assumption is that “economic growth is regarded as essential for prosperity, and the central plot is about getting ahead” (p. 5). It is into this paradigm that community leaders in the Buddhist tradition have begun a movement that we can broadly name *ecodharma*. David Loy (2018), in his book by the same name, describes the term in the following way: “it combines ecological concerns (*eco*) with the teachings of Buddhism and related spiritual traditions (*dharma*)” (p. 5). Loy continues in his book, noting, “Just as climate change is only part of a much larger ecological crisis, so ecodharma is a small part of socially engaged Buddhism (p. 47).

As Ann Gleig convincingly writes in her 2019 book, *American Dharma*, the Buddhism that is currently being formed, negotiated and re-formed in American society is a uniquely American version of Buddhism. Carrying Buddhist traditions, teachings, and translations from a uniquely Asia-based cultural context does not occur without shifts, twists and adjustments, many of which are made without intention or conscious awareness. It’s important to note here that this American version of Buddhism has carried with it the distinctive racial caste systems and economic disparities that have been in place in this country for centuries, and that the realm of ecodharma and environmental activism has the tendency to disconnect from racial and class-based intersectionalities (Kanko, 2017). As a relatively new religious movement in the US,

¹ BIPOC stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color.

the direction and evolution of Buddhism are in flux, open to change and malleable, which enables critiques the possibility of carrying more weight than they might in more established religious and spiritual traditions. The very existence of the concept of ecodharma and its growing momentum in certain Buddhist communities highlights the adaptability of American Buddhism in response to the growing environmental crisis.

b) Three Tenets and Climate Crisis

Bernie Glassman Roshi (1998) wrote extensively on the three tenets of the Zen Peacemaker order, which he among others began in the 1990s as an explicitly socially engaged religious order. To Glassman Roshi, the three tenets were foundational to any process of coming into relationship with suffering, whether one's own or another being's suffering: (1) not knowing (2) bearing witness (3) compassionate action (2017). In his book on the subject, Glassman Roshi outlined how these three tenets proved invaluable for him in leading groups of practitioners in spending time bearing witness to the atrocities that took place at Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Glassman Roshi also gave credit to the three tenets in enabling his community to found Greyston Bakery in Yonkers, NY, and to continue its work in open hiring there over four decades. These tenets can be transferable to any circumstance that causes distress or dysregulation to the individual human body or to the collective human family.

Much has been written about the application of basic Buddhist tenets to support human beings as we awaken to the plight of our Mother Earth. Indeed, many in the ecodharma movement are creating and utilizing novel frameworks based in Buddhist teachings with the hope of allowing the human species a pathway towards engaging with and stewarding more fully our precious Mother Earth. As one of the elders of the Buddhist environmental advocacy movement, Joanna Macy's work has utilized key elements of the Buddhist worldview in order to

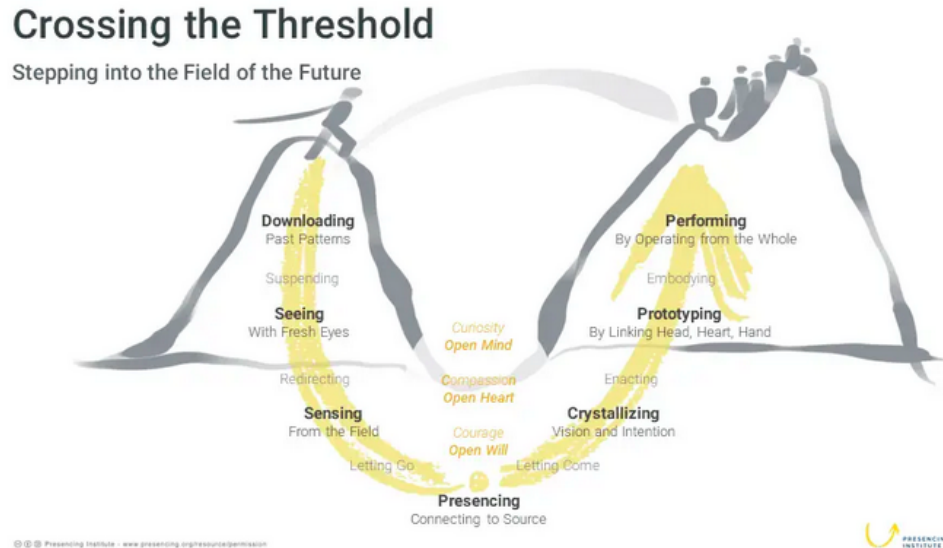
develop a frame encouraging and supporting human beings to broaden perspective and re-member ourselves as kin with and to the realm of Earthly beings. Similarly, One Earth Sangha, an online community working to support ecodharma community in the US, illustrates Joanna Macy's frame based on the three tenets in a comprehensive program offered each year entitled Ecosattva² Training.



Kristin Barker, the executive director of One Earth Sangha, in a video describing the arc of the Ecosattva Training, notes that the process is U-shaped, beginning with “letting go, being with uncertainty as we descend, then....making a home in that place and then letting come, letting things take shape and form...here we’re letting them come together, rise and form, and then finally resolving, affirming and dedicating” (One Earth Sangha, 2023, 02:29). The One

² The term *Ecosattva* derives its meaning from the term *Bodhisattva*. *Bodhi* meaning “awake”, *Sattva* meaning “being”. A *Bodhisattva* is an awakened being who is ready to care and express love in the service of awakening all beings. Relatedly, an *Ecosattva* is an awakened being who is using the incredible gift of our life on this planet to care for and protect all the various forms of life on Earth (Lettero, Jan 2023).

Earth Sangha model is based on the work of systems theorist, Otto Scharmer, whose own U-shaped curve envisions the way social change is forged both individually and collectively.



Opening our minds to rest in not-knowing, as the first tenet reminds us, is a powerful foundation and container for the work that comes to follow in the ecodharma movement. No matter one's starting point, whether a person is convinced of the imminent meltdown of civilization or a person maintains a facade of fatalism or ignorance, dropping one's deeply held beliefs and being open to all possibilities encourages "a thread of adventure," as Macy and Johnstone (2012) call it. "What starts us off is seeing what's at stake and feeling called to play our part....developing capacities along the way and discovering hidden strengths that only reveal themselves when needed" (p. 36). There is an element of the archetypal "hero's journey" (popularized by Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung and others) at play in our engagement with a crumbling environment; surely there are risks and dangers, but alongside them are newfound community, purpose and skills.

With this foundation of coming from uncertainty, One Earth Sangha next brings Ecosattvas into the base of the U-shaped curve in a process of “reckoning with entangled structures,” in which groups are encouraged to engage with “racism, patriarchy, colonialism, military-industrial complex...the slow violence of extraction” (2023, 07:45). In the Work that Reconnects, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) call this next stage (or second tenet of bearing witness) “honoring our pain for the world” noting that many human beings will be caught between dueling fears - “the fear of what will happen if we, as a society, continue the way we’re going and the fear of acknowledging how bad things are because of the despair that doing so brings up” (p. 65). This stage is messy and turbulent, often involving difficult emotions that show up on the individual level as “outrage, alarm, grief, guilt, dread and despair” (p. 67). In the second tenet of bearing witness to the realities of climate catastrophe, we see our growing capacity to be in the presence of intense difficulty, perhaps noticing our desire to change or fix circumstances, but for now inhibiting that impulse and being present with what is.

