

Gathering in Good Relation

Tribal Nations and Buddhist Traditions for Earth Awareness

Report on an initiative supported by the BESS Family Foundation and the Garrison Institute

SUMMER 2026



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Executive Summary

Gathering in Good Relation brings together teachers and practitioners from Tribal Nations and Buddhist traditions to strengthen relationships with Earth and explore ethical forms of cross-tradition collaboration. The initiative is part of the BESS Family Foundation's Earth awareness community and Tribal Nations and Buddhism conversations directed by Karen Waconda-Lewis, which are creating practices and ways of knowing that deepen people's experience of belonging within a living, interconnected Earth community.

This initiative explores how to repair trust and deepen learning across traditions on Turtle Island and in North America. In the current phase, its goals are to develop new Earth awareness practices based in cultural appreciation and permission, and to clarify ethical pathways for collaboration so that practices can be carried into communities with integrity and respect.

Beginning in 2025, Gathering in Good Relation has been bringing together teachers and practitioners from Tribal Nations and Buddhist traditions through online dialogue and in-person retreats.

This initiative convenes Indigenous knowledge keepers (including Cherokee, Isleta and Laguna Pueblo, Diné, Zuni, San Carlos Apache, Hopi, Narragansett, and Ramapough Lenape traditions) with Buddhist teachers and practitioners (including Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana lineages) to move beyond surface-level dialogue and into sustained relationship.

This report describes a 4-day working retreat held at the Garrison Institute focused on land acknowledgement and foundations of permission, cultural appreciation, caregiving, and sacred reciprocity.

The working retreat's primary outcome was relational. It built the trust and shared ethical ground necessary for future collaboration. It also generated practical frameworks, guiding questions, and design principles for cross-tradition Earth awareness gatherings.

This report describes what happened, lessons learned, and next steps.

Key summary points:

- **Trust is built and given, not assumed.** Patience, presence, dialogue, and embodied practice helped participants build the trust required for deeper teaching and collaboration.
- **Tribal Nations and Buddhist lineages found genuine resonance and remaining work to do.** Participants found shared ground in interdependence, humility, transformation, and relationship with Earth, while recognizing distinct histories and concerns about appropriation.
- **Practical frameworks supported collaboration.** Participants developed frameworks centered on consent, credit, context, community benefit, caregiving, reciprocity, and accountability to source.
- **This initiative is building capacity for future offerings.** Participants identified concrete next steps, including carrying relationships forward through ongoing exchange and regional in-person gatherings. Future working retreats are continuing to build community, clarifying ethical protocols for bridging across traditions, and co-creating Earth awareness practices.



Background: Why This Work, Why Now

Many people today are looking for ways to repair relationships with themselves, each other, communities, ancestry, and Earth. Interest in Indigenous Knowledge Systems is growing as people turn toward relational worldviews and recognize harms from extraction, colonization, and disconnectedness from Earth. Many people are also turning toward contemplative traditions such as Buddhism and secular mindfulness to become more present, to work skillfully with suffering, to experience interdependence, and to live with greater compassion and ethical clarity. These growing interests carry risks. Without care, they can lead to appropriation, dilution, simplification, or taking from living traditions without permission or reciprocity.

Gathering in Good Relation brings together teachers and practitioners from Tribal Nations and Buddhist lineages into dialogue because each offers important gifts for this time – and together, they offer traditional practices for attention, self-awareness, valuing ancestral origins of teachings, working with thoughts and emotions, living ethically and compassionately, rooting in context and relationship, and developing responsibility to the living Earth community.

