



Sati Center for Buddhist Studies

Realizing Our Embeddedness in Nature with Chris Ives

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Thank you, everybody, for devoting part of your Saturday morning. I'm not sure where you are, whether you're in California. I'm here in Pigsgusset, which is the indigenous name that can be rendered "the Meadows at the Widening of the River." And the river is what colonial settlers call the Charles River. And Pigsgusset is otherwise known as Watertown, Massachusetts. So I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Boston area, but Watertown is just west of Cambridge. So my wife and I live in a condo about three miles west of Harvard Square. So it's good to be with you on the homeland of the Pequossett band of the Massachusett people in this place they call Pigsgusset.

And it is a beautiful day here. I hope you've been able to get outside in your day. It's a gorgeous autumn sunny day. After our time together, I'm actually going to head out to Walden Pond for a long open water swim, which is one of my ways of plugging into nature, which is our topic for today. And what I'd like to do over the next two hours is to explore with you as you probably saw in the blurb as reflected in the title of our session, explore some resources from the Buddhist tradition, especially the Zen strand of Buddhism, for not just reconnecting with nature, but realizing that we're always woven into nature at any moment. So I often talk about this as realizing our embeddedness in nature as nature.

And what I like to do, I wish I were there with you wherever you are, and we could go outside, be out in the desert in the woods on a beach. There are a lot of guided meditations that work very well in our bodies together outside. But alas, here we are on zoom. And we will do a few guided meditations. I'll offer a few comments. For some of the more doctrinal things, I actually have a PowerPoint, I won't rely on that too much. But we'll be taking pauses, it's not going to be me talking for two hours with a PowerPoint and turn us into what I call zombies, sort of zoom zombies, which can happen pretty quickly, depending on what happens in the zoom session.

As I move along, we will take some breaks, there'll be some guided meditations here and there. Rob told me that maybe about halfway through would be good to just take a five minute break if anyone needs to stretch or refill their water bottle or whatever. But as we move along, again, I'm not gonna try to be talking. I want this to be interactive. I'd love to hear from you about practices you have for realizing your connection to nature. But if anything comes up, something's unclear, or you make some association to something that you've experienced, feel free to raise your hand. I may not see it right away, but Rob has agreed to keep an eye on all of your windows to see if someone does raise a hand. So at any point, please just raise your hand and let me know what's on your mind.

But before we get going, why don't we just take a few minutes and just sort of settle here rather than just diving into talking, talking. And I know some of you may have had busy mornings, maybe you've been out and around or dealing with some crisis. My wife is in her synagogue today and I'm thinking about her safety in light of everything that's been happening in the Middle East. So why don't we just bring our attention to our time together and just take a minute or so, whatever form of meditation you do, or just simply sit with your breath. I have a little bell here, I'll ring it and we'll come back in a minute or two. Sound good? Here we go.

Thank you, everybody. So again, our topic today is realizing our embeddedness in nature as nature. But many of us with our busy lives, our entanglement in technology, our multitasking,



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our time spent indoors, for many of us living in urban areas, our sense of connection or embeddedness with nature obviously is quite thin these days. Many of us feel psychologically disconnected from nature. You may know the book by a fellow named Richard Louv, "Last Child in the Woods," and he actually coined the expression "nature deficit disorder." And he also wrote a follow-up volume mainly about adults like us and our nature deficit disorder, our sense of disconnection from nature.

And many of us, of course, always forget, and you don't necessarily have to be a Buddhist to realize this, that we're always interconnected with nature. always fully embedded in nature. And if you think about this, it really ties into the Buddhist analysis of the nature of the self. I don't know how you explain dependent arising, what Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing, in relation to the Buddhist doctrine of no self, no permanent, separate, essential self, like a soul, the way I often describe it to my students, I don't know if this works for you. But for example, in my case, our normal felt sense of self is that we are some separate entity that came into reality in the moment of our birth.

And so I might put it in the way, I'm a separate entity that dropped into reality back in 1954, and then was named Christopher Avery Ives by his parents. And then secondarily, I've been interacting with various things ever since my birth, my mother and father, the dog that licked my face as a baby, the runs of my crib that I banged my head against, my older brothers that played with me, whatever that might be. But our felt sense of self is like we parachuted in or it came in on a UFO, in my case, in December of 1954. And then we've been sort of doing our thing ever since. With the doctrine of dependent arising, interbeing, Buddhism actually comes up with a different way of thinking about self, it doesn't necessarily obliterate my own sense of self being Chris Ives, as opposed to a blob or something. But in a sense, what Buddhism is saying is, since 1954, the world, as a process of system of interconnectedness, has been doing its thing in and through the focal point, the not in the web, that part of the great web of life that we now call Chris Ives.

And so in a sense, the Buddhist angle is reality, nature, and all of these inputs came together to generate this thing that I take to be a separate, enduring essence called Chris, the DNA that came from my parents, that sperm and egg, what my mom ate when she was pregnant with me. She smoked Kent cigarettes when she was pregnant with me. I don't know if that accounts for any quirky parts of my personality, but the food she ate, what she experienced when she was pregnant with me. And then obviously since my birth, my interactions with the dog, my brothers, the crib and on and on and on through my life, my teachers, the food I ate, my neighborhood, the animals around me, my pets, the woods I played in as a little kid where I went fishing with my brothers, all of that. And then of course, in turn, I've been affecting the world around me, affecting my brothers, my parents, the critters around our house, where I grew up in rural Connecticut.

And basically, we are embedded in this system of interconnectedness. And right now I'm affecting you, in some ways you're affecting me. I'm a slightly different person than the guy who started talking seven minutes ago, constantly shifting, embedded in the system of interconnectedness. Again, what Thich Nhat Hanh calls interbeing. The way I often say it to my students is often we feel like we're a ball on a pool table with this separate integrity and then secondarily bouncing into other balls or the cushions as opposed to being a focal point in a kind of energy field or a little knot in a web or a net of being, the net of nature. Obviously, we don't normally see ourselves as this product of reality, especially nowadays with all the self-branding, what a lot of people are doing in terms of image and self-presentation on social media, consumerism, the competition in our society all contribute to the sense that I am a separate being apart from everyone else.



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And as you well know, Buddhism teaches that our ignorance of this fact, our obliviousness to this fact, contributes to certain problems. Zen comes in big time and talks about how this felt sense of self in our experience is felt as existing over and against objects of experience, other things. The Zen talk of being trapped in this dualistic mode of experience, the me over here, the not me there, that sense of being separate from all these objects of experience. Other types of Buddhism will say our ignorance of what we really are, that ultimately we are relational beings interwoven into reality, can lead to not only ignorance of that fact, but also to our greed and ill will. These three poisons that Buddhism talks about as the cause of suffering, ignorance, greed and ill will.

And greed and ill will is our basic kind of reactivity insofar as we are positioning ourselves and thinking of ourselves as a separate entity that needs to be protected, whose interests need to be advanced as we build that sort of castle around our ego to protect ourselves and get caught up in greed and ill will. Maybe another way to think about this is like and dislike, attraction, aversion, a kind of basic reactivity, which as Buddhism teaches, and leads to a kind of unsettledness, a sense of dissatisfaction, or dukkha, suffering. But we don't have to stay stuck in this sense of self. And I'm sure a lot of you in your meditative practice, and other things in your life, have been thinking about this and working with this sense of being entrapped in this felt sense of separation, the sense of being a separate entity.

And let's try something, let's do a little guided thing right now. One thing I want you to do is wherever you are, just take a second, and direct your attention to the room around you. I don't know where you are. Some of you may be outdoors, outside on a deck. But just take a second and direct your attention to your surroundings, presumably in a room where you're sitting right now. And take a second and note where your attention went. Maybe it landed somewhere. And I would wager that it probably landed on an object, maybe a beautiful plant or a flower, or maybe what's outside your window, or something there on your desk, a favorite stone you got from a beach, something else, maybe a little Buddhist image. But I want you for a second just to attend to the space, the empty space. Often our attention goes to objects, not the space between them. And just direct your awareness to the space. There's probably a major open space around your head, but maybe down by your feet, under your desk, under the table, in little nooks and crannies.