Parts of this paper will detail how participants spoke about their experiences of the first tenet of being with uncertainty and the second tenet of bearing witness; however, the third tenet of compassionate action is where the bulk of this paper will rest. Though this cycle of not-knowing, bearing witness and compassionate action is neither linear nor finite, the participants in their lives had all found ways of interacting with the reality of environmental degradation and had come to “seeing with new eyes” and “going forth” as Joanna Macy’s spiral of the Work that Reconnects leads (2012). The upward curve in the finale of the Ecosattva Training’s journey results in “creating and discovering the way” and “expressing our own awakened agency” – both pointing to an increased capacity to explore the unique gifts and talents that each of us possess to contribute to healing ourselves and thus offering healing to our

Earth. The deep wisdom of the three tenets can be that they are both enacted simultaneously and that there is a constant calibration and emphasis of attention among them – resting in not-knowing, allowing what is to bear witness, and opening to whatever serves in the form of compassionate action.

In my own (never-ending) journey with the three tenets and climate change, I have had the privilege of working both with Joanna Macy's spiral and with One Earth Sangha's Ecosattva Training, all while being held in various Buddhist communities. During an ecodharma retreat at Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center in 2021, I was able to participate in a living enactment of the spiraling nature of this work. The first part of the ten-day retreat was based on cultivating a relationship with gratitude while opening our senses to the natural world. We then moved into bearing witness and honoring our pain for the natural world as we gathered for a Truth Mandala based on Joanna's work. Each member of the retreat was invited to step into the circle and visit each of four elements found there - a stick represented anger; an empty bowl - hopelessness; a bunch of wild sage - grief; a stone - fear. The stories and tears came pouring out of us as our human hearts broke open together. In the final days of the retreat, our group shared our work and passions with one another, brainstorming around our own unique gifts and contributions to the healing of ourselves as part of Mother Earth. Upon my return home from this retreat, I invited others in my home Sangha to journey alongside me in the Ecosattva Training, which resulted in the establishment of a riverside meditation space at a local park here in Charlottesville, Virginia.

c) Situating Buddhist Chaplaincy

As we face the polycrisis surrounding us in all its dimensions, human beings are exploring, creating and collaborating in response to the devastation of our current times as well

as in anticipation of the immense difficulties ahead. Buddhists compose a very small percentage of American society - around 0.7% according to a Pew Research Center Study from 2014.

Counter to many modern media representations of the demographics of American Buddhism, the majority of Buddhists in America are BIPOC with over 50% of folks self-identifying as Asian American, Black, Latino and Other/Mixed (Table 5). Western convert (often majority white-bodied) Buddhist centers are often more powerful and visible in financial and cultural terms, and so Buddhism in America continues to navigate, negotiate and manifest against a backdrop of Asian roots within the current context of American racial, economic and social hierarchies (Gleig, 2019, p.36).

Chaplaincy itself is an evolving field here in the US, dominated by Judeo-Christian values and structures in terms of both training and expected role. While traditional chaplaincy institutions like hospitals, prisons and universities continue to house the evolution of the chaplaincy role, there is growing need for a more expansive framework for the work that chaplains do outside of these traditional contexts. Buddhist chaplains can often find ourselves in a unique position within this broader context of American chaplaincy. As a peripheral group with some key distinctions from our peers in the Judeo-Christian context, Buddhist chaplains are well placed to explore the margins of chaplaincy work and to promote change from our outsider position of non-dominance.

The theme of change and evolution is a key thread of this project as it has become clear to some in the human species that the rules that have governed our society only lead to more destruction and to the devastation of the very world of which we are part and parcel. The structures, forms and ways of modern (especially Western) life that encourage comfortable individualism over intentional interdependence are woven into every aspect of our daily lives.

When we are asked to re-envision the basic structures and forms we take for granted in terms of money, housing, transportation and livelihood, we begin to see that the crises we are in the midst of involve deeply spiritual questions and can only be addressed by our deeply spiritual selves. In this frame, the lens of chaplaincy generally and Buddhist chaplaincy in particular becomes a pathway or portal to walking ourselves and others through the depths of difficulty that lies around and ahead of us as humans, and around and ahead for our Mother Earth in all of her richness and diversity.

The term eco-chaplaincy, like other concepts in the ecodharma movement, is still being defined and negotiated with origins stemming from the last 15-20 years. Sarah Vekasi, credited with coining the term, writes, “Eco-chaplaincy expands the field of chaplaincy by addressing the spiritual implications of ecological crisis through a combination of the four primary roles of a chaplain: theological, pastoral, healing, and change agency” (Fronsdal et al., 2020).

Eco-chaplaincy as a field in its infancy can appear broad, obtuse and opaque - just what does an eco-chaplain do? Attempts are being made throughout the country to answer this question, as organizations like the BTS Center³ in Maine and the Loka Initiative at the University of Wisconsin-Madison make inroads in encouraging spiritual leadership in addressing the climate emergency. As a member of the BTS Center’s Conversation Circles on Chaplaincy and the Environment for the second half of 2023, it has become clear to me that eco-chaplaincy has strong purpose and direction without defined form as of yet. My cohort included a university chaplain, a professor, a clinical pastoral educator (CPE), a farmer, a hospital chaplain, a hospice chaplain, a wildlife biologist, and a climate change chaplain, all of us leaning into this field of

³ The BTS Center is a private foundation that builds on the legacy of the former Bangor Theological Seminary. Today this organization sponsors conversations, workshops, retreats and connections among spiritual and faith leaders in promoting spiritual leadership and ecological imagination.

eco-chaplaincy with curiosity and commitment to serving as spiritual stewards to a planet in need.

d) Climate Catastrophe as Spiritual Dilemma

More often than not, attempts to address the decimation coming our way in the form of climate catastrophe are based in solutions-based thinking and involve pragmatism, logic and “fixing” the problem, i.e., too much carbon in the atmosphere. This approach makes sense in the context of the “Business as Usual” model referenced in the work of Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012). Included in this paradigm are beliefs that “economic growth is essential for prosperity,” “nature is a commodity to be used for human purposes,” and “promoting consumption is good for the economy” (p.16). By the laws of this model, we should be able to solve the carbon/climate problem within the matrix of our current human-centered, extraction-based mindset. Macy (and others) believe that consequential engagement with climate catastrophe can only be brought about through a much broader shift/revolution that she labels “The Great Turning.” The Great Turning involves three dimensions: (1) holding actions that preserve species and forestland, divest funds from harmful products and rampant consumerism, and engagement in political advocacy and activism; (2) life-sustaining systems and practices that restructure accepted models of agriculture, finance, transport, etc.; (3) shifts in consciousness that re-envision the human species back into belonging and connection in our hearts and minds (pp. 28-33).

It is this third dimension (shifting consciousness) that can only be addressed by our deeply spiritual selves, as both science and spirituality move towards one another in pointing to our undeniable interconnection and interbeing as just one of many species on this planet. Macy and Johnstone note that as we pay attention to the inner frontiers of change within our own

personal and spiritual lives, our compassion, capacity and determination to act are all enhanced through a process of increasing awareness of our belonging with and to the natural world (p. 32). Mary Evelyn Tucker, co-founder of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology, supports Macy's diagnosis, saying, "Our challenge has been...responding to grief and loss, be it extinction, be it forestland, be it wetlands... We are saturated with grief at this point in our collective journey as an Earth community" (Lettero, April 2023). Tucker continues, "The response...for many is materialism, buy more, have more - to me it's the American Dream gone mad. That that's going to bring happiness...[which is] an outdated dream." Instead, Tucker invites us to inquire, "What is the dream of the Earth?" referencing Thomas Berry's book by the same name, *Dream of the Earth*, from 1988.

