

Participating In Nature

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Good morning. So, this being the closest Sunday to Earth Day, I thought it would be a good day to celebrate it with an Earth Day talk. And this is kind of a topic that's very dear to me because of what I feel is a very intimate and close connection to the earth, to the natural world, that I kind of grew up with and continue to be part of in different parts of my life. It seems that who I am as a person is almost inseparable from what the earth is, what the natural world is. The representative story that I like for that is when I was going to college at Central Valley in California in the town of Davis. They had some magnificent oak trees in the courtyards of the campus.

Old, massive, majestic oak trees. Somehow they had survived from being cut down. I think there was a time when these massive, great, majestic oak trees were spread out across the valley. The earliest records of Europeans coming to the peninsula, which was Admiral Vancouver in something like 1780 or something—no, yeah, something like that—he describes that there was like an English park along from here, right literally where we are, with massive oak trees. I think it came in the spring, some grasslands. So in Davis, on the campus, they have some of these big oak trees.

I was studying botany. I took a botany class. At the beginning of that quarter, they talked about the cycle of oxygen and carbon dioxide and how we breathe out carbon dioxide. The trees breathe that in and convert it through to oxygen, and that the oxygen that we breathe is coming from the plants around us. I was quite absorbed in this whole biochemical description of how this works on the big blackboard in a very big campus hall. So I probably got somewhat absorbed in that topic, and my mind got kind of quiet.

The class was over and I walked out. I came into the courtyard stunned. As I stood there, I kind of froze in my tracks and looked at these majestic oak trees. The thoughts that went through my mind were, I need these trees to produce oxygen for me. The plants, not just the trees, of course, but more than I need both my kidneys. There are parts of my body I don't need as much as some kind of thing outside of me that's producing the oxygen.

So I had this question: where do I start, where do I end, where does a tree start, where does a tree end? Who are we if I need the tree more than I need my left kidney or something? Where do I begin,

where do I end? What is this connection? I remember my mind got so still and quiet and feeling a kind of vast, kind of sacred space, just being with these massive oak trees. Now this is the third year I'm going to do a pilgrimage in Marin County.

It's a walking pilgrimage tonight, this time about five, six days. We're going to leave the Spirit Rock Meditation Center and walk over the Marin Headlands, over Mount Tam. Some of the places we go have old-growth forests, old-growth redwood forests. Maybe you've been there. We go to Muir Woods early in the morning before everyone comes, and it's very, very quiet there and peaceful. These trees are magnificent.

For me, maybe for a fair amount of people, people get quiet being there in those groves. In fact, one of the groves is called a cathedral grove, so the sense of the sacredness, the specialness of it and the reverence that's there. There's a kind of, maybe a kind of healthy humility that comes with being a human being in the presence of these massive ancient trees, some of them probably easily a thousand years old, if not more. For me, it changes my relationship with all these places of me and the world. I feel like now I feel like I'm in a reverent relationship to the natural world, to the world. I don't feel like I'm dominating someone who's going to dominate the world.

I feel I'm a small little member of this family of life on this planet. I feel more alive in this humbleness or reverence in the relationship to these groves than I do watching Netflix, surfing the web or something, working on my computer. I reflected on one of these pilgrimages about the native people of that area. When there were a time before they were logged, things were cut down, freeways put in, I think there were many places that had these massive trees and redwoods. You walk along the coast there, it's spectacular—the marine coastline. I'm sure that there was plenty of situations where there was a very different relationship for who we are in relationship to the natural world by having it that way.

Imagine, I've imagined myself here on the peninsula before there were any of these square buildings that we have here now. What it would have been like walking 300 years ago, 400 years ago, here in the peninsula, and with these great, massive oak trees. There was one on Pulgas, on the streets here nearby, a massive old one. When the city decided it needed to be cut down because it was in danger of falling, and it was relatively close to a school and falling on cars or whatever, there were all these people protesting and they tried to stop it, but no success. So then they did the ceremony around the tree and all these kids, local neighborhood kids, came and kind of honored the tree and said goodbye to it. This way in which our relationship to the natural world can shift and change depending how we're in touch with it, what we live in it, and how we participate in it.

