



One Earth Sangha

How Do I Widen My Love for the Earth?

Each of Us, an Animal Held Within the Vast Web of Life

Brian Lesage offered this talk to participants in our April 2026 EcoDharma Exploration. Visit the [program page](#) for the full recorded gathering, as well as additional resources: [Letting Love Widen](#).

So once again, everyone, welcome. And really it is such a delight to be here with you today. And as a way of honoring Earth Day that happened a few days ago last week, I want to begin with a question I find myself returning to again and again. And that question is, how do I widen my love for the Earth? And not in some abstract way, but here on this beautiful, wondrous, tiny planet in this vast universe, on a planet that can feel as if it's shuttering under the weight of the climate catastrophe. So the question is, how do I keep loving when my heart, at least mine, can so easily contract into fear or rage or despair?

And maybe such a question or a similar question is alive for you too. So hopefully you're hearing, for me, the question is not only how do I respond to the ecological crisis, which I want to say, that's an important question. Yet I feel there's another question underneath it, namely, how do I behold the world in a way that allows love to widen? And I think this is where Dharma practice feels so important and essential for me.

One way I understand many Buddhist teachings in the Theravada tradition is as trainings, trainings in perception, trainings in different ways of viewing, trainings in learning how to perceive and to relate to experience in ways that are more liberating, more onward leading, and that widen love.

And for me, one of the great gifts of this path is that it invites a kind of fluidity in the heart and mind, a malleability, a loosening around fixed ways of viewing or perceiving experience. And I think this matters. I think this matters because how the world appears depends actually in large part on how I perceive it. And so today I want to explore two ways of perceiving with you. One way of viewing or perceiving places human beings at the center of everything. And I find that this often narrows love. And then the second way lets us feel ourselves as one form among many forms of life. And I find that this can allow love to widen.

So as I said, one perception that I feel narrows love, at least in the dominant culture I know best here in the United States is this human-centered perception. And by that I mean it's the felt assumption that this species, homo sapiens, human beings, are the center of significance, the



One Earth Sangha

primary point of concern. It's homo sapiens who stand over the rest of life and manage it, use it and explain it. And I want to say, I think this way of perceiving is so pervasive, so it can feel bedrock, that it can feel almost invisible. Look at the news, look at most media. Almost all of it is about human beings, or it's an issue that's maybe not directly about human beings, but it's centered around human beings in some manner.

And in that human-centered view, even our care for the Earth can become another form of centering beings. So much of the narrative, at least that I've been exposed to around this, is that human beings will save the world or human beings will destroy the world. But with both of those views, who's the main actor? Homo sapiens. But what if the very way of perceiving, even the climate catastrophe that's going on, that the very way of perceiving is actually part of the problem? And I think, at least this is what it feels like to me.

If the Buddha were alive today, he would categorize human-centered perception as a vipallāsa. Vipallāsa is a Pali word, Pali being one of the early scriptural languages of Buddhism. And a vipallāsa is a distortion of perception. So he'd see it as a vipallāsa along with the other distortions of perception that he talks about. It's one of these unskillful ways of perceiving. It's like this delusion, this felt assumption that we are somehow outside the community of beings looking down upon it, managing it, and occupying a special place of importance within it.

And I want to be clear here. I am not saying human beings are not important or human beings are horrible or have no value. All I'm truly trying to point to is that when human-centeredness becomes the default perception that the heart and mind always go back to, love narrows. It constricts. And then even human care can become subtly domineering, and I would say even not so subtly domineering.

But really what I'm wanting to invite is how would it feel to be truly just another animal among other animals? Just one form of life held within the vast web of life. How would that feel? And not as a mere thought, but as a feeling, like a felt sense in the body. And in the guided meditation, I was just trying to give some simple examples of, I think of ways of beginning to sense differently into experience, a sensing into that allows for feeling intertwined, interwoven in some manner. And also, how would it feel if the Earth was not only a crisis to respond to, but a vast community of beings that we're woven into that we're intertwined with?

I think this is one of the things I appreciate so much about this place that Kristin mentioned, Vallecitos Mountain Retreat Center. So Vallecitos Mountain Retreat Center, it's a place, as she said, it's in Northern New Mexico in a place called the Tusas Mountains, and it's this inholding in this, I think, incredibly moving and beautiful piece of land. And there, so often when I'm there, I've taught there a lot for probably close to 15 years now. When I walk on the land, it does feel like the forest, the weather, whether that's the wind and the sun or the clouds, the birds, the deer and elk, the feeling of the uneven ground, all of it, when I'm really open to it, can shape this perception and it can shape it towards this felt sense of being just another animal among other animals.