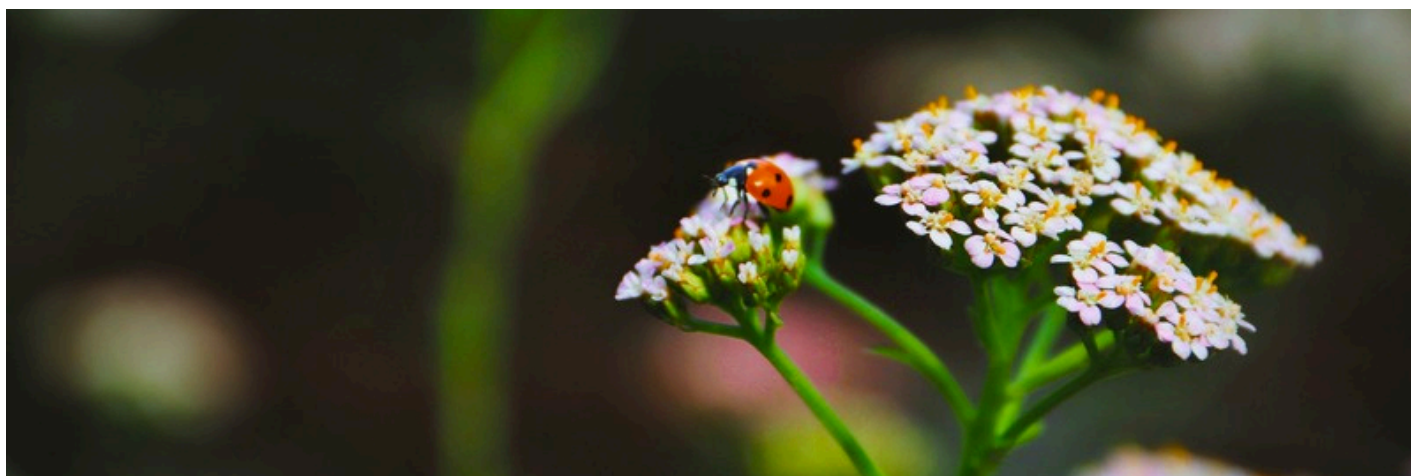
The aim is not to collapse these traditions into one or to take from either. This initiative explores what becomes possible when people carry traditions with integrity and meet in good relation.

At the heart of the work is a simple and demanding question:

How do we come into good relation—with ourselves, with one another, with diverse traditions and lineages, with ancestors, and with Earth?

This initiative is part of a growing community of people working on Earth awareness. Field-mapping, research, and dialogue has generated two knowledge products: 1) a practical guidance document on bridging across traditions with integrity, titled *Discussion and Partnerships: Bridging Tribal Nations & Buddhist Practices*¹; and 2) a published study describing a broad landscape of ecology, spirituality, and cross-cultural knowledge systems, titled *Earth Awareness: Mapping an Emergent Relational Field*². These reports from 2025 offer important guidance for *Gathering in Good Relation*, which aims to move from concepts into practice.

Taken together, this body of work represents a meaningful arc: from the questions of why bridge across traditions and whether bridging is possible, to the development of shared vocabulary and frameworks for doing it well, to mapping of a relational field, and to communities carrying forward living traditions.



The April 2026 Retreat

Overview

A working retreat in April 2026 brought together teachers and practitioners from Tribal Nations and Buddhist traditions at the Garrison Institute, located in Garrison, New York, for a four-day in-person gathering following a series of online meetings. Thirteen participants joined the circle, including elders and knowledge keepers from several Tribal Nations (Cherokee, Isleta and Laguna Pueblos, Diné, Zuni, San Carlos Apache, Hopi, Narragansett, and Ramapough Lenape), with Buddhist ordained teachers and practitioners (from across Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana traditions). The retreat was led by Karen Waconda-Lewis and Stephen Posner, with significant teaching contributions from participants who drew from Indigenous and Buddhist traditions in sessions across the four days.

The purpose was to deepen relationship, trust, and shared ethical space among people carrying different lineages of practice, while exploring how Buddhist and Tribal Nations traditions might come together into good relation in service of caregiving and stewardship for Earth. The gathering was designed to be a shared embodied process: a movement from written ideas and online dialogue into lived practice, ceremony, discernment, and relationship with the land.

The process included online sessions before and after the retreat, including four pre-event meetings and one post-event call. Across these sessions, participants explored themes of permission, cultural appreciation and appropriation, lineage, land relationship, spiritual practice, and future collaboration. There were also discussions on colonization, patriarchy, the impacts of mistrust, reciprocity practices, and intergenerational trauma. The group deeply explored some of the topics outlined in Discussion and Partnerships: Bridging Tribal Nations & Buddhist Practices. These sessions helped establish familiarity for the group to come together in person with a shared vocabulary and a set of questions already alive among them.

