

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



Hi, my name is Kaira Jewel Lingo. I'm a dharma teacher, and a mindfulness and meditation teacher in the Plum Village Vietnamese Zen lineage as well as the Insight Vipassana lineage. I live in Long Island, New York.

Times of great uncertainty and disruption call for an appropriate response. An *Ecosattva* is a being committed to protecting and serving all, including our precious Earth. We can all walk this path of the *Ecosattva* responding to the cry of the earth with clarity and dedication to the interdependent well being of ourselves, our communities, and all beings.

There are two things that any *Ecosattva* needs to cultivate to be able to meet the challenges of this moment: fierce compassion and equanimity. Fierce compassion means seeing the suffering of our times clearly, and being willing to take a stand, to act to relieve that suffering however we can. Equanimity is the spaciousness, the perspective to have our action come from a place of deep wisdom rather than reactivity.

In this talk, we'll explore how fierce compassion and equanimity work together to keep us balanced, grounded, and resourced. Without equanimity, we can engage to an extent that we burn out or get lost in the situation we're trying to help. Without fierce compassion, we won't have the strength to stand up to injustice and address the real suffering that is ever present. Both of these qualities help us to keep our hearts open and connected to deep care guided by wisdom.

The Climate Crisis

You may be feeling overwhelmed lately with all of the distressing climate news; I certainly am, [with] this summer being the hottest on record, just like the many last summers. The heat waves, the forest fires, and the smoke from Canada [have been] making the air unbreathable in so many places throughout the US.

[There are also] hurricanes, flooding, the freak weather incidents, [and] the possible collapse of the vital ocean current system known as the Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC) [in] as early as 2025. Then there's the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warning that time is running out, to make a change before it's too late.

With ever more dire climate headlines [and] incidences of climate-induced worry, fear and despair are intensifying. These emotions are not pathological, nor are they a disorder. They are a healthy and realistic response to the terrifying and tragic realities of our times.

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November 1, 2023



Two hundred species go extinct every day. Every day. 75 percent of the Arctic's ice has melted in the last 30 years and it is said that [even] a 10 percent melt would already mean a huge crisis. Half of the world's coral reefs have died in the last 30 years. Each year, heat waves break new records. Wildfires are even bigger and harder to control, and we see unprecedented levels of flooding [as well].

There are many natural systems and phenomena that will never be the same again. Growing eco-anxiety, eco-guilt, and eco-grief are natural and adaptive as more of us become aware of the incredible harm humans are causing to our planet, other species, and ourselves. They are an intelligent response from our psyches to the SOS signals in our environment.

Just as we would feel grief at the death of a loved one, or if our community was devastated by a natural disaster, fierce compassion means facing this grief and despair with an open heart. The thought that we are facing collapse is extremely hard to accept. Part of taking the Ecosattva Path is to see that we've basically been given a terminal diagnoses as a species.

Our tendency is to deny or resist this diagnosis. But acceptance of the gravity of our situation can bring us peace. It can be healing and even refreshing, as counterintuitive as that sounds. By being completely open to the full range of our emotions around climate change and climate chaos, we can welcome and befriend them, so that the power they hold can be directed towards meaningful action.

A Lesson from Thich Nhat Hanh

If we don't see things as they are, we can't have access to the real capacity in each of us to respond. My teacher Thich Nhat Hanh writes that in *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*.

He tells a story of a senior nun from Vietnam, who came to visit Plum Village, his monastery in France. She had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and was given three or four months to live.

She accepted this and decided to put all of her energy into practicing to be fully present in each moment for the [remaining] days she had left to live. She was aware of her breathing, of her steps. She was mindful of each of her bodily movements throughout the day.

Before returning to Hanoi, where she expected to die, a sister persuaded her to go get a checkup in France. The doctors found that all of the metastasized cancer had receded to just one area. She lived for more than 14 years after she was told she had just three months.

Kaira Jewel Lingo

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November 1, 2023



Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

In the world, we have a Buddhist approach to peace and ecology. The Buddha taught that all phenomena are impermanent. There is birth, then there's death. Our civilization is also like that. In the history of the Earth, many civilizations have ended.

If our modern civilization is destroyed, it also follows the law of impermanence. If our human race continues to live in ignorance, and in the bottomless pit of greed, as at present, then the destruction of this civilization is not very far away.