One Earth Sangha

And I find it is so supportive of this. This is why I think there's something really quite special about retreats on that land because it can evoke what I'm pointing to. This way of perceiving that widens love. Just being one form of life held within the vast web of life shaped by causes and conditions and woven into the life of this Earth. And that way of perceiving, at least from my heart, I can feel it. It feels like it's widening love rather than constricting it, twisting it, narrowing it.

In 1944, 29 reindeer were introduced to a remote uninhabited island in the Bering Sea, and the name of the island was St. Matthew Island. And at that time, the island had no predators on it, and it had lots of slow-growing lichen, which was the primary source of food for the reindeer. So with this food and no predators, the population just exploded. So by 1963, there were around 6,000 reindeer on this small island. And then really quite quickly, in just a few years, there was absolutely nothing left to eat. And then soon after that, the entire reindeer population completely collapsed and had gone extinct.

This dynamic that I'm pointing to, which is quite classic on this example of St. Matthew Island is sometimes called overshoot. And that's when a species grows so much and destroys an ecosystem so completely that it leads to the destruction of that environment. And as I pointed out, to the rapid decline or collapse of the species itself.

So for me, when I hear this story and I really slow down, and I'm trying to sense into the feeling of this, of how it lands for my heart, my heart, it does feel just automatically. It easily feels compassion for the reindeer and for the environment that they were there. In regard to the reindeer, it's not like they were evil. I don't think they were morally failing. They were simply caught in a whole host of causes and conditions. And I can feel compassion for the island too, and for the lichen, for the whole damaged ecosystem. I can feel my heart soften around that story.

And I want to be honest with you about this, and maybe you know where I'm going with this. But when I turn toward human beings, I'll be honest, at times this is tough. I can feel my heart tighten. The compassion doesn't come as easily. And there's a reason for that. Maybe you can relate to this. The homo sapiens, a species that is growing so fast, consuming so much that it's degrading and sometimes destroying many, if not most of the ecosystems across the planet. So it feels more difficult for my heart to soften, to have compassion. It can tighten. Love narrows.

Have you ever noticed this? With the reindeer? Compassion. It might come easy for the island, even for the lichen. Human beings, maybe, maybe not. And I want to just point out a little caveat here when I'm trying to, hopefully you're hearing this connection here. This is not an attempt to erase accountability. I think accountability is important. It's just that I'm interested in something else as well as that. So I want to be clear about that. I'm interested, just as you know the theme of this talk, in whether compassion can be wide enough to include all species. Not to excuse, but rather to include, to widen.



One Earth Sangha

So there's a poem I want to share with you that speaks to this for me in a, I think in a beautiful way. I love this poem. It's by the poet, Chera Hammons. It's entitled Thrasher. As in the bird, that type of bird, the thrasher bird. So the poet begins. [She says](#), "*The curve-billed thrasher digs the small purple potatoes from the raised garden beds and ruins them.*"

I love that line. "*We forgive the bird, which is the same as we are, trying in his own way to learn how to love the world. Every day allocating to himself. Just a little bit more of it.*" But that line, it touches something very deep in me. Of course, hopefully you're hearing this when I connect it to us human beings trying in our own way to learn how to love the world. And yeah, when I make this connection, I want to be clear about the way I see it in terms of this is that, yeah, a human being's probably not so good at this learning, but still trying as a species to love the world. So often badly, often that learning and trying is disastrous. But I really feel that underneath so much grasping and consuming and taking and hoarding, there's still some wish. Yeah, a confused wish, some confused wish to belong, to be safe, to flourish, to actually love, to love the world. And I think this is where the larger human story becomes quite, at least for me, quite painful and humbling because this pattern of taking more of the world, some of you might notice it is historical. I'm talking long historical. It's ecological. This is woven into the long story of homo sapiens.

So our evolutionary story, it's complex. And yet in many places looking at the history of homo sapiens, in many places, the arrival and expansion of homo sapiens, of human beings, coincided with major, major losses of human life. And research increasingly suggests that human beings were often the central cause, not the only cause, but the central cause of this. There were other causes like changing climate during those times and certain ecological vulnerabilities and probably other conditions that were also shaping these dynamics. But this is a pattern for our species. Everywhere we went, the Americas, Australia, New Zealand.

And I want to be careful here when I'm sharing this. I'm not saying every human culture has related to the natural world in the same way. Some have lived with far more of a sense of reciprocity and restraint and reverence and harmony than other human cultures. So it's not simple across the board. It's complex. And at the same time, I want to say, yeah, human beings have also created amazing things, amazing technology that's brought comfort and longevity, mostly to human beings. We really want to acknowledge that. And we do have this tremendous and really quite remarkable capacity to cooperate on vast scales, which I think has important potential. And we have this ability, which is I think the cornerstone of Dharma practice that it lays upon, that we have this ability at least at times to extend kindness and compassion outside of our perceived in-group, which is I think quite radical for, in particular, our family, our primate family, and so beautiful.

