

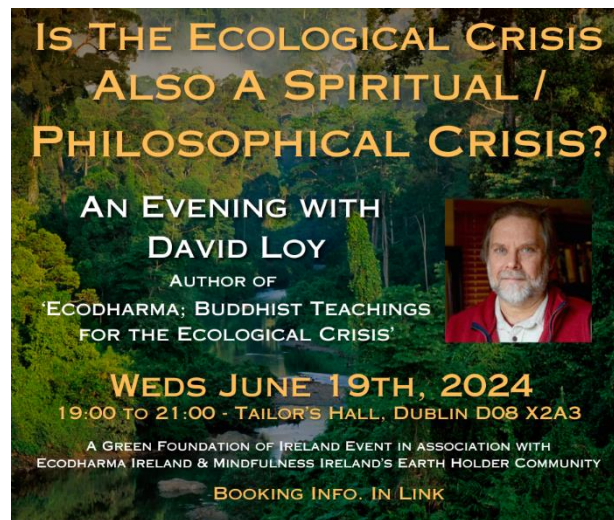


# REPORT

**Green Foundation Ireland,**  
in association with **Ecodharma Ireland**  
and **Earth Holder Community Ireland –**  
**Mindfulness Ireland**

invite you to an **IN-PERSON** evening talk  
with **DAVID LOY**

**Is the Ecological Crisis also a  
Spiritual / Philosophical Crisis?**



**Venue: Tailors' Hall, Back Lane, Dublin, D08 X2A3**

***Wednesday 19 June 2024 – 19:00 to 21:00***

Admission to this event is **FREE** but you **MUST** register beforehand.  
You can do so through [our Eventbrite page here](#).

# Is the Ecological Crisis also a Spiritual / Philosophical Crisis?

## THEME

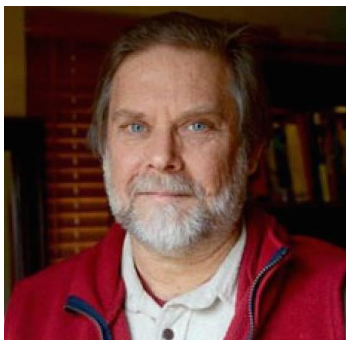
Drawing from many years of experience as a writer, a professor of philosophy and a Zen teacher, David Loy has been focusing primarily on the ecological crisis through his work in Ecodharma. Ecodharma incorporates many traditions in understanding that the climate crisis is also a spiritual/philosophical crisis: a function of our (the human species') profound separation from the natural world.

Ecodharma offers a way of thinking, and a way of living, that works to heal this deep rupture. In order to respond appropriately to the ecological crisis, we must acknowledge its psychological and emotional impact (despair and grief), which will enable us to get beyond denial or passivity and embrace the changes needed, both personal and collective. Ecodharma emphasises the importance of both individual and collective transformation, in addition to technical and scientific solutions.

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## ABOUT OUR SPEAKER

### David Loy



David is a writer, a retired professor of philosophy, co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Centre in Colorado, USA, and a Zen teacher in the Sanbo Zen lineage.

American ecophilosopher and activist Joanna Macy has described David as a 'beacon' in his contributions to environmental issues. And like her *Active Hope* work, David's Ecodharma approach embraces cognition, emotion and practical wisdom.

### Select Bibliography

Loy, David (2018). *Ecodharma; Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis*, (Wisdom Publications, Boston MA).

Loy, David, Stanley, John and Dorje Gyurme, (eds.),(2009). *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*, Wisdom, Publications, Boston MA).

Loy, David, 2003. *The Great Awakening: A Buddhist Social Theory*, (Wisdom Publications, Boston MA).

Loy, David, 1996. *Lack and Transcendence, The Problem of Death and Life in Psychotherapy, Existentialism and Buddhism* (Humanity Books, NY).

You can find out [more information about David Loy here](#).

## ABOUT OUR TALK

After an introduction by GFI's **John Gormley** and by **Dónal Ó Céilleachair** of **Ecodharma Ireland** (who had visited David Loy's retreat in America), the lecture began with a short mediation and David proceeded with no notes in his gentle voice affirming that now is the most dangerous time in the history of society – as noted by the highly regarded scholar Noam Chomsky. It is an ecological crisis. Calling it a climate crisis is misleading, as it is bigger than just switching to renewable sources, thereby allowing us to continue with our normal life. In addition to climate change, we are in the middle of the Sixth Great Extinction. So many plants and animals are disappearing, recalling that there is only half as many wild animals on the planet than there was 50 years ago. Recalling also how we have a huge loss of forests and precious topsoil, with more pollutants now in the seas and also in our bodies. Basically, there is a broad challenge to the way our civilisation is working as we are heading for global self-destruction.