We often think of the space in our room, maybe when you walked in a few minutes ago, maybe when you walk out at noon your time, we often think of it as an empty void. But as we may know in our heads, not so much in our experience. This space around us is filled with gases, oxygen, nitrogen, argon, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrous oxide, all of these different gases in the space. And obviously, we're breathing this gas that does have substance, we often again, think of this as a void. And unless a breeze hits us, or we turn on a fan, we don't realize that there is stuff in this space. And stuff that we're taking into our body moment by moment, without which we will pass out and maybe pass away in a matter of minutes.

So let's do another little guided meditation. If you would, just sort of sit up in that space. With your breathing. I'm going to ring my trusty little bell again. So let's all take a few breaths. And as you breathe in, see if you can really get a sensation that you are breathing in some stuff. As you breathe in through your nostrils, you may feel something very gently contacting the inside of your nose, like a little breeze there. Or if you breathe in through your mouth, you'll feel the air touching the top of your mouth. Just really tune into the fact that as you breathe in, you are breathing in this gaseous stuff, one form of matter, not liquid, not solid, but gas.

Now, as you breathe in, Use your imagination to feel yourself breathing in that oxygen, and you may be inside, maybe even with your windows closed, but imagine that oxygen coming from plants, including trees around where you are. And each time you inhale, pull in that oxygen,



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and imagine you pulling it from the tree around you. Breathe it in as a gift from those trees. And now as you exhale, some of your exhalation is carbon dioxide among other gases. And now as you exhale, imagine your exhalation extending across the room, outside to those plants to the trees around your residence. And as you may know, through little pores, little holes on the underside of leaves, on the underside of pine needles, these little pores called stomata, trees and other plants in effect are inhaling carbon dioxide, taking that gas, some of which you've offered to the trees with their exhalation, taking that gas into the leaves, into the pine needles.

From maybe high school science classes that discussed photosynthesis, the trees are grabbing the carbon atom out of each CO₂ molecule and using that to build new leaves and branches and the trunk of the tree and the roots and then releasing the O₂, the gaseous oxygen, back out into the world. So let's just take a minute, Just sit there breathing naturally. And each time you inhale, imagine your in-breath receiving that oxygen that is exhaled by the trees around your home. And as you exhale, out of gratitude, offer up that carbon dioxide to the tree, which in turn breathes it in, grabs the carbon and exhales the oxygen back to you. Just see if you can use your imagination and breathing to feel yourself woven into this reciprocity with the trees, existing together with, interconnected with the trees that need the carbon from you, just like you need the oxygen from the trees. See if you can feel yourself embedded in that cycle, in that exchange. Let's just do that for a minute or two.

Now as we end this little meditation, offer your gratitude to those plants, those trees, shrubs, grass, whatever around your abode. Offer thanks in whatever way feels natural to you.

Any comments, questions about that? Things you noticed? Things that came up for you? Sometimes when I'm out hiking, maybe backpacking, where I'm drinking water after purifying it from the streams, I'm sweating, maybe I'm perspiring and dropping sweat on the ground, maybe peeing out there in the woods. Another thing I sometimes think about is how we're woven into the hydrological cycle when we're out there, especially for an extended period of time, and we're drawing our water from streams and then purifying it on our hike or our backpacking trip.

How we are woven into that cycle as well. How our sweat, our perspiration, our pee may make it into the local drainage, into the stream, and that water going down to the ocean evaporating at some point, rising up into the jet stream and coming our way in clouds that then again drop rain that forms in the stream that we pull water from that we drink. And how our body in our drinking water, in our peeing, or sweating, or spitting is also woven into that cycle. Also, when we think about our bodies and nature, a lot of us lose sight of the fact that we are animals. Though we live, and you can see I'm here in my study, bookcases, I'm in front of a computer. But how we often lose fact, lose sight of the fact that we are animals too.

And I don't know about you, I find it interesting when you're out in the woods, maybe at night sitting by a campfire, how certain senses and instinctual, what reactions, weariness get activated. And we are on guard when we hear a branch snap out in the darkness beyond the fire. And we react to that. And there's a shot of adrenaline, in a sense, preparing our body to fight or fly the fight or flight response. And also, just how we are at some moments in the food chain as well, even though normally in our daily lives we don't feel that way. But sometimes in the wilderness, we could be another critter's lunch. Or just thinking about our bodies, separate from us being animals out in nature. I always have to check this number when I run across it, but in our microbiome in our body, apparently we have trillions.

I've seen the number 39 trillion bacteria, fungi, viruses and other little critters. And I know there's debate about whether viruses are living organisms or not, but definitely bacteria and fungi are. And basically our body is an ecosystem for literally trillions of tiny little microbes who



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are doing their thing, living their lives in in our bodies, which presumably to them is much vaster, much wild, wilder than say what, Northern Canada or the Alaskan wilderness might be to us. We basically are walking around with trillions of organisms inside of ourselves. And in many ways, performing functions that we really need for our own survival, whether it's bacteria in our stomach, breaking down food or some other function. And also how in our body we have multiple mini ecosystems. What's happening in my ear is very different in terms of the different fungi and bacteria than those in the gut or those in my intestines or what's happening on the skin on the back of my hand.

There's a lot of nature going on. One thing I do, and maybe this is just me growing up in a rural area, sort of an old hiker, a kid who was always in the woods in his body. I'm 68, I just had knee surgery. I'm sort of an old jock holding it together here in my body. But I don't know about you, my practice of Buddhism is primarily in the Zen tradition. And as you all well know, sitting in meditation is an extremely physical experience. I think sometimes people who aren't familiar with sitting will think that meditation is just sitting back in a comfy chair and leaving your body going to some peaceful place, whether it's the astral plane or nirvana or some altered state of consciousness. Buddhist practice is very physical, sitting in a meditation position there with the physicality of breathing, like we've done a little bit today, doing walking meditation, different chores around the center or the monastery done as a meditative practice.

And so when I think about Buddhism as a series or a set of practices, which among other things, help me feel my embeddedness in nature. One thing I come up with, and this is something that's popped up in my writing, but sort of echoes in my head. And it's the idea that our embodied-ness, our embodied-ness in our bodies, in our senses, is the gateway to realizing our embeddedness in nature as nature. And so a lot of my approach, both in my more traditional Zen practice, and in the things that I do outside that are more or less based on Buddhist principles or practices of my own creation, for me, it's very physical and very embodied. And when I talk about embodied-ness, as a way of realizing our embeddedness in nature as nature, I'm thinking of realizing in two senses of the term, realizing in the sense of, "Oh, I realized something to wake up to pick up on something." Like when we talk about spiritual realization or Zen Satori is a kind of realization, but also realizing in another sense, which is making actual. Like we say, someone realized their full potential. They actualized it. They made it something that is in play in actuality in their life.

And so for me, one thing when I think about realizing our embeddedness in nature, it's waking up to that fact that every moment in our breathing, exchanging those gases with the trees, in a little while we'll turn to food and eating, but in just in the process of living, we are fully interconnected with the natural world around us.

And at the same time, this is something we can actualize, confirm, verify, make real for ourselves through our physicality, through our getting out into nature, attending to our breath in sync with the trees, feeling ourselves in the hydrological cycle, feeling ourselves as an animal moving through the woods with our bodies, with our instincts, our reactions, maybe even situated on a food chain out in the backcountry.

