

Lin Wang Gordon

*Connecting to the Elements: Finding the Sacred in the Ordinary*

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Hi. My name is Lin Wang Gordon. I started teaching nature meditation about nine years ago when I graduated from Mark Coleman's Awake in the Wild Nature Meditation Teacher Training. I'm currently enrolled in Spirit Rock's Community Dharma Leadership Program, and I'm a teacher at New York Insight Meditation Center. In the past few years, I have helped found the Sacred Earth Sangha, the Midlife Sangha and the Asian Diaspora Sangha.

As with all my teachings, I like to start with three honorings: honoring the land, honoring the Buddhist lineage, and my ancestors. I would first like to acknowledge and honor all the Tribal Nations, the ancestral lineage on Turtle Island, the traditional custodians of Mother Earth and her beings, on the land where I live. Manahata is the native name for Manhattan. The name means "the island of many hills." I would like to recognize that this land where I live, work, raise my child, and now call my homeland, is the unceded land of the Lenape people. The word Lenape means the "original people," referring to the fact that they were considered the grandfathers of the Algonquian civilization, and the original tribe of all Algonquian-speaking people. The Lenape people were hunter gatherers in the areas of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and parts of Delaware, and traded with neighboring nations. We express deep gratitude for the stewardship that Lenape people have given this land over many, many generations and over thousands of years.

I would like to acknowledge that my practice comes from the long lineage of Buddha teachings that goes back 2,600 years and have stewarded generations of Asian teachers and practitioners.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my ancestors whose wisdom and resilience allowed me to be alive today in this body, in this lifetime, and whether I know their particular history or not, they stand behind me.

What I'd like to share with you today is reconnecting ourselves with the natural environment and the elements, and remembering that we are nature—a part of the natural world—and that the separation between nature and us is an illusion. A few teachers and mentors have influenced me in this talk, including the indigenous healer and teacher Karen Waconda from the Isleta and Laguna Pueblo tribe; writer and teacher Sebene Selassie; the practices from Awake in the Wild from my teacher, Mark Coleman; and the teachings from the master Thich Nhat Hanh. I would like to ask permission to share my teachings today, from the earth, from the Buddhist tradition, and my mentors.

## **A Lifelong City Dweller**

As a lifelong city dweller, I was born in Guangzhou, China. I grew up in New York. I had never hugged a tree or seen the Milky Way until I was 38. I also had never hiked, camped, kayaked, or spent any time in the wilderness until I was 38. When I think of the word “nature” before that—mountain forest, ocean, wilderness—this meant some far away place where I might go on vacation, something that was outside of my daily life, for sure, and something outside of me.

“I’m here in concrete and glass buildings. I don’t see wild animals. I rarely see insects. I understand that we need to take care of the environment, but I see fundamentally that nature and I are separate. I need to take care of the environment because I kind of know that it will impact climate change, which means it will impact my life in some ways, but it is an intellectual, disembodied understanding. There’s an assumption of duality, nature versus humans, wilderness versus cities.”

Honestly, it makes sense that we feel this way. Modern life has made it very easy to forget our interconnection. It wasn’t until I began spending some time in the wilderness—and not only spending time visiting, but really camping, when I started sleeping in it, living in it, depending on it—that something finally began to shift. When we camp, we realize very quickly how much we depend on water for drinking, water for cooking, for washing, how much we depend on sunlight or fire to warm ourselves, and how much we depend on shelter to protect us from the elements.

I was fortunate that I was learning the wilderness experience at the same time and in the context of nature meditation retreats. I was deepening my meditation practices, learning about dharma, at the same time that I was also experiencing wilderness for the first time. What I realized was that it wasn’t just camping that changed me. It was camping combined with a meditation practice that created deep awareness and insights. Because without mindfulness, a mountain could just be scenery.

## **We Are the Elements**

[Mindfulness] allowed me to take in what I was experiencing in the wilderness deeply, and to see the inherent connection. Slowly an understanding became clear: There is no separation between my body and the environment. Through the Four Elements meditation practice from the Buddhist tradition and other nature practices, the same element that shaped the rivers, trees and soil, shaped me. Earth in my bones, water in my blood, fire in my belly, air in every breath. When I drink water, the boundaries between me and nature dissolve. When I breathe, the air that was out that was outside becomes inside.

In the Buddhist tradition, the four elements practice sometimes also includes two more elements: six elements. It sometimes includes ether or space and consciousness. Ether and consciousness are considered advanced practices, and so, as a result, the four elements practices are more commonly taught and practiced. We say in Buddhism that there is no independent self. And I saw this body is not mine. This body is a borrowed element. It is a

temporary gathering of earth, water, fire, and air. The water in our bodies once flowed in rivers, the minerals in our bones came from food and from soil, and the warmth of our bodies came from the sun that warms the earth. The air that we breathe comes from the plant life around us, and has moved through forests, oceans, and countless living beings. We are manifestations of the same elemental forces.