The ecological crisis has many dimensions to it, including economic, noting how late corporate consumer capitalism apparently believes it is necessary to keep growing to survive. Challenging the political will to drive through changes that are needed is very difficult. Furthermore, teenagers are finding it hard today, coping with such a precarious future. But what about the spiritual dimension to this problem? The ecological crisis is something that strikes very deeply with regards to what type of society we have today.

### *Main parts to David's talk:*

Recounting a profound parallel to what traditions like Buddhism and our collective connection to the earth can tell us, David sees a delusion of separation, namely that we are separate from the earth. This is what the ecological crisis is challenging us to face up to. Buddhist language might appear very technical and alien, but you don't even need to be spiritual to understand it. The parallel is so deep between Buddhism and the ecological crisis, it's almost the same: basically a mini problem of understanding of 'self', alongside a macro version and vision of the planet.

One particular individual predicament within Buddhism is its emphasis on suffering, dissatisfaction and almost a denial of the notion of a separate self. It affirms the fundamental illusion of self remains at the core of our dissatisfaction. Recalling conventional (Western) child psychology and the development of the sense of a separate self. This is considered as a result of a construction – a psychological, social and linguistic construction. Children learn to get it and acquire a 'self'. We learn to identify with this sense of self. It creates and sustains the illusion that there is a 'me' inside and the rest of the world is outside. Essentially, it is a psychological construct and does not have any reality of its own. It's more of a process. This sense of self is shadowed or even haunted by some sense of insecurity, a sense of lack or insecurity. There is always a nagging feeling that something is missing – I'm not good enough. [Incidentally, having taught 101 Communications Psychology, the notion of self and identity has been problematised by numerous psychologists including Freud, Jung, Lacan and many others, usually to explain and understand aberrant human development and behaviour patterns.]

David noted that where he comes from in America, being one of the richest countries in world, with a caveat of course that there are still lots of really poor people, yet there remain lots of middle-class people who feel pain, conditioned by society to evaluate themselves primarily by how many consumer toys they have. Environmentalists have long questioned the consume-driven culture fixation within society, and he nails down how this 'lack project' encourages us *not* to feel real enough, or that we are not famous enough, as defined by online screen culture. This in turn creates a sense of envy – if only I was like that. Another preoccupation which is dominant in our culture, is acquiring the perfect romantic partner. If I could just find that ideal partner (as promoted across many current reality television series like *Love Island*), everything would be fine. All are pushing the narrative that if only they got what they wished for, they could live happily ever after. But of course, he joked, this might be just the beginning of their problems – recalling the 'Romeo and Juliet' myth. Such preoccupations and obsessions are symptoms of the fundamental problem, that you will never have the perfect relationship, or you will never have enough money to fill up a sense of lack in your lives.

Buddhism, he insinuated, has a particular emphasis on suffering, and is also haunted by a human lack of a sense of what might be characterised as completeness. Inevitably when caught up in this way of thinking, it leads to self-obsession and a form of selfishness which reinforces the fundamental problem. It also has an important implication for how we experience time. When I make money in the future, I will be happy. Hence this encourages us to live in the future and not live in the now. All of this can give insight into why people do what they do.

He posited love as a way of being and promoting a form of non-duality, which poses a double challenge; basically, to realise this wisdom and to integrate into how you interact with people. While a 'lack project' is always about me and is focused on self-centredness, the whole meaning of our life can transform if we realise, we are not separate from others. As we see through the delusion of self, even the delusion of my serenity and even (selfish) enlightenment. Given who I am, I can ask, what can I do to make the world a better place for all of us? Buddhism is another way to strive and articulate this philosophy.