One thing I like to do, and let's try it here for a second, it's not necessarily a traditional Buddhist practice, but it's what I often do, and maybe you do something similar, when I step outside for a walk, or maybe later today when I get out of the car there at Walden Pond and I'm about to walk through the woods to get into my wetsuit to swim across the pond, what I often try to do as a kind of transition, a kind of little ritual marker that I'm moving from, my iPhone, my job, my to-do list, stuff I'm thinking about and worrying about, and kind of entering a sacred space where I really do want to be paying attention to my natural surroundings for at least a little while.



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I don't need to be worrying about things on my to-do list. And what I do is what I basically call checking in with my senses. I know we're not at a trailhead or about to dive into the ocean or into Walden Pond together, but let's just take a minute and do this together and you'll get a sense of what I am doing when I really do try to get out of my head, out of my monkey mind, my thinking and worrying and be more attuned to my surroundings. And in that sense, plugging into them, being right there with them rather than distracted and only half there on the hike, on the swim, whatever that might be.

So let's try this. Let's all sit up straight. I'll ring my bell again. Let's just take a couple of breaths to settle. [silence] And if you feel comfortable closing your eyes, please close your eyes. Let's direct our attention to our bodies, to the sense of touch. Just feel your butt contacting a chair. I assume you're all sitting down. If you can, feel the bottom of your feet contacting the floor. In and see do you feel warm, a little cool? Might you feel any air moving through the space? Does your abdomen feel relaxed? Is there any tightness in your upper back somewhere else? Now turn your attention to your sense of smell. If you're not congested, breathe in a couple of times through your nose and see if you can detect any smell in the space you're occupying.

What does that space smell like? And now direct your attention to the sense of taste. Is there any taste in your mouth? Maybe from that sip of coffee, traces of your breakfast. If not, just feel your saliva with your tongue and see if you can sense any flavor there. Now direct your attention to the sense of hearing. Let's just take a minute to monitor any sounds we're hearing. Sounds that might arise, continue, and then disappear, like my voice right now, or any other sounds. Just feel your mind as a spacious expanse and just attend to sounds as they arise and then disappear. Maybe there's a continuing sound from a fan or a heating duct.

Now, if you would open your eyes and just gently receive whatever things you're seeing there in front of you through your sense of sight. [silence] And for the next minute, what I'd like you to do is see if you can just settle back into your sense experience, those feelings in your body, sensations on your skin of coolness or warmth, what you're smelling, tasting, hearing, and seeing. See if you can just let go of thinking and just attend to those senses. Maybe you'll go a bit from sense to sense to check in. And just settle back into your sense experience here in this moment. Just like you might settle back in to a really comfortable chair at the end of your day. Just release and settle back into your sense experience.

As we all know and as probably we all experienced in the past minute or so, even when I was When I say let go of your thinking and settle back into your sense experience there in your body, in your embodied-ness with your sense organs, it's easier said than done. As I sometimes say to my students, I'm not a psychologist, but I think probably the worst advice you could give someone who's feeling anxiety or depressed is to say, "Don't worry, be happy," as if we have a little on-off switch. It should be great if we came with one somewhere down along about our ribcage, when we're really worried or anxious or depressed, just flip that little switch, and suddenly I'm happy, I'm blissed out.

But obviously, as we all know, and especially as we know as meditators, we don't have that switch and our thinking and worrying, that monkey mind really is tenacious. However, there are things probably from your own practice, maybe things beyond Buddhism, there are things we can do to come back more into our body, into sense experience, into contact, that immediacy and intimacy with our surroundings, as one way to overcome our sense of estrangement from nature, and from other people for that matter. Obviously, there are techniques to help us come back into touch with everything around us and get out of our heads.



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One thing that I find very interesting is, and you may have run across this, it's the Zen expression Gujin. If we were to spell it, it's G-U-J-I-N. And Gujin, it's two Chinese characters. And rather than getting into the meaning of each of the characters as a compound, and as a practice, Gujin is something you may have heard Buddhist meditation instructors say, and it's this idea of pouring yourself into your breathing, giving yourself fully to the act of breathing, this idea of gujin.

And this is something that maybe you're able to do in your meditation, or maybe an activity you love, if you love playing the guitar or dancing, or surfing, or riding your bike, or making a salad, making a good cup of coffee, lifting weights, playing basketball with your friends. That ability that we have, often when things we really love to do, and more often than not, things we're pretty good at, that ability to give yourself to it.

You love to dance and you get out on the dance floor and boom, you're just moving your body to the rhythm of the music. You're not thinking about your concerns back at work or back at home. You're just fully immersed in that, or centering clay on a wheel as you're throwing a pot in a pottery studio, or paddling out into the surf, or paddling to catch a wave and pop up and making that bottom turn to start going along the face of the wave as a surfer. A lot of us, I think, even if we don't meditate, have had that experience of pouring ourselves into an activity. And this again is something that happens in meditation. We don't necessarily need to do it right now, but when you sit down in a meditation session, and we'll do one or more today, what I try to do is I direct my attention to the breathing, is really feel myself giving myself to the breath.

Again, just like I might give myself to the act of swimming when I dive into a chilly Walden pond later today, or when a weightlifter grabs the barbell and pours herself into lifting that barbell. And this is something that, a lot of meditation teachers talk about doing. And in some cases, pausing as a way to sort of reset. Thich Nhat Hanh talks about pausing through the day, sometimes ringing a bell of mindfulness and taking three breaths, especially when we find ourselves scattered, hurrying, multitasking, disconnected. And out of that, what I often do is I take three breaths and then give myself to the action. So for example, if I'm driving and I'm obsessing about something and I suddenly realize I'm not paying full attention, when I notice that I'll take a few breaths and then really give myself to the act of holding the steering wheel, looking at the traffic, having my foot on the accelerator.

Or for example, when hiking, when you realize you're really not there on the trail, plugged into your surroundings, just pause for a second, take a few breaths, and then as you start walking again, really direct your attention, do this gujin thing, and give yourself to each step. And that's why in some cases, I imagine some of you have done walking meditation, when we really slow down that kind of basic action like walking and do it extremely slowly, it really supports our focus on that action and our ability to give ourselves fully to it rather than kind of walking along the trail or walking along the beach and yakking with your friend and thinking about something at work and checking your phone, that ability to stay focused, to stay present, to stay connected through this act of pouring yourself totally into what's happening.

And again, this is something we can do out in nature, give ourselves to that activity in our body to plug in to what's happening around us. And basically, a lot of what we're talking about here is being present in the present moment with a certain kind of presence. So being present in the present with a kind of presence. I don't know about you, but when I've lost a loved one and I'm grieving or something has really upset me, one thing that I often find most nurturing is not necessarily a friend who brings me some food, which is wonderful and appreciated, not just a friend who sends me a card or sees me and has some words that might be consoling as they express their condolences. But what I often find nurturing is someone who just shows up and



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is fully present with me, who's there, fully there with a kind of presence. And I think in some cases, when we think about Buddhist teachers or wonderful rabbis or great therapists or teachers or friends, often it's someone who, isn't necessarily skilled at doing something to make it better, doing some kind of intervention or saying the right thing, but it's someone who can be really present, paying attention, listening, not trying to make things better or fix things.

And I think a lot of what we're getting at today, this idea of being present, not only helps in terms of enjoying life and being in the moment, savoring what's happening around us, and not only helps us be present for our loved ones, not necessarily just in times of stress or chaos or grief, but just day to day. When at the end of the day, you're sitting down with a loved one and hearing about their day. Perhaps the biggest gift of love we can give people is our presence.

There's actually a line by Thich Nhat Hanh, I quoted in a manuscript the other day where he basically says that. So that's not my original idea, I should cite him, but he said something like, "Offering our presence "and being fully present to others "is the greatest gift of love." And in many cases, what we're doing here is looking at being present as a way to realize our interconnectedness with everything around us, not just people, but especially in terms of our topic today, our interconnectedness with nature.

