

Kaira Jewel Lingo  
“Teachings for Uncertain Times”  
February 28, 2017



Welcome. My name is Kaira Jewel Lingo and welcome to this class on Teachings for Uncertain Times. Today I want to speak about the importance of connecting with our ancestors and using our dharma practice to receive the best things that have been transmitted from our ancestors. [In this way, way we can] transform and heal the things that we don't need to keep carrying from our ancestors.

As people of color, people of many different backgrounds, there are practices in each of our different traditions for honoring our ancestors. This is also a practice that is very much in line with the insights of the Buddha. The insight of interbeing and nonself is that we are not separate from all of these elements that make up who we are, including our parents or those who raised us, and their parents and caretakers. So we are not just this one body, this form, this self that we usually identify with.

We are a stream of all past generations of ancestors that flow into us and that continue to flow into our descendants. This experience of our personal self is just one little piece of a much larger stream. What's upstream is us, not other than us, what's downstream is also us. Seeing ourselves in this way gives us access to tremendous strength and tremendous powers of transformation and healing.

When we recognize weaknesses in our self, we can see that this is not something that we have chosen. There were things transmitted to us by the people who cared for us, the adults in our lives that we didn't have a choice about. We may feel bad about ourselves, we may feel guilty, and we may feel shame. But as we learn to see that these are parts of the whole that was basically forming us and that they weren't our fault, we learn to look at ourselves with compassion and love. We learn to see this inner child, this young child in us that maybe was spoken to harshly, or perhaps was not understood or offered the kind of care that he or she needed.

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When we see that, we see that we relate to ourselves as a parent relating to a child, so we are the parent and we're also the child. We turn to those aspects of our self that we don't like with a lot of tenderness, with a lot of understanding. We know that we are not victims of the transmission from our ancestors and our parents. We can use our practice of mindfulness to be aware of those elements and transform them by learning, first of all, where they come from.

We do a lot of things very unconsciously and we don't even [notice]. For example, our mother speaking—when we speak in that harsh way, that's how we heard her speak, and we're not even aware. So our mindfulness practice helps us to be aware, “Oh, that's my mother in me. That's my father in me,” or, “That's my aunt,” or, “That's my grandfather.”

As we are aware that that's a transmission that we've received, we can stop in those moments and choose, “Oh, how do I want to live my life? I don't have to repeat the same things, the same habit energies, I don't have to carry them on.” This is one way that the dharma can help us, when we see that we've received [things] that are unwholesome from our ancestors, we can hold those with love. [We can] see them when they arise, recognize where they come from, and not take them personally. Not think that we're a bad person, that we're not a good practitioner or that we're not worthy because we have these qualities. We see that these were probably passed from generation to generation. We know how much many of our ancestors suffered because of racism, systemic violence, and depression. So we know that that's also part of our own experience and it's part of our own life. We may often be enduring and working through this kind of experience.

When we look through the lens of the dharma and the understanding of interbeing, we also see we've inherited tremendous strength from our ancestors. They were able to go through the kind of genocide, the extreme dehumanization of slavery, and the very unjust policies towards Asian immigrants in this country. What our ancestors had to do to survive the kind of violence and dehumanization that they were faced with—we know that that strength also flows into us. When we encounter discrimination and oppression in our own daily lives, we can draw on the strength of our ancestors to encounter those difficult moments.

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There's a practice that I will share with you that you can read called the “touching the earth” practice that comes from the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and his lineage. When we need support, when we need help, we can touch the earth and call on our ancestors to be there for us and to transmit to us their strength. We ask them for their energy and this helps us to go through difficult moments, whether it's difficulties we face because of our skin color, our physical appearance, or other difficulties we're going through in our life.

Something else this touching the earth practice helps us to do is to be aware that when we seize our strengths and see our talents and wholesome qualities, that we also don't [have to] take that personally and feel proud as a separate self about those qualities. We know that those things also came to us from our ancestors and so we're humbled and feel grateful that we have these skills. We want to use them to be of service to others who may not have been as lucky as we were to receive such a rich transition from our ancestors.

This practice of touching the earth helps us to touch our vastness, so any time we feel lonely, any time we feel insecure or afraid, it's like we go down into this well. A well is there because of the water underneath the earth. We go down into this source inside of us and we touch this immense amount of power, this immense amount of knowledge, insight, and wisdom that our ancestors have experienced and transmitted to us and that's always available to us.

The touching the earth practice is a practice of resourcing ourselves. It's a practice of holding our unskillfulness, our pain, and our difficulty with compassion. Transforming our habit energies by seeing that there are many generations of suffering and trauma, and that, in this life, we can transform that so we don't pass it on to future generations.

When we catch that we have been transmitted these habit energies, we hone in on them with our mindfulness practice, we recognize how they work, and we get really familiar with their language so that we don't unconsciously pass them on to our own children, to the young people in our lives.

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The negative unwholesome transmission can stop with us through our practice, and by the same token, the positive and beautiful things that flow into our stream from the stream of many generations of ancestors. We can hold those positive things, keep them, grow them, and enrich them so that we do pass them on. We can be like a very fine filter that keeps the sediment and lets the really good, juicy, nourishing stuff that our ancestors knew, be passed on. So that our young people learn, embody, and really feel in their own skin, “I am a beautiful, wonderful, worthwhile human being regardless of how this society may see me, or may relate to me as less than.”

So I invite you to enjoy this practice of touching the earth and to make it a practice—to get in touch with the ancestors regularly, perhaps every day. Touch the earth even just three times as a practice. To put your forehead on the ground, lay your forearms on the ground like in child’s pose, or perhaps lie fully on your belly, and take three breaths acknowledging that, “Who I am is because of all those that came before me and who I am is and will become all those who come after me. Every choice, every decision that I make in my daily life is a moment of transmission, is a moment of continuation of my ancestors, and is a moment of transmission. So how do I want to live with that awareness in mind?”

Thank you for your attention and I wish you a joyful practice of staying connected to the ancestors.