This, he suggested, is the same as our collective predicament in addressing the climate crisis; a macro version of the same personal problem we have around our 'self'. We have a collective sense of self and the largest collective sense of self we have of course is of our species. Or recalling our global contemporary civilisation (very Western-centric vision!) and the delusion of separation from the earth. Is there a suffering/disaffection built into this notion? We did not always have this clear separation from the earth. Yet recalling the Bible and the Book of Genesis, which is part of the problem by in many ways promoting separation with the earth and nature. He distinguishes (contemporary modern) civilisation where we take nature for granted, versus for instance the Aztec civilisation with its strict hierarchy and having no sense of separation from nature; being part of the larger eco-system. Such a civilisation does not take their own political social structure for granted, and their religion is just a part of the way they are linked to various cosmic forces. All of these (ancient) civilisations were embedded and a part of the earth and had roles and rituals which were not just for their own sake. They believed that this was essential and reflected their role in being human. Acknowledging a responsibility to keep the universe working harmoniously, remains a key attribute of effective climate change thinking.

Of course, the Aztecs also had an 'unsavourily' religious practice, by ritualistically killing their enemies, taking their hearts out and offering them up to the Sun God. Essentially, they had to keep feeding these gods or they would lose their way. (See for instance an eco-reading of Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* (2006), which dramatises this very practice and the Aztec culture.) All of which is part of a cosmic cycle, while keeping things working for a while longer.

Naturally, we would not want to live in such a (primitive) society but, as members in that community, they had meaning to their lives which today we have lost. (One might suggest that this calls for some form of deep belief which transcends self; noting at the same time that all religions in various measures promote a deeper ecological sense of responsibility to the planet, as for instance articulated in Pope Francis' *Laudato si'* Encyclical from 2015.)

Within our modern world there appears to be a loss of this role and connection with the earth. Yet, we constantly ask ourselves, why are we here, reminding for example of *Talking Heads* classic song 'How did I get here!' Are we simply accidents of genetic mutation, with an emphasis on the Epicurean philosophy: 'enjoy yourself as long as you can, until you die'. Yes, this is also, David informed us, what our mainstream economic philosophy tells us. Furthermore, we can use the earth as a dump, as it's just there to be exploited, with no other intrinsic value. Consequently, everything on the earth is just a means for humans to use to get what we think we need to get to.

Despite the astonishing things that humans have done, with so much technology to assist us, still nobody knows where we are going or what to do with all that power. We are seen as self-made 'gods' with only the laws of physics to keep us company, constantly using everything but never finding satisfaction, again reminding one of the *Rolling Stones* classic 'I can't get no satisfaction'!

The notion of endless progress is therefore what is holding us back; it is the ever-present drive towards progress, be it economic, political or technological. 'Why is more and more always better, if it can never be enough', remains a key takeaway message from the lecture, recalling the ever-present myth of progress, which is especially hard for young people to buy into anymore. With regards to the ecological challenges ahead, basically we are not doing what is really necessary to avoid the collapse. This myth of progress is the same as our individual dilemma. We are constantly future orientated and always using the present as a means to make the future better. But if we give up this so-called myth of progress, what is left; meaningless or nihilism!

Buddhism and its teaching however does not have anything specific to say about this global tension. The Buddha lived back in the Iron Age in India, in an ancient historical period not that relevant for the modern world. But we can still draw out implications for our modern civilisation. At an individual level, Buddhism offers solutions, using meditation and mindfulness, and letting go of the illusion of separation. While at the collective level, 'the Buddha attained individual enlightenment', but today by all accounts we need a greater sense of 'collective enlightenment'.

Paul Hawken's best-selling book *'Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice and Beauty in the World'* (2008) is worth reading, David tells us. Recalling the movement for social justice and ecological sustainability, Hawken documents how large numbers of groups and organisations have sprung up organically, working for these ecological and related issues. He estimates there are approximately 1.5 million groups like this overall; mostly small but outlining and questioning why are people so committed to addressing the environmental challenges we all face? Basically, by working not for themselves but for other people, and specifically doing it for the earth. They are acting in a selfless way. He compared this movement with the immune system of our bodies. Or like the immune system of the earth, which is springing up to defend the planet. Maybe without even knowing, what motivates us in the environmental movement is that we are (re)experiencing our connection with the earth. All of which is designed to help this healing. Of course, there is no guarantee that such movements will be successful, but it encourages a 'state of being' or a 'mental process', recalling how the earth is also trying to heal itself.

This connects to the age-old question within Buddhism: if there is no separate self and it's all an illusion, then who or what becomes enlightened? After one's own awakening, who verifies this and is it an illusion? To verify this the Buddha with his right hand touches the earth, affirming that the earth is my witness. But what does that mean? I get a strange sense that the Buddha is acknowledging his duality with the earth; it's the earth, the biosphere that is coming to its awakening. I would suggest however such a deep connection with the earth underpins much deep ecological secular thinking, alongside eco-spiritual engagement.