And let me just pause here. I've been tossing a lot out here, and maybe this is a chance to hear from you, any comments, Maybe little practices you have when you enter the woods or step onto the beach. Things I'm saying here about the senses, pouring ourselves into activity. Hopefully you can resonate with that. I hope an activity you love, where you do pour yourself into it and get immersed in, and in a sense, lose yourself in that. Are there any comments or questions before we shift gears?

And maybe in a few minutes, we can take that halfway break. I'd love to hear from you if you have any practices spinning off of that or similar things that you do to stay present, to plug in through your senses, to realize your inner connection with trees and other things.

I see Elizabeth, your hand's up, please.

Question:

- All of this really resonates with me. And actually I was outside walking and then stopping for the practices. But sometimes just either when I'm outside or I'm inside, I just go outside and kind of say something like, I mean, it's corny, but like good night moon or thank you bee. And I also do that when I'm driving to kind of keep myself where I am instead of listening to the radio or a podcast. And it's kind of like the Thich Nhat Hanh bell in a way, you're stopping, dodging. Anyway, that's all.

Answer:

- It's interesting that stepping outside as a way of maybe augmenting a short break from your work or what you're doing indoors. But also, what you're talking about in terms of talking to things around you. I find often when I'm hiking, I'll talk to a beautiful boulder or talk to a bird that flies by or say, "Oh, beautiful little flower, thank you. How's your day going?" I don't know what that does psychologically, but it may be in some way really does deepen that connection to at least talk to, if not in some subtle way, be in dialogue with those things.

And I'll mention this in a minute. We're not the only one presencing or being outside with presence. Everything around us in its own way is presencing as well. And so, in a little while, we can talk about that sort of dialogical interaction, not just me taking things in or talking to things, but thank you. That's fascinating. I do that as well.



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Question:

- An experience I've had hiking, one very powerful one was going early in the morning and it was very foggy up in the hills here in Santa Barbara. And no one was there and I enjoyed taking pictures. And I was just bedazzled. I kept seeing the wetness of the plants and just the dew on everything. It was absolutely transformed. And I stopped walking in terms of cardio. And I was reminded of Georgia O'Keeffe's Apparently what she said that it takes a long time to see a flower. Because when I would stop and take pictures and I could zoom in, another whole dimension opened up that I don't see when I'm just walking by. And it seemed like the closer I got and the more I slowed down, without even thinking about it, the chattering stopped. There was such a strong presence. But one thing and one thing I'm curious about as a Zen practitioner, if everything is one, it seems like there's still more and more subtle ways of our dualizing and saying, don't think, don't do, just be. How do we really have a sense of not always parsing everything in our ordinary way? Thank you.

Answer:

Maybe another way of saying that is how through our practice do we have a balance between realizing a certain kind of oneness and our being woven into that, and yet at the same time come back to being Chris Ives who may have to analyze something to make a decision and how do we have that balance? I don't know about you, Deborah, but one thing I find helpful is that old metaphor of the water and the waves. And sometimes, when Buddhism or Zen talks about non-duality, it doesn't necessarily mean total oneness. There are some religious traditions that say, all of this is illusion, the sense that I'm here in Boston and you're in Santa Barbara. It's ultimately all one if we can only see it.

Zen is really trying to say, at one level, it's all interconnected as a whole, like an ocean. but that whole is always taking particular forms like the waves on the surface of the ocean or Chris, his glasses, his shirt, his books, Deborah, Santa Barbara, et cetera. And how do we have that balance where we can realize that oneness but then come back to, when it's appropriate that dualistic discriminating judgmental mind Like how do I react to what's going on in the Middle East? Or what do I eat for dinner tonight that requires thinking? And maybe that's the path over the long haul is having that balance, realizing I'm woven into all of this, and yet at the same time, at another level, I am Chris Ives. I'm not those books behind me. I have to, at times, deploy my discriminating mind, And yet make sure I don't get so caught up in that I'm obsessing and losing control. But that's a very interesting question.

I'll just share one story. This goes back maybe 30, 40 years ago when Maezumi Roshi was still the Zen master at the LA Zen Center. They were having a week long Zen retreat, a session. And apparently he was giving a Dharma talk on day four or five or whatever. And while he was talking, one of the participants in the session suddenly blurted out, "I can see it, it's all one, it's all one." And Maezumi Roshi, without skipping a beat, turned to one of the senior monks who was sitting next to him and said to the person, "Remind me not to send him out for groceries." And basically affirming that, at one level it's all one, but don't get stuck there. At times we do have to go out and get our shopping cart down the aisle without bumping into things and find the healthy food versus other foods. So his response is, remind me not to send him out for groceries.

Question:

I have a question. Something you said earlier about being present with a kind of presence or specific kind of presence. I mean, I understand being present. You hear that a lot, present, be present, be here in the now. Could you expand a little bit more about what you that last part you said about a specific kind or a kind of presence, if I'm paraphrasing it correctly?

Answer:



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That's going to come up a little bit after our break. So I'll just say one or two things. And then at the end of our time, I'll allow like 15 or 20 minutes for open discussion. If it's still not clear, then we have circled back to me. But in many ways, the kind of presence I'm talking about is what we often feel, even if we're not meditators, when we are very relaxed, when we are calm down, in a certain sense, our mind is emptied, or at least less filled with thoughts and worries than usual. And we can just simply be fully in the moment, attentive, taking things in. I mean, this is how people sometimes talk about mindfulness. And just to be there without reactivity, really listening, really noticing, really paying attention, with a kind of spacious, opened up, in some respects, emptied mind. And when we turn to the PowerPoint in a few minutes, I'll have a slide or two that kind of gets into what this sort of mind or presence might be like. But for me, it's a kind of attentiveness where we are fully paying attention, not distracted, not trying to change things, just being there fully aware in the moment, taking things in. I don't know if that answers your question, but maybe in a little while with the slide, we can talk a little bit more about that. But does that make sense?

Yes, thank you.

Okay, well, welcome back, everybody. I hope that break was nurturing. As you can see, I do have a PowerPoint here. I don't want to turn this into a lecture. But let me share a few things. And again, what I'd like to do is to have a good chunk of time at the end just to have open discussion, hear from you like we just did. And suffice it to say, I'm currently finishing a book on Buddhist resources for engaging the climate crisis. And that is something I'm finishing up in the next month, and they'll probably appear through Wisdom publications next year. And a lot of what I'm looking at in the first part of the book is looking at sort of some low hanging fruit. In the book, I look at lifestyle change, basically helping us work on our consumerism and materialism, our carbon footprints as a contributing cause of the crisis, but also in terms of our lifestyle, helping us slow down and pay attention and deal with that freneticism or distraction often exacerbated by technology that is a hindrance to our ability to respond to the crisis and in terms of our topic for today that freneticism and entanglement in technology of course contributes to our felt sense of separation from or disconnection from nature.

And I'm also in the book looking not just at individual lifestyle change but also structural change looking at certain systemic issues whether the power of the fossil fuel industry or the need for campaign finance reform or certain regulations or the lack of regulations that need to be addressed as well. As you well know, if we just look at individual lifestyle change, it makes it sound like the problem or the cause of the problem, the responsibility, is all with us individuals as opposed to looking at some of the larger issues having to do with economics and power in our society or societies more broadly.

And so in many ways, the book does get into our topic for today, as I'm looking at the need to slow down, pay attention. And in many ways, we could argue that that felt sense of separation from nature has led some people to be more oblivious of what's going on with the climate crisis and other environmental issues that might otherwise be the case if people were more plugged in, paying attention, present to what's happening in and around them.

One thing I'm playing with too is the whole idea of ignorance and ignorance and how if we want to deploy this Buddhist concept to the climate crisis, Buddhist ignorance traditionally is ignorance of impermanence, maybe ignorance of what we are, ignorance of what fulfills us. But at one level, I'm playing with ignorance or ignorance, if you drop a hyphen into that word, around the climate crisis. And you can see some things I'm touching upon, being oblivious, just not knowing what's going on, being misinformed, being distracted, just choosing to ignore the problem. Ignorance in the sense of feeling like it's not my fault, I have no responsibility, or ignorance of things we can do to respond.