The retreat unfolded through arrival and orientation, land acknowledgement and offerings, Buddhist and Tribal ancestral chants and ceremony, shared contemplative practice, whole-group and paired dialogues, time outdoors in nature, art-based practices, collective discernment, and integration. The following description of main sessions helps show the living quality of the process and outputs.



Permissions, by artist Joseph Stacey, Hopi/Laguna Pueblo Tribal Member.

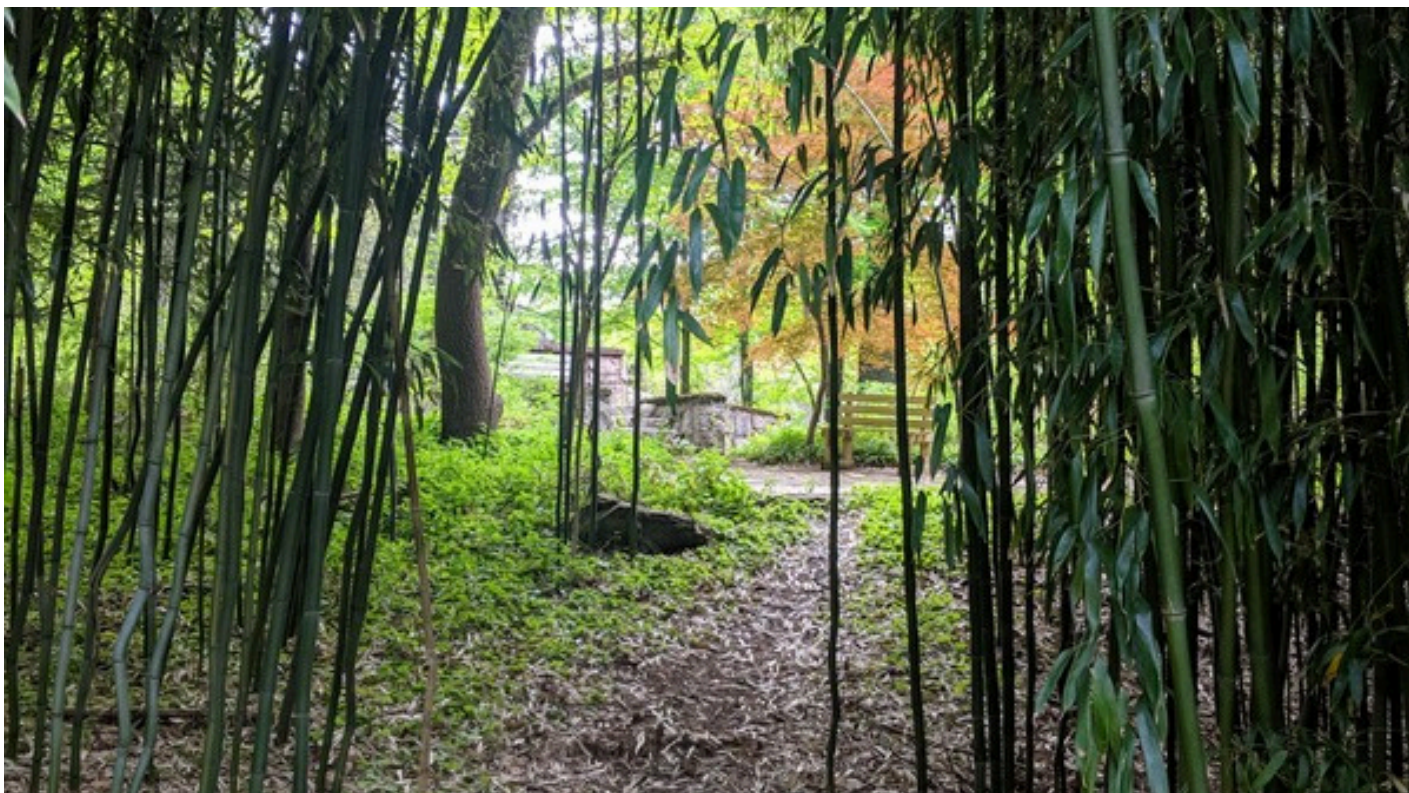
Main Sessions

Land Acknowledgement

Alexander Sterling, a member of the local Ramapough Lenape Nation, grounded the gathering in place by tracing 11,000+ years of their people's presence in the region, the cultural significance of singing stones on Bear Mountain marking the four clans (turtle, deer, wolf, and bear), and the compounded harms of colonization and toxic chemical legacies from heavy industrial activities. He acknowledged painful truths and shared a generative framing: the pitch pine cone requires fire to open, and the current "great conflagration" of harmful systems may provide the conditions under which long-planted seeds of healing finally germinate.