Truly, this is the most dangerous time in human history; we have privilege and responsibility for embodying this, David concludes his talk. Recalling a Zen story and the fruit of a lifetime of practice, learning how to be embedded and respond appropriately to the here and now is a major challenge. The challenge for all of us is to get over this duality. Real transcendence is to live in the moment and all religions must move in this direction.

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### ***Having spoken with no notes for almost an hour, David then opened the floor for discussion:***

*Q – Is it too late to deal with the ecological crisis; are you optimistic or pessimistic? During COVID for instance there were no tourists in Venice and nature came back to the city. It is us who are the problem?*

A – For me, pessimism/optimism are also part of dualistic thinking, each feeds off each other. Both involve hedging about the future and how to deal it. Also, we can talk about hope versus despair. Buddhist texts which talk about hope often see it as a distraction. It is best not to be motivated by optimism or hope, but only motivated by love. This includes non-attachment to results, if someone is ill in hospital, we need to feel with them. This distinguishes despair from grief.

*Q – Great world religions don't need to be opposition. There are toxic forms of all religions and their teachings. For instance, Pope Francis recalls the 'Cry of the earth is the cry of the poor and how social justice goes with ecological thinking'.*

A – Faiths all have to respond to the ecological crisis. A problem with religions is that often people take metaphors quite literally. Religion qualifying us for a 'higher reality' can be taken literally, and this is also true with regards to Buddhism. We are at a critical inflection point for all religious traditions and must face up to this.

*Q – We can and should focus on emerging movements like the 'rights of nature' – following the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss and Young People's Assembly this may become legally added to the Irish Constitution into the future. Is this an act of non-dualism and an act of public love, serving to liberate land from human dominance?*

A – Yes, David is impressed with the rights of nature movement which is also being developed in New Zealand and Ecuador as well as in Ireland. Meanwhile, I look at the rise of religions which are bound up in civilisation and not responsible to other civilisation. While he describes revolutionary religions – Christianity and Buddhism – focus on love your enemy and respect other species.

We are at turning point in the ecological challenge, and we now must feel identification and love for the natural world as well. The development of social justice is essential in changing social structure – social liberation and transformation of nature could and should come together.

*Q – Working with young people of university age, what actions can we take regarding dealing with the climate crisis? [They want to take a more slower approach, promoting self-awareness practice and identify the values behind the initiative. So, we are promoting actions that come out of not doing harm.]*

A – It is good to get students more aware of mindfulness. Buddhism's non-preoccupation with results for instance is evident in much progressive teaching practices. Instead of dismissing feelings of fear, anger, trauma, it is better to accept them. This is practiced in a 3-day course, and he believes mutual love and support can sustain us.

*Q – I don't think we can deal with this adversarial debate around climate change, with no argument about the facts. The task is around persuasion and dialogue with other people. Have you any insight into dealing with the various categories of people who find it hard to connect with climate change including those of us who share and feel what is happening.*

*Meanwhile, others who seem to know the issues, but act as if it's just one of the problems we face. Or others who are just passive to the problem of the climate emergency. Others still who seem to appreciate the facts but seem to act angry in facing up to the difficulties.*

A – There are many dimensions to this dialogue and challenge, and you need to reflect on what you want. In any spiritual tradition, part of the solution involves starting with ourselves. What is our motivation? An important part of our influence has to come from our own example. Are we living a life of love and compassion, and can we show people that this is an alternative way to be happy. Consumerism is like a religion, what is important about the worldview of many if it does not really work. Our own personal transformation is needed. So, always start with ourselves.

*Q – On a practical level what things do we need to do to help develop human wellbeing?*

A – Nature and our engagement with ecology is so important, it's about being tactile and being in nature. Disconnection is a major dilemma and so the antidote is more connection in and with nature. When I am in a gratitude mode, nature shares that with us. In the workshops we run, weather permitting, we spend a lot of time out in nature. Finally, somewhat surprisingly he affirmed that the process of acting can be very powerful in drawing people together. We need a variety of types of actions, including civil disobedience which he believes will become important in the struggle for addressing the climate crisis. We need to put our bodies on the line, but this is not enough in itself, of course we need to also influence the political process.

You can [access our video of the talk here.](#)

You can [view photos of our talk here.](#)

**Pat Brereton, Director  
Green Foundation Ireland**

**28 June 2024**