So this pilgrimage that we do, it changes my relationship to the land by spending five days walking across it. We walk usually in the morning in silence. We do some ceremony as we go along. The sense of this greater humility. For me, kind of a renewed promise I make to try to walk on this world gently. Try to walk on this world without having such a big impact on it.

The Buddha, when he was enlightened, before he was enlightened, and we have in the statue, the

statue depicts the moment. You see his right hand drapes over his knee, and it's him reaching forward to touch the earth. As was the custom back then, but what had now for me, it becomes a phenomenally powerful symbolic value. The Buddha, the stories say, was born under a tree outdoors. He was enlightened outdoors under a tree. His first teachings were done outdoors under a tree.

He died outdoors, laying on the ground between two trees. They say the trees were flowering, so it was kind of a special time. On the night of his awakening, they say that this kind of particular evil trickster kind of character showed up called *Māra* to try to prevent him from becoming enlightened. Came to him and said, you don't deserve to be enlightened. Who do you think you are to do that? I mean, isn't this, you know, you're not worthy of this.

So the Buddha didn't reply directly. But what he did was he put his hand and touched the earth, the earth-touching gesture, and called upon the earth to be his witness for his right to be awakened, to be free. To be free, no longer caught in the traps that *Māra*, the tempter, was setting up to trap him in. The primary thing that *Māra*, how traps people, is with sensual desires. Occasionally, probably, you've been caught by that. The last thing *Māra* wants is someone who escapes his realm of sensual desire, so he really wanted to stop the Buddha.

So the Buddha touched the earth and they say the earth then shook, bearing witness of all the compassionate things the Buddha had done through his many lifetimes, all his practices he'd done, that yes, he was worthy of it. I love this, that we call on nature to witness, we call on the earth to be our witness. So if you're meditating or if you're walking on the earth, what is the earth, what can the earth be a witness for you? What does the earth say about you? What is it there to show you about yourself? I'll leave that question now for now, it's hanging there.

But one of the things is that we live on the earth, and it's so easy to forget it. We live with the earth. In the case of the Buddha touching the earth, it had this idea that it was the earth goddess. So Mother Earth, some people like to say historically, nowadays maybe the parent earth. But this kind of parental source of life that the earth has been for all of us. It wasn't so many years ago in the scale of time that apparently there was no life on this earth.

There's been more period of time with no life on this earth than there has been life on this earth. So, and then if we think about how long humans have been on this earth, it's a much shorter period of time. I've read, I don't know, I don't know the latest research on this, but I read some time ago some idea when they do genetic testings of human beings, and now they can kind of look back in time through the genetic evidence that survives. They think that all humans are descended from a small group of people, tribe. There were probably just a few hundred large somewhere on the plains of Africa at some time, a few thousand, hundred thousand years ago or something. I love this idea that we all have common ancestors.

It makes us all kin. It makes us all family. To call on that, that we're all family in some ways, we all have shared ancestors, if we could trace it back, we would be able to all walk up maybe to the same

little group of people and say, hi. I'm the result of what you started. Thank you for my life. We all kind of be gathering around the same group of people to thank them. Maybe.

There's a story that's told in the *Jātaka* tales that also goes back many, many millennia, thousands, hundred thousand, millions of years, billions of years, which tells stories of the Buddha in his previous life, before he was the Buddha. Some of these are like Aesop's fables. The fable here is that the Buddha was a deer. He was the king of a herd of deer, a very large herd of deer. He was called the Banyan king, the Banyan deer, Banyan being the Bodhi tree. The story goes that there was a new king in that land and this king loved to hunt.

So he took the royal forest, a very large forest that had lots and lots of herds of deer, and he put a large fence around all of it to keep them all there. Once a day he wanted to go hunting. He wanted to kill one deer a day so he could have food and so he could kind of enjoy his sport of hunting. But his hunting that way, he would come with his entourage and soldiers and elephants, and it was a big to-do when he came hunting. The deer would get afraid, and they would start rushing off, and all this way and that way to get away. But they were trapped inside this large area.