We have to accept this truth, just like we accept our own death. Once we can accept it, we will not react with anger, denial, and despair anymore. We will have peace. Once we have peace, we will know how to live so that the Earth has a future. So that we can come together in the spirit of siblinghood, and apply the modern technologies available to us in order to save our beloved Green Planet.

If not, we will die from mental anguish before our civilization actually terminates.

He tells this story as a collective metaphor. We are facing possible extinction as a species. If we can accept that things are going to change, maybe end, and we are on the brink of real collapse, we put our whole hearts knowing this is it. We live deeply, fully as a human species, with other species and with the earth. Understanding okay, we've messed this up. Now we just have a little time. How can we live deeply with all beings on this planet?

What would be possible if we took that seriously, that we might not have a future? How would we want to use the next decade to fully integrate this reality? What could that make possible that hasn't yet been possible? Already, the planet has become a hell for many—without enough food, safety, or basic needs.

This story of the nun accepting her fate and living deeply into the time she had left, and how that changed everything for her. We can see it as a kind of North Star for all of humanity.

So what mindfulness can offer us in this moment is the practice of contemplating impermanence. Coming to terms with, coming to peace with the fact that everything that arises will pass away, including cultures and civilizations. If we open to that, we have an opportunity to touch

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



something deeper than fear, deeper than panic and overwhelm, that will allow us to have a healing effect on whatever this process is that we're going through.

For sure there will be great loss, change and disruption. It's already here in many places in the Global South. Livestock and people already dying from climate disruption, drought, food insecurity, conflicts over water, numerous illnesses that are changing and spreading, COVID-19 being an example. It's already here and will intensify. How we go through this moment is still within our hands. We still have some ability to impact, to shift things.

The Path of the Ecosattva

A helpful image that I have heard folks in the Deep Adaptation movement offer is that of an airplane that cannot stay in the air. The plane is damaged, it's going to have to come down. Either the plane can nosedive and burst into flames on impact, or there is perhaps a way to make the descent softer and more gradual. We have to accept that the plane cannot keep flying in order to start to figure out how to make the descent more graceful.

This path of the Ecosattva is part of making the descent of this plane as nonviolent and as harmless as possible, to support the lives and the safety of as many beings as possible—human and more than human.

Many of us are not there yet in our collective consciousness. More people are waking up but there's still a strong tendency to default to the business approach of doing everything we can to keep that plane flying, because that's what we attach our identity and our sense of safety and comfort to—to deny that there is a real problem and that the plane cannot continue in this way.

This approach aims to save the structures we have. But maybe they're not meant to be saved. Maybe there's something much better than these structures that could come into being if we accepted that the ones we rely on are not actually viable. Our current structures cannot support all beings to live well.

Maybe there's something on the other end of this journey that we can't see yet and only by accepting that these structures will collapse can we help to bring about other structures or systems that will support the dignity of all life.

My partner, Adam Bucko writes this in his book, *Let Your Heartbreak Be Your Guide*:

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



What will die? What, if I may say so, must die before our struggling species can begin to be reborn? I imagine the answer to that question lies in our worship of everything unholy. Our lust for unnecessary things are pretending that those in need are far away. Our excessive use of natural resources and our willingness to live in silos. Where only “we” and “I” and “mine” are safeguarded, and of concern. Let all of this die. It was unholy and needed to die.

What is so hard about this process of seeing our world unravel is all the uncertainty. What I'm learning and leaning into is that it's okay not to know.

As I speak about in my book, *We Were Made for These Times: Ten Lessons for Moving Through Change, Loss, and Disruption*, instead of tensing up, leaning forward and trying to figure out the future, we can actually rest back into the unknown. Our tendency is to plan, to try to be prepared, to try to control, but we don't actually have to know.

Science is about knowing through our rational minds, but we have other means of knowing as well like mindfulness, intuition, our embodied knowing, the wisdom of our bodies, opening to what is here and now deeply. These other ways of knowing tell us that we know enough already. We don't have to worry. The future is made of this moment.

If we are deeply present, touching life, connecting with ourselves in this moment, we will be able to meet what's coming. There is great possibility in not knowing, actually more possibility than if we have all the answers.