Permission

The group then turned to the role of permission in being a good relative. Several frames emerged: gratitude as the doorway to relationship; “respect” as a practice, which etymologically means “to see again”; permission as a verb and ongoing way of relating rather than a one-time transaction; and qualities of knowledge that derive from relationship, humility, pilgrimage, transformation, and empowerment. A central teaching: in many ancient wisdom traditions, the seeker must be transformed into a vessel before knowledge can be received – unlike the modern world, which often conflates intelligence with quick access to information.



Ceremony

A walking pilgrimage, a sacred site, and the Thanksgiving Address created a sacred container for the gathering. These elements helped participants enter a different quality of attention, where Earth, ancestors, and spirit could be felt as part of the circle rather than background context. Karen, Belinda Eriacho, Ayya Santacitta, and Reverend Tenku Osho led blessings, chanting, and a walking practice to cultivate attention and unify body and mind. Stephen guided the group to a place on the Garrison Institute grounds for ceremony and designating a space to recognize and honor the ancestors of the land.

The group made offerings to the land and spirits. Mac Hall led the group in the Thanksgiving Address³, known in Haudenosaunee as Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen (“Words before all else”), a traditional message of peace and gratitude that includes the invocation “And now our minds are one.” Land acknowledgement became an active, direct, personal, and relational practice rather than a formal written statement. A main learning was how ceremony can awaken awareness to the diversity of more-than-human life present in the land, but it also requires ethical clarity about source, lineage, permission, and what is appropriate to share across traditions.



Cultural Appropriation vs. Appreciation, by artist Joseph Stacey, Hopi/Laguna Pueblo Tribal Member.

Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Appreciation

Deep dialogue gave participants a way to name the ethical dimensions of bridging traditions. Belinda led a session to define cultural appropriation (the taking and use of practices, symbols, language, or ceremonies without permission, the claiming of credit for what is not one's own, and the absence of accountability when these patterns occur). The discussion also included four markers that could be used to determine if cultural appropriation might exist: no consent, no credit, no context, and no reciprocity. The opposite of cultural appropriation is cultural appreciation. It means engaging another culture's practices with respect, consent, and reciprocity, honoring the community as a living authority on their own traditions.

Pillars of appreciation were discussed, including:

- Honoring – recognizing, celebrating, and respecting another culture's practices with genuine reverence for meaning, history, and living communities of origin.
- Acknowledging – naming the source's community explicitly, in words, in writings, in compensation, and in relationship.
- Ensuring representation – centering the voices of community members in how their culture is taught, shared, and practiced, rather than speaking for or over them.

The Four Lenses

Belinda offered a framework for right relationship and led the group through an exercise, entitled, “The Line Between - Honoring and Taking” using four lenses (consent, credit, context, and community benefit).

The exercise distinguished cultural appropriation from cultural appreciation and identified pathways toward right relationship.

The four lenses used to evaluate right relationship.

Lens	Description	Guiding Question
Consent	Obtained from the community, not only from an individual.	Did you ask the community - not just one individual?
Credit	Public acknowledgement of source lineages in speech, writing, and art.	Is the source named, attributed, and compensated?
Context	Genuine understanding of why a practice exists and how it has been used.	Is the practice used as it was meant to be used? How do you know?
Community Benefit	Benefits flow back to the source community (reciprocity).	Do benefits flow back in meaningful, ongoing ways?

The Four Lenses can be used to assess activities, events, programs, or grantees by responding to these questions with rating on a categorical scale: Clear Appreciation, Appreciation with Gaps, Partial Appreciation, Clear Appropriation.

A central finding was how to generate new practices with agreement, approval, acknowledgement of source, and reciprocity among Tribal Nations members and Buddhist practitioners.