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Ignorance in the form of ideas that maybe continue our destructive lifestyle, like eat, drink, and be merry, and someone will come up with a technological fix, just keep doing whatever you want to do. Or ideas about certain others. Blaming, I don't know, the CEOs of fossil fuel companies, or blaming the Chinese for their coal-fired power plants or whatever. And then this last one, which is right there with our topic for today, this ignorance, this obliviousness to our embeddedness in nature. Again, this sense of disconnection we're talking about today.

And then, in terms of what do we do about this? Well, in terms of our materialism or consumerism, is there a way we can work on our high impact, materialistic way of living and basically simplify our lifestyle and reduce our environmental impact. And this is a little bit of a digression relative to what we're looking at today. But let me just share one thing that's there in the manuscript.

And one thing that I find interesting is that Buddhism, the Dharma, started 2500 years ago, and basically sort of the original or basic Buddhist path, having a lot to do with purifying our minds. We were talking earlier about greed, ill will and ignorance, and that idea of transforming your mind and purifying it of those impurities, those detrimental or unwholesome mental states, like ignorance, greed and ill will, and replacing them with their opposites, these healthy mental states of wisdom, generosity and loving kindness or compassion.

And that was basically established as a spiritual path, it wasn't set forth as a kind of what virtue ethic, or way of forming yourself to live in a more ecological way. It was a spiritual path, not an environmental path. And yet, it's a kind of win win thing. In many ways, if you live in sync with these Buddhist values, these mental states, we can call them virtues, like restraint, simplicity, contentment, etc. What's there, it also conduces to a greener, more ecological lifestyle, a kind of win-win situation where your spiritual path also bears ecological fruits.

And then in terms of our freneticism, our distraction, this ignorance, or our disconnection from nature, one thing I'm playing with, and I mentioned this earlier is the whole idea of spaciousness and how as sort of a foundation to greening our lifestyle or in terms of structural change, getting involved in activism, how we can cultivate spaciousness in the three areas of action or karma. Karma understood here as acting, mental activity in our mind, and here you have the Sino-Japanese character for that, our speech, and the location is our mouth, and physical actions other than speech in our body, as the three areas of karma, or action.

And we see this, these three areas, in, for example, the doctrine of the 10 detrimental actions, which you can see can be lumped together in three groupings, our physical actions, killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, verbal actions, four through seven, and mental actions. And some of this may ring a bell, as you can see the physical actions one, two, and three. And then if you bring in the verbal action number four, that's for the five precepts. Or if you look at those four verbal actions, four, five, six, and seven, those are the four types of incorrect speech that the Buddha talked about when he gave the doctrine of the Eightfold Path and preached about correct or right speech as one of those eight components. It's speech that does not involve lying, slander, harsh speech, or frivolous speech. Sometimes that's translated as gossip.

And then as you can see, the three mental actions here are basically the three poisons, these three mental states that cause suffering, coveting or greed, giving away to anger, that ill will, and holding false views, ignorance or delusion. And so what I'm doing in the book is thinking about these three areas of action and how we can create more spaciousness as a way to sort of slow down and pay attention to simplify. And so the first area, the mental area and mental spaciousness. A lot of times when we talk about meditation, and I don't know about your own personal practice, a lot of it is through our breath, is a settling down, a shifting from thinking



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and worrying to a kind of awareness. Call it mindfulness, call it presence, and opening up a kind of awareness, a spacious, open, receptive awareness that many Buddhists compared to the sky.

So Jack Kornfield, for example, in one of his writings quotes the Buddha is saying, "Develop a mind that is vast like space, where experiences both pleasant and unpleasant can appear and disappear without conflict, struggle or harm. Rest in a mind like vast sky." Or the Zen master from ancient China, talking about the mind like a sky. And when thoughts and feelings arise, it's like a bird appearing and flying through that sky and disappearing, or clouds appearing, passing through the sky, our open mind, and then disappearing. And so many ways I find this idea of, quieting down, emptying the mind, not that the mind is always going to be empty, the mind does secrete thoughts and feelings, but getting in touch with that spaciousness, where we can observe our thoughts when they happen, rather than getting caught up in them and getting entangled in that train of thought as we start obsessing or obsessively worrying about something.

And so I'm finding that this idea of spaciousness in terms of our mental experience is helpful. In terms of Dogen, as you may know, the founder of Soto Zen, Soto branch of Zen in Japan, bringing it over from China in the 13th century. In one piece that he wrote, it's one chapter in his magnum opus called Genjo Kōan, and you'll see I'm highlighting there these first two characters, Genjo, and you'll see why in a minute. But this is probably one of the most quoted little stanzas in all of Zen literature, and you've probably run across it yourselves. To study the Buddha way, the Dharma, is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be realized. Here's the Chinese character can also mean be confirmed by the myriad things.

And Chozen Bays, who as you may know is a Zen teacher up in the Portland, Oregon area, she sort of speaks this where she says, "We teach the mind to empty itself and stand ready." This kind of relaxed mind that's waiting for whatever will appear next. And this is basically our being presence and presencing ourselves, and this being brought about by this forgetting of the self, this letting go of your thinking by pouring yourself into the breath, by emptying yourself out, by being spacious and open like the sky, so you can be filled by all things, this idea of being realized by the myriad things, you can take it all in and really be present and feel that around you and overcome again that sense of separation.

And what's interesting, the character for sky is also the character in Japanese for space, and it's also the character for empty. Now some of you may have studied Buddhist philosophy, and you may have run across the concept of emptiness, which in many ways is a Buddhist, what, reconfiguration or another phrase for that idea of dependent arising, interbeing, as Thich Nhat Hanh calls it, interconnectedness. Emptiness is another way of talking about that, which is saying each thing is empty of any separate essence. Each thing is a function, like we were saying earlier, of all these inputs and influences. It exists in this interconnectedness. And in that sense, by being empty of any separate essence, what that means is you're open to being constituted by all of the things around you, including your parents' DNA and what your mom ate when she was pregnant, etc, etc.

So to be empty of soul means to be a relational being who exists through all those inputs, not having some little essence that secondarily manifests itself with your appearance, your body, whatever that might be. But what's interesting, again, this character for emptiness is also the character for spaciousness in sky. And so one thing I like to do is to play with that and think about this idea of empty, spacious sky mind, kind of riffing on these three connotations of this Chinese and Japanese character that's there in parentheses.



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There's another part of Dogen's writing where he talks about this idea of genjo. And what genjo is, is basically presencing. In our case, what we were talking about earlier, which is, through your breath, through giving yourself to the action at hand, like breathing, or paying attention, jogging, that showing up and being fully present as a kind of presencing. And this is one kind of enigmatic quotation from one of Dogen's writings, where he says, "The mountains and waters of the present are the presencing, or are doing the presencing, spoken of by Buddhas long ago."

And what I like to do with this, and this gets back to Deborah's question earlier, is this whole idea of genjo, or presencing. This is the Japanese expression that I'm referring to when I talk about presence or presencing. When we are, and think about your own life, your own experience, maybe you're on vacation, maybe you're on that beach, you are relaxing, even if you haven't been meditating, your mind does quiet down, it calms down, it settles. Maybe the amount of thoughts do become fewer, and your mind is more open, like a spacious sky.

And you are there being present and open and attentive, like sitting on a beach on vacation, perhaps. And then with that openness, you can really take in things around you that gorgeous sunset at the end of the day on the beach, the smell and sound and sight of beautiful surf coming at you as you sit there on the beach, the seagulls overhead, the sailboats going by.

And this is what I find very interesting, that Buddhist idea of suchness. And this gets us into the aesthetics of Zen, Zen art, et cetera. But that idea that when you are fully present, you can really appreciate things as they present themselves to you. You can really savor the music, savor the sunset, savor the face of a loved one when you are just calmly present. In a sense, you're filled by that sunset, you're filled by the music, you're filled by the surf.