So it made them panic even more. He was successful in, you know, killing one deer a day. But a lot of deer got injured in the process. They would trip over each other, trip over logs. Those who had antlers would run into people, others, you know, stab them and things. It was kind of a mess.

One day, the king of the Banyan, after the king had hunted one of the deer, went up to the king and said, excuse me, sir, you have to realize what you're doing here. You're injuring a lot of the deer. You're harming them. They're more dying than need to die because of the way you're doing this hunting. I'm here to ask you to please try to do an act of harm reduction. He wasn't asking him not to kill, because maybe that was asking too much, but an intermediate was to ask for harm reduction.

The harm reduction was, we will provide you with, we'll have a lot, we'll have, what is it called, we'll choose someone, we'll have a lottery or whatever you call it, you know, where, not a lottery, but what do you call when you pull a straw? What? Letter? Choosing a lot. Yeah, choosing anybody. You see who has to present themselves to the king to be killed every day. That won't create all this other harm, the people running and trying to chase the runaway.

So that's what they did. These compassionate deer who wanted to prevent so much harm being done were willing to sacrifice their lives for the greater good, in a sense. Then one day, it came upon a pregnant doe to be the one to offer herself her sacrifice. But she was pregnant, so she went to the king and said, Please, can I not do it until after my doe is born? But the king said, well I can't really ask someone else to do it in your stead, but don't worry you don't have to do it. So when the king came to hunt that day, the king offered himself in order to save the doe and the pregnant child.

But the king, the deer, the king deer, was kind of very majestic, very, you know, had a strong presence, and stood there in all his dignity, ready to be killed. This got the king's attention. The king said, I can't

kill another king, you know, in this kind of majesty. So he said, what are you doing here? The deer said to the king the story about the pregnant doe and that he was taking her place to save that doe and that child. The king was so moved by the compassion, the care, and the sacrifice that the deer king was willing to make that this changed his heart dramatically.

He said, okay, from now on, I'm going to stop killing any of the deer. The king deer said, dear king, that's not enough. Can you make a vow not to kill any animals? The king said, yes. So in that realm, from then on, no animals were ever killed. So it's a fable.

It said, or I'll say, that when the moment the king said, promised, yes, he would no longer kill any animals, that's when the forest started to heal itself. We have harbored so many places in our world, in the natural world. When are they going to heal? Some of them maybe never will heal. When I was in high school, I went to hear a talk by Richard Leakey. Some of you might remember him.

He was one of the first, not first, but a really important anthropologist of ancient humans. I think he was found at the time, remains of the oldest human in Africa, the skull of an oldest human. So that was a big deal. So he knew a lot about evolution. He, in this big auditorium, explained that what he had seen is that a species that over-specialize die out. He used the example of some great, like, what do they call those elephants with big tusks, mammoth, woolly mammoths.

Apparently, their tusks got so big, they couldn't function very well anymore, defend themselves very well. So then they were easy to hunt. So they died out because they over-specialized this big. He was saying that back, this was 1960s, late 60s, that if we over-specialized as humans, that we were going to have the same fate. But in some ways, we already have. We've had civilizations come and go over the millennia.

I saw some of that growing up in Europe. One of the places I grew up was in the Adriatic coast. In my eyes, there were some really beautiful islands that we would visit and go vacation on. We would go sailing sometimes along these islands. Part of their beauty was their starkness of just being rock, but they weren't always just rock. There had been a time when they were filled with olive and grape orchards.

You could still find back then in the 60s, if we went diving into the water in these little bays, you could find clay vases that had fallen over the boats and find a lot of pottery shards left over from that time. When they came and the ships came, the Roman ships came to get the olives and the grapes or the grape juice, whatever they made wine. They over farmed. All the soil washed away. The islands can no longer bear a lot of vegetation because all the soil washed away. So the people who were surviving and lived off the land had to move because they could no longer survive.

That's happened to whole civilizations in Mesopotamia, where they over-farmed, overused the water, and then the civilization collapsed. So it's what Richard Leakey said, if you over-specialize too much, things collapse. I grew up partly also in Los Angeles in the 60s, and I remember still very well the

amazing amount of smog that L.A. used to have back then. We would get sore throats just by breathing the air back then. And runny eyes. I remember sometimes flying back to Los Angeles from being in Europe and going out of the airplane.