What *is* the dream of the Earth, and our own individual and collective dreams as kinfolk to all earthly beings, our river relatives, rock ancestors, plant and animal cousins? Turning inwards to our spiritual and earthly bodies, hearts, minds and souls gives us insight into these questions, as this project will embody.

II. Project and Findings

a) Methodology and Thesis

This paper is an expansion of my own personal work in the realm of ecodharma and eco-chaplaincy. Spiritual practice has long been a tool for me in sitting with the hell realms that are evident here on Earth in the context of racial hierarchies, economic inequity and environmental degradation. And I have continuing curiosity about the ways that Buddhist Sanghas in the American context are confronting the ecological crisis, as well as how responding to the needs of our Mother Earth is, in turn, causing shifts in American Buddhism.

There are a growing number of Sanghas in this country that are shifting their mission, goals and energies towards working in the direction of ecological advocacy, and the time for cross-pollination of information and resources is ripe. For this study, I reached out to Sangha stewards who are active in the ecodharma movement and set up interviews with ten Buddhist stewards⁴. As someone who has been immersed in different Buddhist communities in the American context for nearly a decade, most of those I reached out to are folks about whom I am curious and whose work I respect. I wrote to Dharma friends and mined my networks to gain access and interviews with some folks; some folks I sincerely wished to interview did not respond or were not available. Participants were sent a list of potential questions ahead of the interview (Appendix 1), and were told we could focus our time in areas that felt appropriate to them. Anonymity was initially granted to each participant as part of the informed consent that all participants agreed to (Appendix 2). Upon feedback from the initial reviewers of drafts of this paper, I decided to ask each participant if they would agree to being named within the paper, which would allow for readers to connect to them and their initiatives more readily. Most participants agreed to be named, and those who preferred to remain anonymous are labeled as such. More about participants' backgrounds is offered in the section "Background on the Participants."

In *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013), citizen of the Potawatomi Nation and botanist-writer, Robin Wall Kimmerer provides the basis for the thesis of this paper, "Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street to a

⁴ The use of the term "steward" here is strategic. Whereas labeling someone a religious or spiritual "teacher" or "leader" implies hierarchy and a specific set of power dynamics, the word "steward" connotes the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one's care. Stewardship is also often used in relation to stewarding land, and carries with it a (hoped-for) leveling of our current anthropocentric worldview.

sacred bond” (pp. 120-121). When Dharma stewards direct more of their attention, energy and practice towards loving, caring for and protecting our Earth, how does this sacred bond of kinship become a primary motivating factor that shapes and shifts the Sangha in return?

After one has been immersed in ecodharma readings, listenings and conversation for some time, the theme of community-building emerges again and again. Bearing witness to the immensity of our Earth Mother that has been lost and that we continue to lose everyday is something that our species has not encountered before, and we as a species are not built to hold this experience alone. As Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012) write, “the experience of connectedness with a healthy community...brings out our latent, distinctive gifts” (p. 93).

This paper centers spiritual communities as a crucial foundation of our global response to our suffering Earth, and it’s instructive to delve into some of the distinctions of American Buddhist communities by touching on independent versus interdependent cultural theories. Buddhist teacher Larry Yang writes cogently in his book, *Awakening Together* (2017), that the Asian cultures from which Buddhism originated and evolved share traits of “strong interdependent cultural values, behaviors, norms and social dynamics [that] are inherent to the identity and cohesiveness of many cultures” (p. 47). Yang writes further, “I do not believe that rugged individualism or personalization is the inherent spiritual journey that the Buddha invited us to take...He was inviting us to explore, as deeply as meditation itself, what it means to awaken together in community” (pp. 48-9).

Along these lines, the narratives, themes and experiences that follow elicit this emphasis on collective awakening, the ways in which our climate catastrophe demands community-building and our collective practice. It is here that the concept of “chaplaining” spiritual community becomes key to this paper’s direction. As Yang posits in his writing,

Western convert American Buddhism has yet to explore many of the ways that individual-centered American culture has shaped the transmission of Buddhism – how communities have been formed and led; how Buddhist spiritual practice is defined and what aspects are prioritized.

Aligning with Yang’s view, this paper reflects on the experiences of ten Dharma stewards in the American context, all of whom are focusing much, if not most, of their energy on ecodharma initiatives within their communities. As will be discussed below, there are new forms of leadership, stewardship and visioning emerging from Buddhist communities. Many of those interviewed for this paper can be said to be working with these new forms and building alternate understandings of what Buddhist community can be. Including these perspectives, experiences and lessons under the evolving field of eco-chaplaincy can provide a more expansive understanding of the tools, re-framing and shifts required in order to bring our human-centered worldview into greater alignment with our true place in the dream of our shared Earth community.

b) Background on the Participants

Who are the Dharma stewards whose thoughts, energies and wisdom form the backbone of this paper? With great gratitude, I can describe them in the following ways.

Participants’ ages range from mid 30s to early 70s. A third of participants were not born in the US, but have moved to the States in their lifetime and have contributed in ways large and small to the forming of American Buddhism. Some are former monastics who have spent a decade or more in Asian/European Buddhist monasteries, eventually taking leave of their monastic vows to teach classes, workshops and retreats both nationally and internationally. Individually and collectively, they have spent years of their lives in personal practice and retreat,

and several participants have been practicing for forty years or more in various Buddhist traditions. They represent the Tibetan, Zen and Theravada lineages and some have practices that meld two or more lineages. Some participants were firm in defining themselves as activists, while other participants were clear that they are not activists and/or do not relate to the world politically.

Some participants are currently at the helm of larger Buddhist communities that are involved in shaping the stream of American Dharma. There were several participants who are involved in interfacing with larger interfaith and/or educational communities in service of ecological advocacy, while another is intimately involved in stewarding local land in service of offering a place for spiritual retreat. Some have been leading retreats, workshops and class series for years in service of reconnecting to our innate belonging with nature. Others are re-envisioning the confines of Buddhist spiritual community and creating new forms. Still others are questioning the very structures that have built Western convert American Dharma communities and are interrogating power structures, financial systems and consumerism, while advocating for deeper connection to the natural world.

Most of the interview participants identify as female with just two of ten identifying as male. A majority of participants also identified as white-bodied, which as a whole does not adequately represent the majority of American Buddhists who identify as BIPOC. The reason for an interview group that is two-thirds white-bodied is a true regret of mine, though this demographic representation is not uncommon in Western convert Dharma halls. As Western convert American Buddhism becomes more aware of the layered nature of internalized racism within our centers, there has been an upwelling of support for BIPOC Dharma stewards. Just as in society at large, there is an impulse among white-bodied folks to demand the time and energy

of BIPOC leaders, though fortunately there is a growing tendency of creating and maintaining BIPOC practice groups, retreats and communities. The time and energy of BIPOC Dharma stewards is, unsurprisingly, in high demand, and as a white-bodied, cis-gender woman, the history of my ancestors demanding the time and energy of BIPOC folks dissuaded me from repeated requests of their time for this interview. With white-bodied participants, I felt more comfortable with repeated inquiries for a study that did not offer compensation. To include additional BIPOC Dharma steward voices, I made an effort to listen to and read resources from these BIPOC folks whose voices and experiences are crucial in pointing us towards wise action; I have incorporated their thoughts and wisdom throughout this paper.

c) Origin Stories of Participants' Connection with the Natural World

The ecodharma stewards interviewed for this paper grew up in a range of different circumstances, some very close to wilderness and land, and others in more suburban or even urban environments. Each came to embody spiritual practice in their own way, and yet there are some similarities to be found among the ways that each came to experience a profound relationship of care for and interdependence with the natural world.