Ecosattvas support the planet, and all of life on Earth by seeing the possibilities in what is not known, in the uncertainty. This is part of what I learned in my process of disrobing after being a nun for 15 years. I was losing my identity. I didn't know who I was. It was painful and disorienting. I thought it would kill me at times. But I learned by sitting in stillness, listening, being with others in retreat in silence, that I could be with that fear, that despair, that worry, that not knowing, that discomfort.

I could trust the darkness, the dissolving into the goop of a caterpillar's cocoon, where it digests itself. In the soup are special cells called Imaginal cells that contain all the information necessary for the caterpillar's next step. It seems part of our collective is dissolving. It's painful, and it's difficult, and it's scary. It's hard to be with this.

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



We're not what we were 20 years ago, and we're not whatever's coming, yet we're in this unknown soup. As things start to dissolve, the next phase hasn't become clear. But it's possible to be with this, to be in it and to listen. We have all the imaginal cells within our collective consciousness that we need for the next steps, for whatever the next stage of our unfolding as a species is going to be, and for the unfolding of life on the planet.

We are also not doing this alone. We don't have to figure this out all by ourselves. We have each other, we have the intelligence of Gaia, this living, breathing, evolving planet. We have all of our ancestral traditions, we have scientific ancestors. James Lovelock, who passed away last year, offered us the Gaia hypothesis of the Earth as a living intelligent organism.

Looking to Other Wisdom Traditions

We also have our many wisdom traditions as well as the wisdom of other species that we can look to as examples. Black queer author Alexis Pauline Gumbs in her book *Undrowned*, calls upon the wisdom of the whales for guidance in this time. It's a wonderful book.

As a support for meeting the uncertainty of this moment I want to share with you from Donella Meadows, from her paper on *Leverage points: Places to Intervene in a System*. She's a systems theorist. She talks about leverage points as being places within complex systems, organizations, governments, a city, a living body and ecosystem, where a small shift in one thing changes everything.

Donella Meadows says that the most powerful way to intervene and change a system is by transcending paradigms. I'd like to read a reflection she offers on this power to transcend paradigms:

There is yet one leverage point that is even higher than changing a paradigm. That is to keep oneself unattached in the arena of paradigms. To stay flexible to realize that no paradigm is true, that everyone including the one that sweetly shapes your own worldview is a tremendously limited understanding of an immense and amazing universe that is far beyond human comprehension.

It is to get at a gut level the paradigm that there are paradigms, and to see that that itself is a paradigm and to regard that whole realization as devastatingly funny.

It is to let go into not knowing, into what the Buddhists call enlightenment. People who cling to paradigms, which means just about all of us, take one look at the spacious

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



possibility that everything they think is guaranteed to be nonsense and peddle rapidly in the opposite direction.

Surely there is no power and no control, no understanding, not even a reason for being, much less acting, in the notion or experience that there is no certainty in any worldview. But in fact, everyone who has managed to entertain that idea for a moment, or for a lifetime, has found it to be the basis for radical empowerment.

If no paradigm is right, you can choose whatever one will help you achieve your purpose. If you have no idea where to get a purpose, you can listen to the universe, or put in the name of your favorite deity here and do its will, which is probably a lot better informed than your will.

It is in the space of mastery over paradigms that people throw off addictions, live in constant joy, bring down empires, get locked up or burned at the stake, or crucified or shot, and have impacts that last for millennia.

May that give us some courage to move towards the unknown. To know that a caterpillar has to let go of its paradigm of being a caterpillar in order to transform into a butterfly.

It's important in looking at how things change to look at where our action is coming from. It's hard to change things if we're not aware of ourselves and what is motivating us. In times of challenge, Ecosattvas are opening to the reality that stillness can exist with action.

Mindful action is the kind of action that contains within it deep wisdom, a wisdom of non-reactivity, of non-discrimination, of interdependence. This is balancing fierce compassion, this taking action to relieve suffering on one hand, with equanimity on the other.

Compassion and Appropriate Action

In many temples in Asia, you see statues of a great being, the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara Kuan Yin. A bodhisattva is an awakened being. In this particular statue, you'll often see many, many arms, so many, many hands. In each palm, there's drawn an eye. Sometimes the bodhisattva is male, sometimes female, transgender, very gender fluid. This eye on the palm of each hand, is the eye of wisdom.

That if we look deeply into the situation, then our action will be appropriate action. But if we are caught up in our own story, and in our strong emotions, our anger, our reactivity, then we won't

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



be able to see the situation and its depth, and its complexity and its impermanence. Then our action may actually cause more harm than good because it doesn't have this deep grounding in wisdom.