The smell of this thick smog was quite something. The direction it was going, I don't know if anybody would have survived in Los Angeles. But that's one of the relatively good stories of cleaning the air. The catalytic converters, all kinds of things happened that cleaned up the air enough so it's not as bad as it used to be. I don't think people get sore throats anymore in L.A. from the smog. So what kind of harm reduction do we do?

Can we do, are we the king who goes around killing the metaphoric deer by how we live in our lives? How much dies, how much is killed, how much is killed and destroyed inadvertently by the lifestyles that we have? How many, you know, there's a spillover—what's the equivalent of the king hunting and then the secondary effect of all the other deer dying? What happens to us? What do we do here? What are we destroying?

So one of the kind of dramatic, I think very clear teachings of the Buddha is that he distinguished between the natural world, and he didn't use this word, but the synthetic world. He made a very strong distinction between the natural world and the humanly constructed world. What we can build and make and think that doesn't exist in the natural world itself. It's not natural in the sense that it's not produced by the natural world. It doesn't participate in the natural process of regeneration, of self-healing, self-replication. I saw that when I went to Spirit Rock last week.

A little bit representing it for me was it's so great to be at Spirit Rock. It's a meditation center in Marin County where it's designed to be outdoors any time you go between different buildings there. You really feel like you're part of the land in a nice way. I've been there, going there for over 35 years now, even before there were any buildings there. In about 1993, the person who started IMC, before I got involved in IMC, a man named Howard Nudelman, who started it, him and his wife, Ingrid, in 1986 in Menlo Park. When I got here, which I had moved to Palo Alto, he died.

He had been president of the Spirit Rock Board. So when he died, we went and bought three oak trees and planted them near Sir Francis Stake Boulevard, as you go into Spirit Rock, in his honor. Those three trees are still there and they just look like they're more grand every year I go to Spirit Rock. They're growing, developing and now they've been over 30 years they've been growing there. In 1998 they opened the big residential meditation hall which 27 years ago was shiny new. I remember what it was like, I was like, wow.

This time when I was there, I looked around, wow, it's aging. It's beginning to rot the wood in the side of the building and rust here and there. This is not going to last so well for another 27 years. But those trees are doing just great. We build things that don't exist in the natural world and don't participate in the natural process of life because they don't replicate, they don't reproduce. Some of those things that we create that are not natural, the synthetic things, cause a lot of harm.

Now we have all these microplastics that we're finding deeply embedded in our body and our brain that end up. I think I read this the last couple of days, that they're finding something in the fallopian tubes. It's not going to be long before we find microplastics in the embryos. Is that what we want to have in our life? So we have to be very careful about the synthetic world that we're creating, and forever chemicals. The Buddha, he didn't know about all the things that we create synthetically now, but he made a very clear distinction in what's constructed.

In his mind, it was really the things we construct in the mind that don't exist in the natural world. A lot of the concepts, ideas that we live in, ideas about me, myself, and mine, greed, hate, and delusion, that we construct on that, these constructions, these ideas, these worlds that we move into, that we, our fantasies create, can create so much harm. The Buddha wanted to, kept pointing us back to the natural world in ourselves. He used metaphors of the natural world outside as a representation of how the natural world works, so we can find it in ourselves. I think the most dramatic use of these kinds of metaphors, that using part of the natural world that's in us to represent the natural world that's in us, in terms of spiritual practice in life, was he referred to something profound within us that arises from something that he called the *yonī*.

Yoni is the source of life for humans; it means the womb, the profound attention, profound contemplation, the profound engagement with life that's womb-like, coming from this deep place within. It's a generative place. The Buddha talked about spiritual life; it's a life we're growing. I want to say something I've said now a few times. In English Buddhism, we use the word practice a lot to describe what we do. We practice meditation, for example.

A lot of people who practice meditation... So the common question in the Buddhist circles in the West is, what is your practice? Then people usually reply with a technique. I practice mindfulness. I practice loving kindness. I practice Zen. I practice this and that.