And in this way, your presencing opens you to the presencing of other things in their vibratory suchness. And think about maybe when you're outside, maybe on a hike, and you see a gorgeous rock, or you see lichen growing on a rock, or a beautiful wildflower. When you're there calmly present, you may have had that experience of taking that beautiful thing in. And it's almost like it's expressing itself. It's offering itself to you in a kind of vibratory "isness", just as it is in its simplicity, simple beauty. And you're moved by that as you take it in.

Now, ultimately, with some of these experiences, when we talk about, I was really calm at the concert. The music was coming at me in its suchness. I was taking it in. And there may be those moments where any sense of you and the music, you and the sunset, you and the flower drops off, and what there is is just simply boom, the music, boom, the sunset.

And sometimes, this may be in an action you're doing, maybe playing your guitar, dancing. There may be a moment where it's not you thinking about the soccer ball you're dribbling, or you thinking about the keyboard on the piano, but that distinction drops off and it's just the event, the happening of what? Music playing itself through you, or the act of dribbling the soccer ball, or jogging along the beach, walking along the trail, and it's those moments where, you drop away and it's just boom reality.

Maybe those are the moments when people talk about, becoming one with everything becoming one with nature. And the only way to describe is in that moment. It's just reality presencing. And what we're doing there is extracting ourselves from that dualistic mode of experience. And in those moments, overcoming that felt sense of separation in that moment, reality was the sunset. And maybe a few seconds later, you pop back into that dualistic mode and say, wow, "That was a really beautiful sunset," or "Wow, I was really engrossed in the music, and now I'm thinking about it. That was a really good song. I'm glad we came to this concert," or whatever.



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And just as a little footnote here, what I'm playing with here in terms of our meditative practice supporting this presence is not just simply being more attuned to nature around us and maybe overcoming that sense of separation when for a moment it's just the ocean, the sunset, the beautiful tree, but also this as a foundation for staying present in the face of the climate crisis or in other cases, staying present in an emergency when you're in the emergency room and a loved one's just been brought in an ambulance or whatever you might be dealing with.

But this ability to stay present, to maintain focus, to stay grounded as we say, and maybe sustain this in a certain kind of resilience through that long night in the emergency room or through the long haul trying to ameliorate and mitigate the climate crisis.

And just very much in passing, I also talked about those other areas of action. Remember, not just mental activity, but verbal and physical activity and playing with, how can we maintain more verbal spaciousness in our speaking, in our listening, and physical spaciousness in our schedule, in our days, and also in our abodes and maintain a kind of spaciousness there.

Let me just stop sharing for a second and just see, is there any comments or questions? I know it's throwing some pretty obscure Zen philosophy stuff at you. Let me just pause here and then I can continue for a few minutes and then we can open it all the way up. I don't know if that makes sense. Maybe when we spend our last 15 or 20 minutes we can chew on that a little more.

All right, let me go back in and just share a few more things. And again, we can open it up do our discussion. Let me get over here and share that one. So just continuing here in terms of what I'm looking at. And one thing, when we think about Buddhist meditation, I don't know about you all. I mean, I became interested in Buddhism in the early 1970s. And in full disclosure, when I first started meditating, I was really thinking about it as something that is, first of all, central to Buddhism. It's all about meditation. And what meditation is all about is having certain amazing experiences or experiencing certain altered states of consciousness that I had experienced in other ways as a young hippie.

And I think in some ways, when we think about our Buddhist practice, and a lot of what I've been saying so far today, here are some meditative practices, to be present, to realize you're interconnected, to check in with your senses, a lot of the emphasis is on meditation and meditative states. And I think for a lot of us, especially if we're long-term practitioners, sometimes if we just think about our meditation and whatever we think meditation should be, deep mindfulness, or maybe some certain amazing altered states of consciousness or new ways of experiencing, we're often setting ourselves up for disappointment.

And I think for a lot of us, when we think about practicing Buddhism, and I hope this is the case for you with the Sati Center. I know some of you may be in the world of insight meditation, but I hope you have community and you also have other practices to support you on the path as opposed to what's the case with a lot of us is expecting our meditation to be a certain way and that's the whole ball game.

And so in some cases when we think about how can we realize our connectedness with nature, we may put a lot of emphasis on meditation but there are other things and some of these are there in Buddhism that can support us. So we're not constantly thinking, "oh, when I go hiking, I should feel at one with things or feel myself in a certain rhythm, or just totally in sync with all the cycles around me." That's a lot to put on ourselves.



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And so many ways, there are other practices in and through our bodies, that can help us realize that embeddedness, embeddedness in local nature. I think sometimes when we talk about meditative experience and being one with nature, we're often talking fairly generically. Like I'm somehow in tune with nature writ large, like I don't know, the cosmos or the whole biosphere of planet Earth or the entire Pacific Ocean or whatever. But in many ways, our way of plugging into nature is really our local place, what's right around us.

And in terms of really tuning into that and appreciating it, that also leads to a certain valuing of that, a certain caring for it, not only caring about it, but caring for it by doing certain actions around conservation or activism about local zoning, whatever that might be.

And one thing I find very helpful, I imagine some of you know of and may have read the poetry or essays by Gary Snyder, who lives, as you may know, sort of up, north of Sacramento. And Snyder, in addition to his poetry, in his book, *A Place in Space*, has a wonderful essay called *Re-inhabitation*. And you may be familiar with this, with his interest in Zen, indigenous traditions, having worked as a fire lookout, growing up on a farm, spending a lot of time in the woods homesteading. He really talks about really plugging into your place, committing to your local place for the long haul, learning the geology, learning how water moves through it, that hydrological cycle, knowing the plants, the fauna and flora, the animals and plants in your place, how indigenous people lived in that place before Europeans came in as colonial settlers or maybe better yet invaders. And really talking about how through farming, through clearing brush, through planting a garden in our bodies, we really are plugging into nature. But again, not nature in some sort of broad love of nature way, but nature as your place, your surroundings, know it, nurture it, stay with it, protect it for the long haul.

And this of course is something done in community. And it's interesting, he talks about not only community with other people in your local area, like in your town or village or whatever, in your watershed, but also other than human animals. He talks about the great earth sangha, that's not just people getting together in a sangha to practice Buddhism, but other people, other sentient beings, animals, and even plants, and even inorganic things like mountains and rivers and oceans being part of our community, part of our great earth sangha.

And one thing I'm thinking about, and this is something that also bears on our topic today, when we think about connecting with nature, you often were thinking about, like I was just saying, the sunset, the waves on the beach, the forest, but also other sentient beings. As some of you may know, Buddhism has a kind of mixed bag with animals. In some ways, there are Buddhist resources that seem to point to protecting animals, and yet the tradition, as you probably know, has not flat out advocated vegetarianism.

And one thing I have found helpful, and I don't know if any of you have ever read David Abrams books like *The Spell of the Sensuous*, a person who originally was a street magician traveling around the world, and became interested in shamanism in relation to magic, which got him thinking a lot about indigenous traditions, and how they view animals, animals as intelligent, as presences, speaking their own languages, rather than just critters out there that are instinctual.

Now Buddhism, as you may know, historically, even though it's kind of a mixed bag, Buddhism has recognized, at least most animals, as fellow sentient beings, and sentient or sentience in the sense of having feeling, being able to feel pain, and in that way, by extension, being able to suffer. And so for Buddhism, traditionally, animals are seen as fellow sentient beings, fellow suffering beings, also on that cycle of rebirth, ultimately heading to a human birth, and ultimately to the realization of nirvana.



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But basically, Buddhism doesn't go much beyond that. It doesn't really make distinctions between different types of animals. It hasn't historically really try to get at, well, what is the nature of the suffering of, I don't know, a rattlesnake versus a squirrel versus my pet golden retriever versus a whale or a chimpanzee? Many animals are just lumped together as generic sentient beings.