Embodied Practice

Time on the land embodying what we talked about helped move the gathering beyond conversation and into direct sensory relationship. This mattered because Earth awareness cannot remain only an idea; it must be felt in the body, in place, with trees, water, soil, and more-than-human life. Haley Laughter offered Indigenous Yoga sessions that blended teachings from Diné and Vedic traditions.

Silvermoon LaRose guided the group in making corn husk dolls as part of mindful cultural education, drawing from work through the Tomaquag Museum and highlighting how this sustainable art form reflects Indigenous teachings. Sylvie Rokab led a Forest Bathing session with music and a reflective session with nature.



Cornhusk dolls made by Stephen, Haley, and Belinda (left to right) under guidance from Silvermoon. Photo: Stephen Posner.

Caregiving

We focused on teachings and concrete examples of how to move from management, control, and extraction towards land relationship, responsibility, kinship, and community. Jessica Harjo shared stories drawn from personal experience in nature and taught lessons in care, repair, and how to be in good relation with all living beings.

Caregiving for bison – as distinct from caretaking – helped define practices of reciprocity and personal, social, and ecological regeneration. This session was an invitation to consider how practices could return home with participants and serve their communities, rather than remain only meaningful within the retreat setting.



What does the Earth need that we might alter together?, by artist Joseph Stacey, Hopi/Laguna Pueblo Tribal Member.

The Four Elements

This shared practice provided a pathway to exploring resonance between Buddhist contemplative practice and elemental, land-based awareness rooted in medicine from the Southwest. Participants were invited to draw what their bodies were feeling using the elements, and to spend time directly with Earth, sun, air, and water. In offering this teaching, Karen emphasized cellular structures and pathways within the body, the necessity of caring for one's own ancient knowledge rather than holding onto others', and the role of permission and reciprocity in any cross-traditional sharing.

This practice showed how Buddhist practices can contribute methods for attending to embodiment and interdependence, while grounding within Tribal understandings of land, spirit, and relational responsibility. Mindfulness was braided with a living sense of embeddedness in Earth, inviting experiential understanding of the four elements.



The Giveaway

A giveaway practice invited generosity, humility, and relational exchange into the heart of the gathering. This helped reciprocity become less conceptual. Participants prepared a item that was dear to them and that they'd want to give away to another as a token from their heart. In this way, the group practiced giving and receiving in ways that honored and deepened lasting relationships. There was an element of surprise and organic gift-matching. This session was an opening, with reciprocity flowing in unexpected nonlinear directions on its own timing. The group reflected on the importance of moving from one-time gifts to ongoing and mutually supportive relationships based in giving care.

Fire Ceremony

Adam Lobel led a powerful fire ceremony. Gathering in a circle with fire brought participants into direct relationship with transformation, release, spirit, and elemental presence. The fire ceremony reflected some of the deeper complexities we are all navigating collectively, such as how to acknowledge harms that many lineages carry while also honoring the sacredness of what a ceremony holder is seeking to draw forth through their work. It also surfaced important questions about power, cultural specificity, intergenerational healing, and how to hold practices when people relate to them differently. The group recognized that future work must more deeply address everything in our lineages and the responsibilities that come with holding and participating in ceremonies.



Respect the Ceremony Holder, by artist Joseph Stacey, Hopi/Laguna Pueblo Tribal Member.

Closing Sessions

As we closed, we included reflections on permission, lineage, cultural care, and next steps. Participants did not simply ask whether Buddhist and Tribal Nations traditions should or could be bridged. They began expressing how to bridge well at the pace of trust and wisdom. The group also discussed the importance of reciprocity, mutual respect, elder guidance and support, ancestral permission, and accountability to source.

One of the clearest next-step themes was the shared intention to create new Earth awareness practices together: not by diluting or extracting from living traditions, but by tending a careful container in which appropriate, grounded, and genuinely shared practices emerge. The retreat showed that this collaborative space is still early and must be tended with care. It also showed that a living circle formed—one that is ready to continue deeper and discern what can be carried forward in good relation.