Throughout these conversations, participants referred to pivotal experiences that occurred in a spiritual-natural world context that encouraged them down the road of ecodharma practice. One participant, Lin Wang Gordon, noted that she spent her childhood in a very urban context and had never hiked or kayaked before going on a Buddhist nature retreat in Mexico in her 30s (personal communication, August 2023). This experience completely changed Lin's practice and brought the insight that "city life is new to this body." Another participant, Tashi Black, grew up in a large, southern US city and reported not having had "an inborn reverence for the natural world" (personal communication, October 2023). Tashi's personal connection with nature took

shape through Tibetan Buddhist practice, time spent at a Canadian monastery and the ceremonies and rituals there that align with the Moon cycles and spirits of the land based in the Tibetan lineage.

Several participants did experience deep connection with nature from childhood. One participant noted building shrines in the woods with bark and berries, and at an instinctual level sensing into the sacred and into the spirit of the water and seaside nearby (anonymous participant, personal communication, August 2023). Dekila Chungyalpa, another participant, recounted a childhood spent in Sikkim, a state of northern India with borders to Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet (personal communication, September 2023). In her upbringing, land and wildlife were respected as sacred. She knew of long-term retreatants living in caves and noted that in her Bhutia community, animals were deeply respected and often had honorifics attached to their names. Another participant, Lama Willa Blythe Baker, spoke to her father's deep appreciation for nature and his sense of wilderness as deep food for one's body, spirit and mind. This form of inter-relationship with the wild "caught on" and wilderness has been a thread of practice throughout Lama Willa's life (personal communication, October 2023).

d) Bearing Witness to Climate Catastrophe in the Lives of Ecodharma Stewards

Buddhist practice was a catalyst that brought many of those interviewed for this project to their understanding of and relationship to climate catastrophe. The Thai forest tradition of Ajahn Chah showed one participant that life in a Buddhist community provided ample access to the natural environment including alms rounds, metaphors from nature and a culture of preservation with attention to how the land was used and cared for (anonymous participant, personal communication, August 2023). From this space of greater connection, this participant began engaging with issues of environmental concern in the late 1980s after an explosion at an oil

refinery where they lived. Another former monastic, Santikaro Upasaka, echoed these thoughts, describing practice in one forest monastery as “like being in Boy Scouts” (personal communication, September 2023). He recollects practicing in small huts in the woods without walls, and an infrastructure that was mostly open air with floors of sand and thatched roofs. “However the weather is, you live it,” Santikaro noted, which offered an important reminder from the wisdom teachings that nature is both dangerous and life-supporting. Witnessing “environmental monks” in the Thai forest who were protecting patches of forest gave Santikaro the insight that environmental changes are inseparable from socio-economic changes. Furthermore, “alms rounds in rice and rubber farming villages regularly confronted us with the environmental changes taking place and accelerating in the 80s and 90s. My teacher was one of the first prominent Buddhist leaders to point to the long-term consequences of ‘the development ideology,’” Santikaro shared. Here the concept of “sila,” the Pali word for ethics or morality, played a key role, as this Dharma steward witnessed a society changing due to the Cold War and Vietnam War along with harm to the natural world that was co-occurring, leading to the question “How do we take care of each other in community?”

Another participant, Sara Shinei Monial, who spent eight years in an American Zen monastery, first spent five years committed to living an environmentally-sustainable life with no use of plastics, money or cars (personal communication, September 2023). Shinei’s first spiritual/meditation teacher was committed to living an ecologically sustainable life, and she became accustomed to biking to the wilderness where she came into contact with glimpses of fundamental safety and belonging through trusting and relaxing into the natural world.

Bearing witness to the climate crisis in community figures strongly into several participants’ experiences as well. One participant, Lin Wang Gordon, specifically referenced

attending a wilderness retreat in which one of Joanna Macy's Truth Mandalas was a component. This was the first time Lin was able to absorb her emotions of grief and shock around climate change and she emerged with a "new sense of purpose" (personal communication, August 2023). Lin spoke to a resulting feeling of clarity she experienced for the first time and a sense of "why I'm here." After seven years of centering nature practice and five years of dedicated time spent coming to terms with feelings of denial, shock and grief around climate change, Lin now feels able to hold some measure of equanimity with the climate crisis and "can teach this [ecodharma] without spinning."

As another example of collective practice with bearing witness to climate catastrophe, longtime Dharma practitioner (and Natural Dharma Fellowship board member) Sarah Buie co-founded the [Council on the Uncertain Human Future](#) (CUHF) in 2014. In this ongoing initiative, the simple, intentional practice of council holds members in a trustworthy space as they listen, speak and come present together to the social and planetary breakdowns underway, and the questions arising from here. Not outcomes-oriented, the original CUHF practice allows for profound acknowledgment and reckoning (individual and collective), the holding of grief, and coming present / leaning into the implications of what is underway. The Council practice itself is an ancient one, known to peoples around the world. As a mindful container for listening and speaking together, and drawing on skillful prompts, it encourages trustworthy exploration and discernment, and collective presence to the questions. In acknowledging the truths of this time, members also seed open-ended possibility (personal communication, September 2023). Through the mindfulness inherent in the practice and the collective trust that builds from it, members often experience insight and community in new ways, fed by the depth and honesty of their shared experience.

Another Dharma steward interviewed, Lama Willa Baker has been a member of the CUHF National Council and several EcoSattva Councils, and noted that the experience of being part of these groups has normalized conversation around climate change; the experience and contributions of other members expand the possibilities for holding the crisis, and have given her language to speak about climate crisis with her Dharma community, Natural Dharma Fellowship (NDF) in Boston and New Hampshire. Lama Willa's involvement with CUHF inspired her to pivot the NDF community's vessel to offer presence and support for centering the planet, and has led to a number of ongoing NDF / CUHF collaborations: additional EcoSattva Councils, Green Dharma Retreats, a Dharma Dialogues series, and the ongoing Rewilding the Soul series, in which the Council practice is embedded. Lama Willa and Sarah Buie will also co-host a Threshold Council among women Dharma leaders in September 2024. These Dharma stewards continue to be guided by the question, "How do we move forward knowing what we know?" (personal communication, October 2023).

e) Collective Compassionate Action

A theme that weaves throughout each of these conversations with Dharma stewards is the necessity of creating new forms - new ways and models of practice, melding teachings from different lineages, letting land teach us and influence our minds, bodies and hearts. Many of the stewards I spoke with noted the importance of context, having connection to land, and being invited by the land. One participant, Erin Mychele Selover, places a priority on knowing the history of colonization of the land where she lives, works and practices. She also works with educating herself about local watersheds and has intentions of stewarding land in her future (personal communication, August 2023). Another interviewee, Lin Wang Gordon, echoes this theme in her dedicated research of the Indigenous history of the lands where she teaches. Lin

researches the history of the specific land where she resides, and always includes land honoring practices with groups (personal communication, August 2023).