I think there's a lot there in Buddhism where Buddhism can learn from people like Abram, indigenous traditions, certain zoologists and other scientists, and maybe get a more sophisticated understanding of these fellow sentient beings, which may have certain ethical fruit, both in terms of how we treat animals, also in terms of our sense of connection with nature in the form of other animals.

One thing I like to do, and I won't do this with you today, some of you have probably done the meditation, it's something Thich Nhat Hanh historically has done a lot. But when you look at your food before you, maybe when you're saying grace, expressing gratitude, and taking a minute to acknowledge, let's just say, I don't know, maybe a piece of bread you had as toast for breakfast today, and really acknowledging all of the inputs that made it possible. The soil, the grain, the farmers that grew the grain, the sunshine, the people in the bakery that made the bread, and on and on and on.

And where Thich Nhat Hanh will say things like, if you look closely, you'll see the whole universe in this piece of toast at breakfast today. One thing I like to do when I play with that, and maybe you've done that kind of meditation, and maybe this will help, I also like to bring other critters into the equation. What are the pollinators that pollinated some of the plants that are here ultimately in my breakfast?

What about the worms in the soil, the ants? What about other creatures that are part of the web of life, and the whole food system that we're plugged into? And these are animals that are not just simply things out there that are running around like ants on my kitchen sink or something. But often are animals who are organizing themselves, communicating, doing social life, often in very sophisticated ways.

I imagine some of you have heard about beehives where you have the queen bee versus the worker bees, and bees coming back and doing certain dances that commit, or that transmit information to other bees to help them find that flower where they can go and get the nectar, or ants leaving a little trail of scent to help other ants go and get access to that food source. Alpha males in wolf packs or alpha females in wolf packs and all of that very sophisticated social behavior.

Sometimes I say with my students, we look back 400 years and we say, back then people thought the world was flat. What was up with that? And we think we're so sophisticated with our smartphones and Zoom and be able to do what we do today. And I sometimes say to my students, 400 years from now, what might people say about us in 2023?

And I would wager that among other things, people in the future, and let's hope humanity is still thriving in 400 years. But if we are, I imagine our descendants in the future will look back and one of the things they'll say is, man, people in 2020, they didn't have a clue about animal intelligence, animal communication, animal feelings. And I think in many ways, we're just at the beginning of understanding how robins and other birds communicate in the woods, not just warning each other of danger, but doing a lot of other, in some ways, very sophisticated communication.



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And I think if we can tune into that and realize, whether it's with our pets or the animals that are part of agriculture, those worms, those pollinators, those ants, we can realize that, we are in this interconnectedness, not only with dirt and sunshine and rain, but all sorts of other creatures, many of which we barely understand.

Some other little supportive practices when we think about. What we can do to connect with nature? Like I was just saying, saying grace at meals, a gratitude practice, maybe in conjunction with looking at all the inputs to that piece of bread at breakfast. I won't get into this too much. Segaki ritual is done at traditional Zen monasteries, where at the meal, you put a little bit of your food on a special tray that's then set outside for the hungry ghosts, these hungry beings in the cycle of rebirth, which ultimately are the birds and squirrels that get this food that the monasteries put outside.

Walking meditation outdoors. Some of you may know Nelson Foster, the Ring of Bone Zendo that he and Gary Snyder founded up there in the foothills of the Sierras, north of Sacramento. They'll do backpacking retreats. And here's that Zen word "seshin" for a Zen retreat. I'm also struck, and I'll wrap this up now with just a couple of photographs, at Zen temples being nestled and embedded in nature, just like we are nestled into and embedded in nature.

How a lot of Zen monastic life is outside in our bodies, working in the gardens, doing gardening as a form of practice. And this Zen idea about gardening, chopping vegetables, washing the veranda, these quote unquote chores to keep the monastery going, done as a form of meditative practice. Again, this idea of gujin, give yourself fully to raking the gravel in the rock garden, give yourself fully to wiping the veranda with a wet rag, this pouring yourself into not only your breath in meditation, but these actions around the monastery, making those actions a form of meditation.

And the term for that is Samu, these chores or certain tasks done by pouring yourself into them as a form of meditation. And also just simply the artwork that is there on the wall, some of you may have been to Japan to some of the traditional temples, the artwork that is there all around you. And all of these things as well, not just highfalutin meditative states where you feel at one with nature, but a lot of these practices, gardening, going for walks, walking meditation outside, being surrounded by nature in the temple, nestled in nature, the artwork around you, getting out and doing physical chores as meditation outside.

All of these things as well, I think contribute to those resources that Zen offers us for feeling our embeddedness in nature. Again, we don't have to rely on meditative experience alone. Zen offers all sorts of other structures or cues or little practices that contribute to this.

And just to wrap up. When I lived in Japan, I lived in Kyoto, or I have lived in Kyoto for about eight years. sort of my research home away from home. And some of you may have been there, it's one of the centers of Zen Buddhism, and traditional Japanese arts. But a lot of Zen temples, rather than towering over nature's with a lot of verticality, architecturally, you'll see them, in a sense, sort of tucking in.

And in this way, architecturally, or in terms of the kind of landscaping, blending in and overcoming that separation rather than standing high above and beyond nature. Also in terms of things like some of the traditional gardens, often surrounded by trees, the rake, gravel, and the stones, quite simple, quite organic, again trying to evoke a sense of, in this case, Deborah was talking about photographs and the fog and the mist. Some of these rock gardens are seen as, who knows, those bigger rocks as summits of mountains rising above the clouds down here below, or maybe islands here in a sea rising up out of them. And then the naturalness and rusticity and things like tea bowls, bowls for drinking tea and tea ceremony, very rustic, like this



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bowl here. Maybe looking like a boulder, like we see are often up in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. These boulders that are covered with lichen and have that very dry, ancient feel to them, a kind of rustic simplicity.

And also in the landscape and other paintings, the simple, quiet crow on a pine branch out in nature, this kind of artwork around you, in a sense celebrating the kind of beauty in nature, the simplicity, the quiet, the calmness. Or landscape paintings like this one. You can see two people in the boat in the lower right hand corner, a couple little houses tucked in at what looks like the base of a cliff, on the top of which maybe some trees are sticking out, some, very steep misty mountains in the background. And this way through, zen inspired or zen influenced art of trying to evoke how we are tucked into nature, not trying to dominate it, not standing over it and against it, but in nature and with permeable boundaries.

Those little houses sort of blending into the landscape, the mountains receding back into the mist, breaking down these clear divisions between home and surroundings, or me and the natural world around me. So let me stop there and stop talking and open it up. Any impressions, responses? I know it's a lot I'm offering here but hopefully some of this makes sense and I hope there'll be some takeaways for each of you. Comments, questions, let me learn from you, your experiences. Anything in those slides or anything I said?

Question:

Well, several things came up for me, but one is, I don't know if it's because I'm paying more attention and/or it's expanding, but just in the last few months I have learned, which is why I'm interested I've never heard of you, but I'm interested in your program, and I thought you were in California I had come across Mark Coleman who? You're familiar with him. He's on the waking up app by Sam Harris, and he has these wonderful meditations in nature, and I just it was just such a wonderful it never even occurred to me because I as you had referenced I do my meditation and then I get on with my day, which is why I'm so sensitive now to this dualism that acts out on so many levels.

And so this intentionally being in nature seems to be necessary perhaps to help rebalance this rather stark separation of, especially since COVID, of living in a building, living in a car, this continual removal from nature. And so as I've been looking out, literally looking for embedding myself more in nature, it's no longer a natural. I grew up with openness and then I became a camper and a backpacker, and then I lived at a retreat center and just waking up and going into the natural world was the most natural thing. And it was so wholesome. I didn't even realize it until I became so isolated.