It's challenging to see a situation clearly. The Buddha said that most of our perceptions are wrong. So we need to act, but we need to try to see clearly. For this we need the skill of equanimity, which is non reactivity. It's seeing things from all sides.

The word in Sanskrit is Upeksha. It means to be able to look and see from all around, like you're standing on the top of a mountain. You're not caught in any one side, in any perspective.

When 9/11 happened, I was a nun with the community of Thich Nhat Hanh, and we were traveling with Thay from Southern California to Northern California where Thay was going to give a talk in Berkeley. We heard the news on our radios on the bus. In those days, we had Walkmans.

We were deeply shocked as everyone was, and we wanted to respond immediately and have something to offer. We knew there would be a lot of people looking to Thay, to our teacher, and to the community for what to respond, what to do in the face of this terrible violence.

We were very shaken up. We felt anger, fear, sadness. A group of us monastics who were from the United States started to brainstorm and think about what we could do, and we came up with a plan. The next day we would go into town and get resources from our archive at Parallax Press and do a press release, in order to begin to respond.

That night, once we arrived at the monastery where we were staying in Northern California, we came to Thay and we shared our plan quite urgently. Thay took some breaths, and he said, "No, I don't want you to do that tomorrow. Tomorrow, we're all going to the beach." We were taken aback. The beach? There was a terrorist attack to respond to. But he was our teacher and we listened, and we all went to the beach.

It actually turned out to be a very important time to connect with each other, to feel safe with each other. We can't create safety if we don't feel safe. So we played together, we just ate together, we swam in the ocean. I remember I heard the sound of dolphins in the water. I saw this pod of dolphins swimming near the shore. It felt like a big support actually, to our human family from the dolphins.

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



We slowed down and we didn't speed up. We were deeply nourished. And the next day we did all the things that we had been planning to do, to create that press conference, etc. But it came from a different place. I learned a lot from that. That the way we respond is crucial.

We knew we were going to respond. But how and where does our response come from? That's what we need to investigate.

During the war between the US and Vietnam, there was the School of Youth for Social Service. Thousands of youth were going into the countryside to rebuild villages, schools, roads and improve the lives of people. This School of Youth for Social Service was set up by Thich Nhat Hanh, by Thay.

This was important work. It was often the difference between life and death for people. Yet every week, these young social workers would take a day of mindfulness for themselves to refresh themselves, to come together and practice and to heal, to listen to each other, to share from their hearts.

They didn't say the work of the war is too urgent, we have to work seven days a week. They understood that in order to sustain themselves, they had to take regular pauses to take good care of themselves.

The well known peace activist A.J. Muste has said, "There is no way to peace; peace is the way." The young social workers in Vietnam were practicing peace, not working towards peace in a frenetic or frantic way. That's not how we create peace. We need to manifest it in every step. Not running for something in the future, but being peace in this moment, because the future is made of this moment.

The young people in Vietnam would rebuild bombed villages. In one village in particular, they rebuilt it, and it was bombed again. They rebuilt it a second time and it was bombed again. They rebuilt it a third time. I believe it happened four times that they rebuilt that village and they didn't say, "Hey, this isn't worth it. Let's just call it a day."

They weren't rebuilding the village because they wanted a particular outcome. Of course they would have preferred I'm sure that the village remained unharmed, but they weren't dependent on that as their outcome. They rebuilt the village time and again because that's what they needed to do, not because there was any guarantee that their action was going to work, and succeed in the end. That is a deep example of "There is no way to peace; peace is the way."

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



We're not doing something with the expectation of a particular outcome. If we do that, if we say, "I'll only do this, if this happens," we will burn out very soon. Because either we won't do it at all, or we do it and if it doesn't work, then we lose all of our energy, and we fall into despair. So it's like the difference between conditional and unconditional love.

It's hard to practice unconditional love, and it's very hard to work for change without wanting things to go the way we expect. If we want to survive with our energy, and our hope, our love, our enthusiasm intact, we have to look with this eye in the palm of our hand, which sees that no action goes unrecorded in the larger scheme and the larger flow of life. That an action done out of pure intent to bring joy or relieve suffering is never lost, even if in the immediate outcome it's not what we want, and maybe it's even the opposite. That eye in the hand of our action is the eye that sees that all we can do is what we deeply feel and know needs to be done.