Another participant, Santikaro Upasaka, stewards a 70-acre parcel of land in the midwest called Kevala Retreat, that he also offers as a center for yogis' personal meditation practice. This Dharma steward and his wife have attempted to live more closely to the land (somewhat successfully) and to build Sangha in a rural area (not very successfully) while also rehabilitating the local ecosystem. Santikaro and his wife have increased the native wildflower population, removed countless invasive, non-native plant species and also are caught in the bind of living rurally and thus using their vehicle often (personal communication, September 2023). "It was easier to be involved in larger initiatives back in Siam. In Wisconsin, our hands are full just caring for the 70 acres and teaching," Santikaro said.

One Dharma steward, Sara Shinei Monial, from the Pacific Northwest in the Zen tradition has begun to lead nature-based retreats, some of which offer a traditional Zen sesshin in a primitive, forest environment. Other retreats involve a month of backpacking with some days spent hiking and other days spent in settled meditation practice at a camping spot. Each of these retreats involve more traditional elements of Zen practice with prayers and services in the morning and evening. According to Shinei:

The effect of being in an environment where nothing is created from human thought nor for human comfort brings about a subtle but impactful shift in identity. When we are not surrounded by things that came into being as a result of our own self-centered concept, this imagined 'I-concept' softens and along with it the feelings of separateness, lack, and need. Immersion in wild nature-scapes is healing physically and physiologically, bringing us back into our natural state of expansiveness, non-separation, and balance with our

larger earth body. This embodied insight into non-separation, which can be recognized in both ‘natural’ and human-created environments, is the fundamental Buddhist insight that is sometimes referred to as ‘awakening.’ (personal communication, September 2023).

Dekila Chungyalpa worked with her experience of deep eco-anxiety in her earlier career as an ecologist and program manager for the World Wildlife Fund through her Buddhist spiritual practice and found healing in her ability to facilitate ecologically-sustainable initiatives for Tibetan spiritual communities (personal communication, September 2023). In 2008, Dekila was asked by His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa to create environmental guidelines for Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and nunneries. Her work was so successful that she was asked back repeatedly, and helped organize a network of monasteries organized into a movement across the Himalayas called Khoryug, which means “environment” in Tibetan. This organization, with Dekila’s support, has worked on reforestation, river clean-up and stewardship, and, more recently, disaster preparedness (Harvard Divinity School, 2023, 13:30). Dekila has gone on to create and support three other faith-led environmental and climate programs at World Wildlife Fund ([Sacred Earth](#)), at Yale University ([YETI](#)), and at UW-Madison, [the Loka Initiative](#), which, as mentioned above, builds capacity and does outreach with faith and Indigenous leaders on environmental and climate efforts.

Another Dharma steward, Lin Wang Gordon with New York Insight, was a co-organizer of her larger community’s Sacred Earth Sangha which began as a peer group. This group was not strictly based in the Theravada tradition and incorporated elements of the Divine Feminine, ancestor practice, dance, mask making and Indigenous-focusing oriented therapy. Coming out of this work, Lin offered a yearlong course on climate resilience that met outdoors monthly and

continues to offer classes and workshops with the intention of transitioning groups to being self-sustaining and peer-led (personal communication, August 2023).

Lama Willa Baker of Natural Dharma Fellowship (NDF), a Tibetan Buddhist community based in Boston and New Hampshire, began “centering the non-human world” in her teachings with wilderness retreats in 2009, noting that most religions center the human world. As part of her community’s efforts along these lines, prayers have been rewritten to include ecodharma themes and Ecosattva vows, including in their now-standard dedication of merit (personal communication, October 2023). Now with over a decade of deep engagement with the climate catastrophe, the partnership between Natural Dharma Fellowship and Council on the Uncertain Human Future has developed a robust offering of ecodharma-based retreats, five Ecosattva councils and several year-long programs (Sarah Buie, personal communication, January 2024). Many of these offerings have emerged organically through the “mycelial” relational process that Sarah Buie describes from the councils through CUHF; by building deep trust and speaking into the not-knowing together, collective wisdom arises out of these groups – this wisdom then manifests into greater access to ecodharma programming for the whole community.

One large initiative that has anchored the ecodharma movement in the US is the online community One Earth Sangha. This community has brought teachers from various US-based lineages together in offering the yearly Ecosattva Training. Within the program, there is a recommended structure for groups, which includes a living earth acknowledgement (Appendix 3). This adaptable acknowledgement encourages groups to deepen their engagement with and education about local watersheds, local Indigenous peoples, personal Buddhist lineage, and local ecological and ecosystem communities. The structure of One Earth Sangha follows a pyramid-shaped model to demonstrate means of engagement and proportion of energy invested

(Appendix 4). At the base of the pyramid, One Earth spends the bulk of its time “offering the wisdom teachings and practices that support ecological well-being” (2023). The second layer of the pyramid relates to Sangha and community-building - local groups of Buddhist practitioners meet regularly to journey through the teachings, practice together and in some cases actively engage in Earth-supporting initiatives. The top of the pyramid is action, which One Earth doesn’t directly organize; but it does facilitate an active calendar with campaigns and initiatives that members can become involved with.

The above descriptions of Dharma stewards shepherding themselves and their communities in collective response to climate catastrophe is heartening, and echoes back to Joanna Macy’s language around the Great Turning. Spiritual practice, meditation and contemplation allow the chaos that is the minds of modern humans to settle, even just slightly, to enable a softening into our interconnection and deeper nature. Kaira Jewel Lingo, a former nun in the Plum Village lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh, supports this view, saying, “just teaching mindfulness is a kind of ecological work because when people are more in touch with themselves, with their bodies, they are more in touch with the Earth because the earth is our bodies...as we learn to listen to our bodies we have a greater chance to be able to listen to the needs of our earth” (Lettero, January 2023).

III. Themes and Synthesis

a) “Using the forms to break the forms” (Erin Selover)

As we contemplate the second dimension of Joanna Macy’s Great Turning, restructuring life-sustaining systems and practices, it’s possible to see that there is much to be gained by examining the institutions, power structures and communities of practice that have arisen within the nascent Western convert American Buddhist movement. In an early conversation for this

project, Erin Selover who helps steward Dharma communities like Spirit Rock on the West Coast offered an intriguing view, one that aligns well with Larry Yang's thoughts in *Awakening Together*. From this steward's perspective, Western converts to Buddhism in the US have received the teachings of the Dharma over the past forty to fifty years amid the backdrop of societal structures based on systems of patriarchy, classism, racism and oppression. Even though the teachings of the Buddha transmit deep wisdom on the power of interconnection, interdependence and personal/collective healing, the structures upon which we have developed Western convert Buddhism in this country were the unquestioned ones that we had on hand to replicate, most often based in capitalism and extraction. "Unless we have new systems, we fall back on old ones," said Erin (personal communication, August 2023).