So this, perhaps, is this louder conversation recognizing we're so isolated as you acknowledge those many factors, especially this technology, which also is allowing us to connect. But I'm very concerned about the smartphone breaking of all of our connections and attentions. But anyway, this ongoing response, and there's greater response here in this area to the indigenous people. There are more places, more like in a little town called Ojai, where there is more respect for the land and offering ways to bring people in who've never had what we had as kids, who have grown up in suburbia, in cities, and literally don't know what the natural world is. And it's a scary place.

So anyway, I feel encouraged by the number, by the conversations, while at the same time, seeing the shrinking space. We're always fighting developers. Everywhere I've been, we're fighting developers in California. And still this encroachment, it's a lively time, it's a lively time, but I'm very grateful for what you're offering and I will continue to read your writings. Thank you.



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Answer:

Deborah just now mentioned Mark Coleman, wonderful teacher and a wonderful book called "Awake in the Wild". I think it's right behind me. Here it is right here. So I strongly recommend this book, "Awake in the Wild" by Mark Coleman. And I know many of you are very much based in the insight meditation tradition. And that's, as you may know, where Mark's coming from.

And as you can tell, a lot of what I was talking about today is very much colored by the Zen form of Buddhism. The little book that Rob was mentioning earlier, this is sort of like, if you want to put it this way, sort of a Zen version of Mark's book. Here is Insight Meditation practices for connecting with nature outside. And if you want to try that for more of a Zen angle, that's there. But Mark's work is wonderful. And a lot of richness there.

And also, Deborah, when you're talking about, just getting outside. We didn't really talk about it yet today. But, we're today talking about, the one benefit of getting outside in a certain way with certain practices, this realizing our embeddedness with nature, with what that does for us spiritually, helping us overcome that anxious separate sense of self. A lot of times when people talk about spirituality, they'll talk about it as having a sense of being part of something larger than ourselves.

And that's in a sense what we're doing here today, a kind of spirituality of hiking, techniques for realizing our embeddedness, our connection, our being part of something larger. And in many ways that's what we're looking at here. But there are other benefits to getting outside. I think you were starting to touch upon some of them, not just this overcoming of separation, having this kind of spiritual experience that has ecological ramifications.

But also, just the benefits of being outside, whether it's out in nature, breathing in the terpenes, some of these chemicals that are exuded by trees that are seen as affecting our parasympathetic nervous system, reducing certain negative chemicals in our body. Some of you may have heard about or participated in what's called forest bathing, loosely based on certain traditional Japanese practices, and people really talking about the benefits of getting out into the forest and breathing in those chemicals, being out there, enjoying the beauty, moving your body, getting the blood flowing, the dopamine flowing, benefiting from these chemicals the trees are exuding.

There's a lot of benefits to just simply going outside regardless of whether you're, trying to exchange gases with the trees or check in with your senses or doing practices that Mark or I are advocating for people. Other things, please.

Question:

I was going for real hand. I was going to try the other, but for me, a sense of gratitude helps draw me, drop me in, even as I wake up in the morning, to be aware of the room I'm in, the bed I'm in, the windows, the materials from the earth, everything that I have to start my day with a sense of gratitude. It brings me back quickly. It's one of the quickest ways to go back. I grew up camping, backpacking, still backpack. But I think as much can be done, maybe going locally in your neighborhood and picking up garbage.

There's homeless people that have left a trash pile to just go pick up that come to awareness that taking care of the earth is taking care of myself. As I take care of myself, I'm taking care of the earth. But that there's a practice, it's maybe a little bit more real than going raking rocks, going go get a picker up or indoor gloves and a bucket and go pick up garbage. Feels good. Go out and chop vegetables at a homeless place. It also works.



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Answer:

I think that practice too, whether it's picking up trash in an empty lot. Taking vegetables to people who live in a food desert or need healthy, nutritious food. A lot of times, and I've been doing it today, talking about being on the trail or out in nature, on a beautiful beach in the sunset, it runs the risk of seeing nature as something out there. It runs the risk of us privileging "wild nature" or "unspoiled wilderness," not that there is any pristine untouched place.

And the flip side of that is denigrating worked over nature, or the nature there on Madison Avenue in New York, or Telegraph Avenue in San Francisco or whatever. And I think going out and being outside doing the kind of things you're talking about, Kristen, helps us realize that no, nature is all around us. It's in my body. And who knows. Is this space I'm in with these books behind me, how is this different from a bird nest or a beaver lodge there in a local pond or whatever?

And, I think a lot of what we need to do is to realize that we're embedded in nature, not just when we're out backpacking or surfing, but when we're walking down the street in New York, and how can we attend to nature there and really take care of that nature, steward that, rather than sort of saying, okay, we have these national parks, wilderness over there. We'll preserve that. And the flip side of that often has been, we can trash these other places, whether it's mountaintop removal or clear cutting, or just, bulldozing a forest to put in a Walmart or or whatever.

I think we all have to be careful. I do this a little bit in the Zen on the Trail book. Going out into nature is not just simply going into a trailhead in the high Sierra, trying to get up to John Muir Trail in California. Stepping out is also when you step out your front door in Watertown, Massachusetts, or Midtown Manhattan, or Oakland, California. We need to break down that distinction between real nature and stunted nature in an urban, empty lot.

Question:

Just to continue what you're saying, one of the things I appreciated in "Meditations on the Trail" is actually kind of the first part of the book where you talk about all the steps that you do before you even get onto the trail. The destination isn't the reward or the getting there is all the things that you do in preparation for getting onto the trail.

Answer:

Maybe. Mindfulness begins when we're starting to pack the pack, not just when we're locking up the car and walking into the woods. One thing too I find, and I don't know about all of you in your own practice, nowadays when a lot of us are talking about mindfulness as we have this morning, often we have definitions of mindfulness, whether it's from Joseph Goldstein or Sharon Salzberg, whoever the teacher might be. Often, mindfulness is that bare attention, that presence, paying attention in the moment, ideally without judgment, without that reactivity, that like, dislike we were talking about earlier.

When you look at the term, and it's there in Sati Center, your center, sati there in the Pāli language or smṛiti in Sanskrit, as some of you probably know, given that that term is in the name of your center. This term sati or smṛiti that's often translated as mindfulness, the root in Sanskrit and Pali, it really also has to do with remembering or keeping in mind. And so I find that in some cases mindfulness, if you look at traditional Buddhist meditation manuals, it doesn't necessarily mean have no thoughts, just that bare attention.

In some cases, mindfulness, sati, is discussed as keeping certain teachings in mind. As you go through the day, you do have some mental content. It's not a total empty mind like a mirror. You're keeping certain Buddhist doctrines in mind, as you try to move through the day, non



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harming, paying attention, working with your breath. And I find in terms of going out into nature, mindfulness can be that presence where we're there just boom, filled with the sight of the sunset or really connecting with our senses and our surroundings. But mindfulness also can be keeping certain things in mind.

When we're on the trail, maybe thinking, oh, maybe it would be good to pause and take three breaths if I'm really obsessing about something back home. Maybe it would be good to just pause and check in with my senses. And sort of using mindfulness as remembering, getting back to Rob's point just now, remembering or keeping in mind the 10 essentials I want to have in my pack in case I get stuck overnight in the backcountry or get injured or something comes up. So, I think we can think of mindfulness in several senses when we go out into nature to support our being fully there and connecting with it, or better yet, realizing that we're always woven into, embedded in nature as nature.

So thank you, everybody. It's been great being with you. I hope I can be out in the woods with you in person someday. And if anything comes up, feel free to email me. I should put it in the chat, but it's cives@stonehill.edu. If you just Google me, you'd probably find it that way, but [cives@stonehill](mailto:cives@stonehill.edu), one word, .edu. We have this interconnection and presumably it goes beyond these two hours together. So let's stay in touch. Tell me about your experiences and maybe we can be together in the woods someday.

Thanks everybody.