The only way we can be truly free and deeply powerful in that action is if we do it because we know it needs to be done. That is the power of equanimity, that we need to balance out the fierce compassion that drives us to action.

If you recall the story of the nun, that's what she was doing when she was determined to practice. Because she said, "Well, my life is going to end in a few months. Let me give all of my attention to this step, this breath, this moment."

She wasn't trying to live for 14 more years, that just happened. Her desire was simply to do what needed to be done, to practice with all of her energy for the few months that she was told she had left. So she was truly free. She wasn't thinking, *I'll do this so that I can get this in return.*

That is really working with the mystery, the unknown, and letting life just unfold, and hold us and teach us. So that is what this practice of the Ecosattva path is, to give our best wholeheartedly, not with any outcome that we are attached to. We never know what may come of that action.

The Tibetan teacher Chogyam Trungpa writes:

We cannot change the world as it is.

Let's just let that first sentence sink in for a moment.

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



We cannot change the world as it is. But by opening ourselves to the world as it is, we may find that gentleness, decency and bravery are available, not only to us, but to all human beings.

What he's pointing to is this importance of paying attention to what our relationship is to what's happening. How is our mind? That's where that eye in the palm of the hand helps us to not stir up strong emotions and reactivity.

Taking the Long View

A similar sentiment to this comes from a Brazilian theologian named Ruben Alvarez. He's talking about how we can maintain our discipline in our spiritual work. He says, "We must live by the love of what we will never see." He expresses this vast trust that *I'm doing this and I have to let go of the outcome. It may come generations after I have passed away.*

I think of this as taking the long view of a situation. We see the situations in our life as the only thing, but if we zoom out and we take in what's happening now from the perspective of 100, 200, 300 years ago, or 500 years in the future, we can see with more perspective. We want to notice how we are engaging with the world.

This can help with the feeling of overwhelm, this sense of loving this world so deeply, loving the species, the other humans that we share this planet with. Living by the love of what we will never see, we pour ourselves out wholeheartedly with all of our energy now, but we may not see the impact of that love.

In this way, equanimity balances fierce compassion. Fierce compassion, you could say, is sort of the manifestation of the historical dimension, which is this sense of what's happening here and now, the ways in which we are all identified with the more limited expressions of who we are.

We have a birth date, we have a date of death. But there's also in Buddhism, the ultimate dimension, which is this other realm of existence, where we see that before we were born, we existed in some way, we were in our parents, we were in our grandparents, we were in all the elements that brought them together, that allowed them to make us.

Then after we die, we also exist in all the people that we have touched and impacted in this life. The ultimate dimension is like the water, and the historical dimension is like the waves on the water. The waves go up and down, fast or slow, but you can't say that about water. Water doesn't go up or down, doesn't go fast, or slow. Water is just this vastness that makes the waves come

Kaira Jewel Lingo

Taking the Ecosattva Path: Equanimity and Fierce Compassion

November 1, 2023



into being. So if we are in the historical dimension, we can still at that same time as a wave, we can touch our nature as water, the ultimate dimension, and that is how we can transcend fear.

Fierce Compassion and Equanimity

I think of these qualities of fierce compassion and equanimity, as kind of fierce compassion is, the understanding that I'm in this wave form, and I need to respond to the difficulties, the suffering of other wave forms around me. The equanimity practice is touching our nature of the water, and touching every other being's nature of the water, knowing that we are completely interconnected, and that we can take this bigger, vaster perspective, not just this one moment in time. That's the transcending paradigms of Donella Meadows that I spoke about.

We need to act in this moment. Fierce compassion, standing up, addressing injustice, responding to this very important moment of climate chaos. But we also need to let go and know that we are held, that we are being guided, that we are not in control, that there are many causes and conditions that have been put into place millennia ago, eons ago.

We can do something, we certainly can have great impact. But we also need to accept that some things are beyond our control and make peace with that, like the nun who accepted she had just three months to live. This walking between the two steps of fierce compassion and equanimity, being in both can help us actually accomplish what we still can accomplish in this very difficult time of everything burning and things collapsing, without falling into despair, without giving up.

That is the powerful path of the Ecosattva and I invite all of us to take it together. Thank you so much for your kind attention.