This can stir us to reflect on the systems that have structured Dharma communities in the US thus far. Many US Buddhist centers were started with cultures that didn't involve questioning foundational systems of governance. As Lama Willa Baker wrote in *Lion's Roar* in 2022, more often than not in conventional organizational structures, power is concentrated at the top - in Sanghas, that leader is a single teacher or guide. Lama Willa continues by pointing out that though decision-making and implementation are swift in this system of governance, the leader represents but one experience out of infinite possible experiences, leading to the inevitability of tension and stress as decisions flow through the organization. In addition, Lama Willa notes the reality that "power has a way of intoxicating and corrupting; no human being can thrive when offered total power," and that isolation results.

That Buddhist communities would align with the already-existing models of power, privilege and separation in the American context should come as no surprise. Buddhism, as a peripheral religion in the US also occupies a unique position, in that there are few set structures,

national hierarchy or rigid infrastructure in place as of yet as communities are forming. We are also privileged in the US as many Western convert Dharma stewards are in positions of exercising autonomy and personal agency in the forms and traditions that they prioritize and establish within individual communities. Many current teachers and stewards have spent anywhere from five to twenty years in intensive study or under monastic vows, often in an Asian context, and then return to the US to establish their own centers and communities, very often without oversight and with an abundance of autonomy. (Though one Dharma steward, Santikaro Upasaka, notes that part of the trade-off for autonomy is a lack of institutional support (personal communication, January 2024)). In her book, *American Dharma*, Ann Gleig (2019) teases out some of the details of this phenomenon that is alternatively called “Buddhist modernism” and “American Buddhism”. Some of these developmental features as noted by Charles Prebish include: racial and ethnic tensions between and among Asian American Buddhists and non-Asian American Buddhists, different modes of practice, democratization, social engagement and adaptation (pp. 38-40). As American Buddhism continues in its dynamic evolution, various communities can become, and indeed have become, grounds for experimentation with alternative forms of governance, sustainability, mission, finances and engagement.

In his work with systems theory, Otto Scharmer, an MIT-based educator and academic, labels three macro-level transformations needed to adequately address our current polycrisis (2022). The first is to transition our economies to focus on ecological sustainability; the second is to transform governance from top-down to co-creative and dialogic; the third is transitioning leadership and learning from the old model that centers output and efficiency to an updated model that allows for regeneration and ecosystem awareness. Scharmer continues with his belief that when the systems we are currently working with collapse as they are currently doing:

We are left with each other. We are left with our relationships. With how we relate to Mother Nature, how we relate to each other, and how we relate to our emerging Selves...If that is true, then the single most important leverage point for progressing on our collective journey of transformation is the creation of enabling infrastructures that support leaders, citizens, and communities in transforming their relationship from extractive to regenerative by shifting the underlying consciousness from ego-system to eco-system awareness (2022).

Along these lines, a guiding inquiry for Erin Selover is exploring and co-creating the systems that are as aligned with life as possible, with the insight of interdependence of all beings. What are the systems that are truly aligned with the depth of these wisdom teachings? (personal communication, August 2023). What are the systems and structures that allow for true flourishing of the Dharmic teachings? How do we co-hold the edges of these systems that we are not yet able to move into and mourn together when we use relationships as part of extractive systems?

These valuable inquiries are crucial in the movement towards shifting consciousness as both Macy and Scharmer posit from “ego-system to eco-system awareness” (Scharmer, 2022). As Dekila Chungyalpa observes:

We are part of concentric circles and in each of these circles we hold relationship with different beings. We are not the dominant species, we are not the dominant being. The number one protagonist is Mother Earth, we are her children...we have placed the human species right in the center and assumed that everything exists around us. Whereas we might just be a bystander in the actual story of creation (Lettero, April 2023).

b) Confronting Patriarchy within Buddhist Systems

Two Dharma stewards I interviewed spoke extensively about the role that patriarchy plays in traditional Buddhist structures. Both participants had spent over a decade as monastics, and could speak to “Asian Buddhism as primarily hierarchical and authoritarian,” as Charles Prebish categorizes it (Gleig, 2019, p. 39). Both interviewees identify as cis-gender female, though both also made clear to note that patriarchy does not mean that we are focusing on or casting judgment on men (anonymous participant & Lama Willa Baker, personal communication August & October 2023). For both of these Dharma stewards a reconnection to the empowered, sacred feminine is a key piece of bringing ourselves back into balance with the natural world. Both point to the oppressive process of colonialism that has undergirded patriarchal systems and has brought us to a profound loss of belonging. Reclaiming the depth of our feminine selves in our brothers, sisters and non-binary siblings involves rebuilding our web of belonging, a soul-filled world of connection. Re-establishing relationship to wilderness and to our wild selves is part and parcel of this reclamation.

Meditation can enable some of these insights to open up, but there is a deep need for wise counsel in community to name, uproot and transform systems that are no longer useful. Both of these Dharma stewards have made inroads in re-interpreting, adding and making relevant new forms. One learned from their teacher, Ajahn Chah, that intuitive guidance is “not in a book, it’s the heart’s own knowing.” Keeping the spirit of the Dharma alive while translating it to fit the context of our daily lives creates a bridge. This might mean highlighting certain teachings, bringing them back into our consciousness or creating new forms and ceremonies (anonymous participant, personal communication, August 2023). “We live at a time when the Dharma is consciously expanding to meet the challenges of this time. We see the possibility of joining so

many others as midwives of a fresh dharma, one that acknowledges the colonial past, leans towards social justice, and recenters the more-than-human world” (Lama Willa Baker, personal communication, October 2023).

Connecting to the wisdom of our ancestors, both local Indigenous peoples and the Buddhist lineages that were born of Indigenous wisdom is another key piece to our path forward. One Dharma steward envisions our society moving into more of a community- or village-based model of living, similar to the villages that are based around monasteries in Tibet (Lama Willa Baker, personal communication, October 2023). This reverence for the non-human world was part of the worldview that shaped Dekila Chungyalpa’s growing-up years in Sikkim with an awareness of land deities and of wild animals as sacred beings (personal communication, September 2023).

Supporting the centrality of reconnecting to the wisdom of ancestral traditions, Kritee Kanko, a climate scientist and Zen Buddhist priest, reminds us that though Indigenous communities represent just 5% of the global population, they safeguard 80% of the world’s biodiversity and over one-third of the world’s irreplaceable carbon forest (personal communication, December 2023). Learning to steward Dharma communities with less attention to “ego-systems” and greater awareness of our ecosystems, as Joanna Macy and Otto Scharmer support, offers a pathway to greater stewardship of the natural world, as our Indigenous elders and guides have been modeling for centuries.

c) Blending of Spiritual Traditions

In response to naming and untangling structures of patriarchy, racism and classism within Western convert Buddhist communities, participants in this project brought to light a range of different explorations that they and their fellow yogis are evolving across the country. This

reflects a pattern noted by Charles Prebish in defining Buddhist modernism involving experimentation with different modes of practice. Some of these modes of practice bring to light teachings that have not been highlighted, but that remain at the core of what is considered the Buddhist canon. For example, in her book, *You Belong* (2020), Buddhist teacher, Sebene Selassie focuses attention on the four elements of Earth, Water, Fire and Air to re-center attention on an aspect of the classical mindfulness teachings from the Satipattana Sutta (pp. 177-179). This practice also strengthens a visceral connection to the human species' interconnection with the elements that compose all life forms here on Earth, and is a popular teaching framework in ecodharma circles (Lama Willa Baker, personal communication, October 2023).