And yeah, I think modern industrial societies in particular have often shown little wisdom about how to live in harmonious relationship with the Earth, even though many indigenous and traditional communities have carried quite profound ecological knowledge.



One Earth Sangha

So in light of this, I feel that we as a species have a really tremendous amount to learn from other living beings about how to live in a more harmonious relationship with this Earth. There's a line. Some of you might know it because it's such a great line by the writer, Robin Wall Kimmerer, that I return to again and again. And writing from her Potawatomi tradition, she says, "Humans are viewed as somewhat lesser beings in the democracy of species. We are referred to as the younger brothers of creation. So like younger brothers, we must learn from our elders."

I love that. I love the humility of that. This species, we are not the masters. Rather, we are the younger siblings of all the other beings. We're still learning and we have a lot to possibly learn, to definitely learn from them. We're still dependent. It's like we're still in need of being taught by ravens and crows and moss and lichen and rivers and stones. Are you hearing this? I feel like this way of perceiving feels so different than the human-centered view. It's like the whole sense of self can begin to loosen and fade a bit with the sense of being just another animal among other animals and really being possibly the younger sibling of those other animals, of being one form of life held within the vast web of life.

So I think this is one reason why the philosopher and theorist, Jane Bennett, some of you might know Jane Bennett, she wrote this book, *The Vibrant Matter*, *Vibrant Matter*, I think it's called. Why she's been so compelling to me is because of how she describes that human beings are just beings among other beings to our very core. And so I want to share with you a quote from her around this. She says, "My flesh, my flesh here is populated and constituted by different swarms of foreigners. The crook of my elbow, for example, is a special ecosystem, a bountiful home to no fewer than six kinds of bacteria. They're helping to moisturize the skin by processing the raw fats it produces. The bacteria in the human microbiome collectively possess at least a hundred times as many genes as the mere 20,000 or so in the human genome. The its outnumber the me's." Just right here in this body. "In a world of vibrant matter." So she's continuing here. "In a world of vibrant matter, it is thus not enough to say that we are embodied. We are rather an array of bodies, many different kinds of them in a nested set of microbiomes."

I love this. The I's just in this body outnumber the me's. These boundaries between self and other or between human and non-human are so much more porous and interdependent from this perspective. And really, what's happening is mixing up the whole notion of agency or lack of agency and where agency resides. So from this way of perceiving this mind and this body are so intertwined and so entangled with everything else in this vast universe. It doesn't make sense just to speak of me as an individual. And it doesn't make sense to place agency in one small place in the universe that's been extracted from everything else.

Bayo Akomolafe, who you might know, his writings and things like that. I think, and some of you might know this, he's been quite influenced by philosophers like Jane Bennett. And so he puts it well when he says "it's in part an invitation to move away from a notion of agency that situates responsibility, power, centrality, and control in the human figure."



One Earth Sangha

So coming back to what I mentioned before, this notion that human beings can save the world or human beings can destroy the world. That's centering the human being. It's creating all the control in the human figure. And I think this is why for me, especially now for retreats, it's been so important for me to get out into forested and wilderness areas where there are fewer reminders of human beings that reinforce centering human beings. And I think this is because in such areas, again, Vallecitos comes to mind because it's really touched my heart. In such places when I'm meditating in a way that's stabilizing the attention and opening the heart and doing that in a way that thins the boundaries between me and the environment around me and really does evoke more of the sense of being intertwined, interdependent, the sense of really, this sense of what it is to be alive. And then to respond from there in skillful ways in a way that's inherently interwoven with all beings and to experience this through the body in a deeply embodied way. So it's just not a thought.

So why am I sharing all this with you? It's because I sincerely feel that this is at least one way to widen love for the Earth. It's one way for me to widen my love for the Earth. This is one way I know to widen my love for the Earth, to practice perceiving myself not as separate, not as central, not as the one who stands above, but as one animal among other animals, one form of life held within a vast web of life.

And I want to be clear, I don't do this because I believe this will save the Earth or solve the catastrophe, though of course I want to do what I can. But because if I abandon this widening love in the desperate hope for a certain result, it's like something in me is lost. Something in me withers. For me, this mysterious and widening love can't be contingent on success or on solving the problem, not even contingent in a weird way on despair. Because it's this love, this love is the thread that weaves me back into the Earth again and again and again. And this is what feels essential to me. This is what feels foundational to me.

So may your love widen it for the benefit of all beings.

Thank you. Thank you for your attention.