### **Modern Life: Insulated from the Elements**

I came to reflect on what is inside and what is outside. We are not in nature. We are nature. So where did that sense of separation come from? Human beings are incredibly creative. That's the strength of our species. From the beginning of time, we have learned to build shelters to protect ourselves from the elements. We settle near water, to cook, to clean, to survive, and we found fertile lands to grow food so we don't need to hunt constantly. We invented countless tools. So over thousands of years, we've been on a trajectory toward making life more controllable, more predictable, and more convenient. Industrialization in the last 150 years only makes that trajectory more accelerated and more dramatic. Our entire modern life is built around the idea of insulating us from the elements. Now, in the summer, we turn on the air conditioning. In the winter, we turn on the heat, and if the air gets dry, we turn on a humidifier. We have running water. We have hot running water. We can buy strawberries in the winter, and we can use ice all year long. We live in cities with millions of people. This is extraordinary, but something else happened in the process. We begin to live as if we no longer depend on the elements, as if they are outside of us, as if nature is a resource rather than our source, our mother.

Industrialization removes us from our intimacy with the land and the technology detaches us from the natural elemental forces that sustain us. Because of that insulation, we forget. We forget that when we turn on the faucet, we are touching the water cycle. We forget that electricity is modern fire. We forget that food is transformed sunlight and soil.

### **Reconnecting with the Elements**

The practice of reconnecting with the elements is not about forcing an intellectual recognition or something abstract, it is really remembering what is true, what is already here, deep in our DNA, and that we need Mother Earth, that we and Mother Earth are not separate. We are her children. We are one and the same. The elements live outside and inside of us. They made up the environment and us.

### **The Habit of Remembering**

That remembering can happen anywhere. It might be easier to see that connection in the wilderness, but we also can see that connection in the city, if we pay attention and cultivate the habit of remembering. The Pali word for remembering is *sati*, or mindfulness, and implies an active, purposeful recollection, rather than just passive memory. To reconnect, we need to cultivate mindfulness and to re-remember. So how do we do that? I want to offer three simple ways.

One is to build an intimate relationship with the land in your neighborhood. This is a practice that came from Mark Coleman's *Awake in the Wild* book: to connect with the natural environments throughout the seasons. You could do this practice wherever you live, including cities. You don't have to go to a national park. You could go to your neighborhood park, a church courtyard, a community garden, an urban farm on a rooftop, a small green space nearby, or a tree on your block. The key is consistency. Go to the same place throughout the four seasons so you can get to know it intimately. I took this on as a year-long practice and found a routine that worked for me. When my son was young, when he was in elementary school, I would drop him off at eight o'clock in the morning, and then, next to his school was a small church courtyard, a really small green space with a tiny pond with a few fishes, a few trees, some shrubs, and stone benches. I would sit there and meditate for about 20 minutes before I headed back into the subway and go to the park or go to work.

I did this for years. As I sat every day throughout the year, I began to notice subtle changes in this space. The air in early spring smells differently with humidity and temperature than in deep winter. I could sense spring coming, even though there was snow on the ground. In the fall, there was a certain coolness in the air before the leaves fully changed and temperatures started to really drop. I could sense rain gathering hours before it fell.

When we return to the same place over seasons and years, the trees become like neighbors. I noticed trees grew taller. I noticed a branch fell. I noticed a certain bird song. I noticed the rhythm of seasonal changes. Meditation deepened this noticing, because we're paying attention, slowing down. And with regular noticing comes intimacy. With intimacy comes with connection and care.

### **Elemental Awareness**

In addition to connecting to the land, we could also transform our daily routine into elemental awareness. This is easily accessible, but we don't often think about it until we pause.

My mentor, Karen Waconda, and Sebene Selassie, both have taught me that there's nothing we do in a single day that's not connected to nature and elements. When we brush our teeth, water. When we shower, water and heat. When we cook, fire. When we eat food comes from the earth, sunlight and rain. When we breathe air. Every ordinary act is elemental. When you turn on the faucet, pause for a moment. Consider how miraculous it is that water just comes into our apartment and flows instantly for most of human history, that's not the case. Water had to be carried, bottled, and filtered manually. This is a miracle of coordination in modern infrastructure. And the source of water matters: where it is generated, how it is being cared for. When we take care of a water source hundreds of miles away, we're taking care of our bodies. We're taking care of the earth as our family member. In New York, the state buys land around reservoirs and watersheds to ensure they're protected. When we cook breakfast and turn on the stove, we recognize the fire element is at work. When we turn on the light, we realize electricity is flowing. Electricity is our modern form of fire. It brings heat, light, and energy. That source of power

comes from either elements directly—from the sun or water—or from the elements, indirectly, corn and gas. They all go back to the source ultimately.