Practicing meditation in the natural world was a common theme of these interviews and emerges as a popular teaching pathway for many of these Dharma stewards, with one participant even joking that she forgets how to lead meditation indoors during the rare instances that this takes place (Lin Wang Gordon, personal communication, August 2023). Another Dharma steward encourages their community to gaze out at natural landscapes, if possible, at the beginning of meditation periods, even if all that is accessible is a house plant nearby (Lama Willa Baker, personal communication, October 2023).

Other Dharma stewards who participated in this inquiry shared their thoughts and reflections on the process of experimenting with new forms and creating new traditions of practice. One participant who spent over a decade in monastic life has worked in recent decades to coalesce Theravada and Mahayana teachings in response to lineages that are still swathed in patriarchy. This interviewee has appreciated staying on the periphery of more mainstream Dharma centers in the Western convert Buddhist world to encourage the kind of flexibility and

risk-taking that is required in order to experiment and sometimes fail in the blending of traditions (anonymous participant, personal communication, August 2023).

Similarly, Lama Willa Baker from the Tibetan Buddhist lineage spoke of the history of Buddhism throughout time and shared that before these lineages were centralized and institutionalized with formal monasteries and codification in the 15th and 16th centuries, there was much more melding of traditions. Buddhism was indigenous (and still is in many Asian contexts) of course and there are shamanic aspects to Buddhism that can still be accessed in a world that we can see as populated with deities of the mountains, streams and lands. Lama Willa highlights our good fortune as Western convert Buddhists that we have the opportunity to choose which aspects of Buddhist practice are modeled (personal communication, October 2023).

Yet another avenue of blending traditions is to pull from non-Buddhist wisdom traditions that are part of one's personal history and lineage. Erin Selover, who is based out of Oakland, CA, has experimented over the past three and a half years in building spiritual community around a shared connection to Celtic ancestry. With her personal lineage leading back to western Europe, Erin spent five to seven years beginning to observe the eight ritual ceremonies of the Celtic Wheel of the Year, which follow the solstice and equinox solar calendar as well as four Cross Quarter Points, Samhain, Imbolc, Beltane and Lammas (personal communication, August 2023). For Selover, this spiritual path offers alignment with the energies of the natural world in a way that compliments and supplements other Buddhist practices. The Celtic Wheel gives nonlinear insight on traditional Buddhist teachings like impermanence while drawing more tight connections to ecology, the cosmos and astrology.

d) Governance and Hierarchy in Buddhist Communities

Another avenue of shifting and evolution that arose among these conversations with Dharma stewards relates to the sphere of governance, power dynamics and authority within spiritual community. Just as many of these folks are using wise discernment to choose which aspects of Buddhist practice to emphasize within their communities, they are also experimenting with different models of leadership in ways that align with collaboration and collective input.

On this topic, one Dharma steward noted that spearheading initiatives is challenging. Instead this person emphasized, particularly in these times, engaging the “hive” mind helps point the community in a more collaborative direction. Expounding on this idea, this person related that in a “collaborative commons” folks aren’t just being spoken to; instead people feel their own agency and are able to tap into their own creativity and passion. This Dharma steward sees the climate catastrophe as a profoundly challenging moment that is inviting us to take risks as human beings together. It takes trust to make these shifts, but building conscious community, they believe, makes this outcome more possible (anonymous participant, personal communication, August 2023).

Lama Willa Baker of Natural Dharma Fellowship and Wonderwell Retreat Center offered an apt metaphor related to governance and power dynamics within her Sangha. She sees community as an ecosystem, and that a strong ecosystem, just like a resilient Sangha, is woven together by many different species/groups and many different decision-making bodies. At NDF, all decisions are made within a context of conversation and community and everything is vetted. In addition, councils and decision-making bodies use a consensus model, so that everyone involved has to be on board (personal communication, October 2023).

One Earth Sangha, as part of its dedicated mission to anti-racism, has established an initiative in which they offer different levels of honorariums for Dharma teachers who contribute to their programming. The One Earth team explicitly links exploitation of the Earth to exploitation of people based on colonialism, racism and classism. With teachers of color being in such high demand, these higher levels of compensation play a small part in supporting efforts to turn the tide of levels of race-based inequity that our country has historically maintained (Tashi Black, personal communication, October 2023).

IV. Chaplaining Spiritual Communities into the Future and Conclusions

As shown above, the age of climate catastrophe is re-shaping the needs being brought to spiritual communities of all kinds. I am not alone in espousing the deep belief that all human beings, without exception, are registering the devastating effects of our impact on Mother Earth within our bodies – perhaps some of us more consciously than others. Spiritual communities are shifting and adapting in response to the needs that are arising. Buddhist spiritual community in particular, as a relative newcomer to the American religious landscape, has shown the ability to transmute traditional wisdom teachings to more comprehensively address the human species' disconnection with Mother Earth.

On a more personal note, this project has been energizing to my own body–heart–mind in that I have been privy to the immense energy and vitality that many in the Buddhist community are pouring into awakening and activating Ecosattvas near and far towards healing and reconnection. In a metaphor that she uses often in her teachings, Dharma steward, Kaira Jewel Lingo brings to mind an infinity symbol (∞) invoking the continuous and all–encompassing

journey of one's spiritual path. "You can't be a true spiritual practitioner if you're not somehow responding to the needs of the world ... and you also can't respond to the needs of the world around without taking care of your own spiritual needs...those two things really feed each other," she says (Lettero January 2023). My own practice resonates with this metaphor, and as I reflect, I can see that spiritual practice has been my portal into activism – as we settle the mind and heart incrementally through meditation and compassion practice, there is an increased ability to bear witness to the cries of the world and allow for emergent action to take shape.

Though I have witnessed inklings of Buddhist communities' efforts around engaged practice personally, I can say with certain sadness that I have not personally been involved with or witnessed Buddhist spiritual community cogently and comprehensively at work with ecodharma. As Kritee Kanko says:

We don't know how to belong to the land and the spirits of the land for the long term. How to belong and tend to all of life, all species, all the ancestors and all the elements....I find refuge in my fellow Ecodharma practitioners who are not giving up on asking the questions that need to be asked, asking the more-than-human and invisible realms to guide us beyond what science and policy-level strategizing can give us. In each of our imperfect ways, we are trying to love this sacred world the best we can. I am prepared to grieve for what has already been lost and I am hopeful about what will emerge from the rubble of modernity. (personal communication, December 2023)

Kanko's statement echoes Thomas Berry's life's work, in which he often repeated a similar sentiment, "It's not bad people who are ruining the earth. It's good people. Good people become the most destructive when their paradigm of what's good becomes dysfunctional: that's the terror of it" (1984, p.4).

As I write the conclusion to this journey of a paper, I am left with more questions than answers. We are such a messy species, us humans, full of unwarranted power and yearning and a great emptiness that we recklessly (and so often without conscience) attempt to fill. How do we encourage the "gospel of enough, the gospel that what we have is plenty" (Lettero, April 2023)? How do we wake up to the fundamental understanding that society as we have organized it is not working? How do we work with the fact that many can more easily imagine the end of the world than they can the end of capitalism (Lettero, January 2023)? There are untold layers and mountains of grief behind and beneath all of these questions. Grief of centuries-old loss of connection and belonging, millennia of oppression and social hierarchy, generations of mis-remembering our place in the family of Beings. And though the Buddhist wisdom teachings are helpful with grief, suffering and sorrow, I am beginning to question the inherent usefulness of man-made religion in an age of such rampant destruction carried out by these same men/human beings, so often with the backing of religious and spiritual institutions.