That's nice, but it's usually describing it by a technique. The ancient, from the time of the Buddha, the equivalent word to the word practice, it kind of fits in the same kind of context. That word, what it means is to grow, to cultivate, to develop something, but it can mean to grow. So what happens if you were asked not what are you practicing but instead you're asked what are you growing? What would you answer then? If you say what you're practicing, I think it's easy to say, well, I'm practicing something else, practicing that, I'm practicing this, and I'm practicing the better thing.

But what are you growing? Now we're talking about the natural world within and something we all have. We all have inner growth. We all have this natural world inside that can grow. We all are nature. It's hard to imagine that I'll ever have a human being who's not born in a womb.

Will they ever be able to incubate or gestate in a lab, a human being? Is that possible? I hope not. It's amazing what our natural world is like, that which is within us. The natural world within us that can think, that can feel, that can heal to some degree, that can replicate, all kinds of things, that arose out of this earth, came from this earth, that is part of the earth's natural processes. We share in this in a

profound way.

That makes us kin, makes us family with all life on this planet. It's not just like, you know, the earth, all the things we see in the natural world are not just decorations for our pleasure. It's participating. It's a participatory natural world that we participate in. It participates in us. It provides us with oxygen.

It provides us with food. It provides us with so much in order to be able to live. We need the natural world. We then, our naturalness, has a chance to grow. For the Buddha, we're learning to tap into, to support, to generate, to care for, to preserve the natural world in ourselves so we don't get caught up in the constructed synthetic world that humans have been very clever in creating over these last centuries. The Buddha also saw the constructed world of ideas of self.

Ideas of status, ideas of dominance, ideas of right and wrong, good and bad, that they're causing so much harm in this world. So the idea we're all kin, we all belong to this world. What the redwood trees remember, what the deer remember, we need to re-remember. Re-remember, reconnect to that, how much we're part of this natural world, how the earth cares for us. If the earth cares for us, shouldn't we care for it? Can we walk on this world lightly?

What would that look like? At least in terms of harm reduction, the idea of stopping causing harm might not be natural. Just as I saw at Spirit Rock last week, there's a white egret that has kind of taken up residence at Spirit Rock. Now it doesn't seem to be very afraid of people. You can't get too close, but you can get 10 feet away from it. It's been there for about a year.

So it's kind of cool to see this white egret. They named it Paul. One day I was standing 10 feet away, and it was doing what it does, and suddenly it just kind of snapped at the ground, and in its bill was a lizard that it caught. I was told there's very few lizards around Spirit Rock right now because of this one egret. On one hand at first I thought, "Wow, this is like an amazing natural thing to watch." But then I thought about the lizard.

I felt for the lizard. But you know, some of that is not going to stop. That's going to continue. But can we at least do harm reduction for ourselves so we don't hold ourselves above nature, that we are nature? May we be like the king of the deer. May our compassion spread out into the world so that everyone is cared for, everyone is respected and valued.

May we have forests that are sanctuaries, cathedrals, sacred places, that we go there to remember who we are in some deep way, that we can't remember so well, so easily, on the freeways in the Bay Area, in rush hour traffic. Perhaps this earth is not something to be saved. Maybe it's something to come home to. If we come home to it and live with it as our home, then maybe it will save us. The natural process of this natural world, the regeneration, the self-healing of the natural world, has the ability to heal us, save us, if we allow it to, if we connect to it in such a way. The earth, I think, will always continue.

Maybe, you know, life as we know it will be radically different. Maybe the human race will disappear.

But for a long, you know, the earth will be here. Life will probably be here in some form or other. So we're capable. But it looks like we know now, since the 20th century, that we're quite capable of destroying this world as we know it.

If we do that, we destroy ourselves. But if we come home to this world and touch the earth, let the earth be the witness to our own naturalness, maybe the earth will save us. That's my hope on this Earth Care Week 2025. So thank you. And we have a few minutes maybe. We can take five minutes.

If anyone has any comments or questions you'd like to ask. Maybe that means you're all eager to go out to the Edgewood Park or go out for a walk on the trails here in the peninsula. So, thank you. May you love this earth. Thank you.