Eating is another way of connecting to our daily routine. We eat a few times a day. When we eat, contemplate the journey of that food, as Thich Nhat Hanh often taught. The soil, the rain, the sun, the farmers, the transportation. Relating to eating is grocery shopping. It connects us to the season and the land. When we visit a farmer's market regularly, we begin to see seasonal rhythms more clearly. Spring: tulips. Summer: fruits. Fall: squash. Winter: root vegetables. Seasonal eating reconnects us to a natural cycle.

I deeply appreciate the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh who spoke of interbeing: the idea that everything contains everything else. For example, in a piece of bread, you could see the cloud and without rain, there's no wheat. Without wheat, there's no bread. So when we pause before eating and take a moment to feel gratitude, it can transform us and our relationship with eating and food. Eating becomes meditation. Drinking becomes meditation. Our daily routine becomes our practice to remember.

Besides cultivating an intimate relationship with the land and awareness and daily activities, we could also look around our home and recognize elements in our own home. The wood in your furniture was once a tree. Glasses in your window come from sand, which come from quartz-rich rocks. The light in your room comes from the sun and from electricity. Your sink is part of the water cycle. The plants in your home give you fresh air.

If you ever experience a power outage, you would quickly remember how dependent we still are on the elements. We would be lost without heat, hot water, or light.

## **Gratitude**

Modernity did not eliminate the elements. It insulates us from them. When we start seeing this, we begin to appreciate the abundance and convenience from modern life, what it brings us, and we cultivate gratitude. So in addition to *sati*, or mindfulness, we are also cultivating gratitude. Gratitude is a practice in many spiritual traditions. They say blessings for everyday activities as a reminder throughout the day of the connections to the sacred: gratitude for running water, gratitude for hot showers, gratitude for sunlight entering the window, gratitude for the food on our table.

As we feel gratitude, something else began to happen. We become more conscious of how we consume. When we feel that water is precious, we waste less. When we remember paper was once a tree, we use paper more carefully. When we recognize that food has traveled hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles to reach us, we taste it more fully and would not waste it. We may consider eating locally and use less labor and energy, and we start changing our relationship with the elements and Mother Earth. This made me think of an Indigenous wisdom. They refer to elemental forces as family: Grandfather, sun; Grandmother, Moon; Mother, earth;

Father, sky. What if we truly saw the element as relatives? Not as resources, but as kin, as family?

I once heard an Indigenous philosophy from the Navajo activist and writer Woman Stands Shining (Pat McCabe) that's really inspiring. She said, philosophy is: we replace everything we use within our lifetime. In this worldview, we take only what is needed, ensuring what we consume regenerates viewing ownership as stewardship. We make decisions with seven generations in mind.

Think about that. What would it mean if we need to replace everything we use within our lifetime? How does that change our habits and consumption? If we use wood, we would plant trees. If we ate salmon, we would over fish, and we'll make sure that the salmon grew stronger and healthier and got more plentiful. And if we ate from the soil, we would restore it. Imagine how differently we would live. We would consume less. We would waste less. We'll protect more because we respect, protect, and care for our family. It's a reciprocal relationship, not an extractive one.

The Master Thich Nhat Hanh said, fear and separation, hate and anger, come from the wrong view that you and the earth are two separate entities. "The earth is the only environment, and you are in the center, and you want to do something for the earth in order for you to survive." That is a dualistic way of seeing. We need to move beyond the idea of "environment." We need to fall back in love with Mother Earth.

### **Nature Is Not "Somewhere Else"**

So how do these practices change? Me? I am still living in New York City. I still use electricity, I still shop for groceries, I still benefit from modern infrastructure. The truth is, we're not going back to hunter gatherer life. A majority of us in the modern times live in cities. So the invitation is not to escape modernity. It is to bring awareness to it, to slow down, to pause, to remember, to cultivate intimacy with elemental forces that create and sustain us. And as I practice this way, I notice something inside changing.

When I walk on the sidewalk, I remember I'm walking on Earth. When I breathe in winter air, I feel gratitude for clean water. And perhaps most importantly, I no longer feel that nature is somewhere else. I no longer feel that I must escape to a mountain to be spiritual. The courtyard was enough, the faucet was enough, the breath was enough.

Because the elements are always here and they are what we are, and we remember that we're not visitors on Earth, we're children of Mother Earth. When we remember that life feels less transactional and more sacred.

The Buddha taught interdependence as liberation. When we see that there's no separate self, fear softens. When we see that we're not separate from the earth, reverence naturally arises,

and when reverence arises, care follows. We do not protect nature as an external object. We care for it as our own body and as our family.

I'd like to close this talk with a dedication of merits. May the four elements bring you blessings, courage and strength to care for the elements in all beings. May our lives and practices be adequate expressions of the blessings we have received. May Mother Earth and all her children on this earth, humans, and non-humans, be well and thriving. May the merits of this practice, together benefit all living beings, humans and non-humans, present and future, everywhere, without exception. Thank you.