Gary Snyder, Buddhist poet, scholar and bioregionalist, has also come to similar questions throughout his lifetime in statements like, "All of the world religions remain primarily human centered" (2013, p. 46). According to Snyder, wisdom traditions from the near past (i.e. Judeo-Christian and Hindu-Buddhist traditions) have very little to say on land-as-sacred, which makes our lack of communication and relationship with the non-human world perfectly understandable. "What do you say to Magpie? What do you say to Rattlesnake when you meet

him? What do we learn from Wren, and Hummingbird, and Pine Pollen, and how?" Snyder asks. Thomas Berry, the religious scholar and environmentalist agreed with his contemporary Snyder in noting, "None of our spiritual or humanistic disciplines offer any support for the renewal of the earth" (1984, p.4). Snyder believes this distinction between the wisdom traditions that have centered the human species and the wisdom traditions of "inhabitory people" (what might be called Indigenous peoples today, i.e. folks who have not lost the spirit of being directly related to their land) is imperative (2013). And Snyder's directive for modern humans is clear:

We must find our way to seeing the mineral cycles, the water cycles, air cycles, nutrient cycles as sacramental—and we must incorporate that insight into our own personal spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received from the nearer past. The expression of it is simple: feeling gratitude to it all; taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh) (p. 47).

Indeed, Berry cautions, "When we so ruthlessly extinguish the life forms of our period, we threaten, along with those planetary beings, the inner life of the human" (p.167). In his lifetime, Berry came to advocate a "cosmology of religions" that re-members the human species "as an element of a living Earth" with "spiritual sensibilities...derived from and dependent on a flourishing Earth." Both Berry and Snyder's lives led them to deeply-felt respect for Indigenous peoples, which is where this paper will conclude.

There are infinite ways to serve the healing of our broken societies and our crumbling Mother Earth, and underlying them all are small, but vital shifts in consciousness - reaching out to greet a watchful evergreen Tree as an elder, noticing this same elder in paper-plate-form as we are nurtured by the Earth's bounty during a community potluck. Robin Wall Kimmerer calls her

ancestral culture's (Anishinaabe) kinship with the more-than-human world a radical challenge to the status quo—a dangerous conception, in that “kinning with Grandmother Moon, with salamanders, with lichens on our rooftop—all of those are acts of resistance to the objectification and commodification of the world” (Kimmerer, Hausdoerffer & Van Horn). Kimmerer continues saying that this process of reclaiming kinship with the natural world “brings us joy and happiness, and that too can be understood as a radical reclaiming of who we are as humans.”

Appendix

- (1) [Interview questions](#)
- (2) [Informed Consent Document for participants](#)
- (3) [One Earth Sangha Living Earth Acknowledgement](#)
- (4) [One Earth Sangha Pyramid Diagram](#)

References

- Baker, Willa Blythe. (2022, January 19). The building blocks of belonging. *Lion's Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for our Time*. <https://www.lionsroar.com/building-blocks-of-belonging/>
- Berry, Thomas. (1984, September). Bioregionalism: A worldwide movement honors local culture and 'human-scale' economies. *The Tarrytown Letter*, No 41, 3-5.
- Fronsdal, G., Harrington, S. & Rudestam, K. (2020, June 1). *Eco-chaplaincy: In service to a suffering world*. One Earth Sangha. <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/eco-chaplaincy/>
- Glassman, Bernard (Bernard Tetsugen). (1998). *Bearing witness: A Zen master's lessons in making peace*. Bell Tower.
- Glassman, Bernie. (2017, June 25). The Three Tenets of the Zen Peacemakers. *Lion's Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for our Time*. <https://www.lionsroar.com/taking-the-plunge-street-retreat/>
- Gleig, Ann. (2019). *American dharma: Buddhism beyond modernity*. Yale University Press.
- Harvard Divinity School. (2023, May 9). *William Belden Noble Lecture Series: Dekila Chungyalpa*. Harvard University. <https://hds.harvard.edu/news/2023/5/9/>
- Video-william-belden-noble-lecture-series-dekila-chungyalpa

Kanko, Kritee. (2017, July 13). *White privilege: how should we confront it compassionately?*

Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center. <https://rmerc.org/white-ecodharma/>

Kanko, Kritee. (2020, March 5). *White supremacy = mother of climate change*. Boundless in

Motion: Zen, Healing, Justice & Climate Action. <https://boundlessinmotion.org/>

white-supremacy-mother-of-climate-crisis/

Kimmerer, Robin Wall. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.

Kimmerer, R. W., Hausdoerffer, J., & Van Horn, G. (2021, Autumn). Kinship is a verb. *Orion Magazine*. <https://orionmagazine.org/article/kinship-is-a-verb/>

Lettero, Carly. (Host). (2023, April 25). Dekila Chungyalpa and Mary Evelyn Tucker (No. 4)

[Audio podcast episode]. In *Inner Nature*. Spring Creek Project. <https://prax.oregonstate.edu/spring-creek-projects/inner-nature-podcast-series>

Lettero, Carly. (Host). (2023, January 11). Kaira Jewel Lingo and Kritee Kanko, part 1 (No. 1)

[Audio podcast episode]. In *Inner Nature*. Spring Creek Project. <https://prax.oregonstate.edu/spring-creek-projects/inner-nature-podcast-series>

Loy, David. (2018). *Ecodharma: Buddhist teachings for the ecological crisis*. Wisdom Publications.

Macy, Joanna & Johnstone, Chris. (2012). *Active hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy*. New World Library.

Miller, Andrea. (2018, May 30). *Deer to the heart*. Lion's Roar. <https://www.lionsroar.com>

com/deer-buddhism/

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (2023, September 14). *The world just sweltered through its hottest August on record*. [https://www.noaa.gov/news/](https://www.noaa.gov/news/world-just-sweltered-through-its-hottest-august-on-record)

World-just-sweltered-through-its-hottest-august-on-record

Oliver, Mary. (2017). *Devotions: The selected poems of Mary Oliver*. Penguin Press.

One Earth Sangha. (2023, October 13). *Session one: Arriving and setting a course: Course overview with Kristin Barker* [Video]. <https://oneearthsangha.org/articles/pgm-post/ecosattva-training-v6/resources/s1/>

One Earth Sangha. (n.d). *About us*. <https://oneearthsangha.org/about-us/>

Patnaik, A., Son, J., Feng, A., & Ade, C. (2020, August 15). *Racial disparities and climate change*. Princeton Student Climate Initiative. <https://psci.princeton.edu/tips/2020/8/15/racial-disparities-and-climate-change>

Pew Research Center. (2014). *Religious landscape study: Buddhists*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/buddhist/>

Scharmer, Otto. (2022, September 6). *Protect the flame: Circles of radical presence in times of collapse*. Medium. <https://medium.com/presencing-institute-blog/protect-the-flame-49f1ac2480ac>

Snyder, Gary. (2013). Reinhabitation. *Manoa* 25(1), 44-48. <https://doi.org/10.1353/man.2013.0010>.

Yang, Larry. (2017). *Awakening together: The spiritual practice of inclusivity and community*.

Wisdom Publications.