Guiding Questions for Earth Awareness Retreats

Dialogue in the working retreat led to the following reflective and practical guiding questions. These questions distill what participants learned about designing Earth awareness gatherings with care, especially when bringing together people from different cultures, traditions, and histories. For teachers, conveners, funders, and retreat hosts, these questions and responses offer concrete guidance on how to center relationship with Earth, prepare participants well, support people through challenges, navigate appropriation, and create conditions for trust, reciprocity, and repair.

If we center good relation with Earth as our common ground, what does this ask of how we teach and learn in retreats?

- Retreats that include more time alone with nature and more time as a group on the land will help “relating with Earth” to become a core retreat experience rather than an added activity. In this way, we can know the land, be known by the land, and let the land shape our learning.
- Retreats need space for transition between sessions, metabolizing and integrating teachings, and sharing authentic acknowledgements – including acknowledgements of the place, the original peoples and ancestors of the place, the beings who live there, and where participants are emotionally and spiritually before moving between sessions.
- When participants receive a grounded orientation before arriving, it helps create familiarity, especially when Tribal participants are entering Buddhist-led retreat spaces or Buddhist practitioners are entering Tribal-led spaces. Orientation could include natural and cultural history, etiquette, spiritual protocols, and what to expect.
- Retreat spaces could include designated support roles in addition to facilitator roles. People may be triggered or unsettled during retreat, and it helps to have clear people to turn to for elder support, spiritual support, room clearing, grounding, or other forms of care.
- Chants, ceremonies, and shared practices need to be handled with great care, especially when participants are asked to repeat words or actions whose meaning they may not understand. Mirroring or mimicry can be part of early learning, but it can also cause harm if it is not held with context, permission, and care-filled attention.
- Retreats that include concrete action on behalf of the land and surrounding community are more likely to be in good relation with Earth. We can leave a place better than when we arrived through service meditation, gardening, site restoration, care for local ecosystems, and other forms of reciprocity. This is true for retreats and extends more broadly to how we live our lives.
- Connecting with the Earth and her beings is an embodied practice, shifting the sense of care. Therefore, it can open wounds of denial, ancestral trauma, colonialism, or lack of connection in the body and senses.

- Teachers and facilitators could become conduits for Earth to teach by considering what would be best coming from a tree, a bird, water, and other Earth beings. For example, the Council of All Beings, an experiential practice co-created by Joanna Macy and deep ecologist John Seed, invites participants to soften their human identity and to embody and speak on behalf of another Earth being. Rather than only teaching about Earth, teachers can teach from Earth and help participants listen, feel, sense, and receive teachings directly from the land while engaging with Buddhist practices to help work with the fear, grief, guilt, and emotion that may arise.
- Centering Earth as a unifying frame does not need to flatten or overlook diverse human experiences. People bring different personal histories, ancestral trauma, cultural identities, and lived experiences into the circle. Good retreat design calls upon unity while making room for diverse lived realities rather than bypassing or dismissing them.
- We can be careful to not assume trust with Earth, land spirits, people, and communities. Trust must be cultivated, earned, given, and repaired through action, not only through words.
- We can be careful to not assume the meaning of “Earth” is the same for everyone. Participants carry different lineages, cultures, mental models, and beliefs. People benefit from opportunities in retreats to explore what Earth means to them personally and collectively.
- Retreats can emphasize experiential learning: listening, feeling, sensing, practicing, doing, and reflecting together. Teaching and learning that goes beyond the verbal or conceptual realm – that moves through the body, the emotions, the land, and right actions – can more deeply transform teachers and learners.

What inner qualities and right action does this work require of us?

- Trust and insights into how trust moves, grows, and guides our work together.
- Deep listening, discernment, and restraint in speech. The acronym W.A.I.T. – “Why Am I Talking?” – can serve as a reminder to speak only when it truly serves the circle.
- Personal and cultural humility are essential. These are deeper practices than “competence,” and involve watching, listening, learning, assessing what is needed, and respecting that some knowledge requires years of relationship, lineage, and community recognition.
- Receiving teaching does not make someone a teacher. Permission to carry or teach a practice must come from the community of origin, not only from one individual. It cannot be self-proclaimed.
- Flexibility and patience are needed, because different people have different needs at different times. Interpretation, meaning-making, and integration are personal processes. Retreat spaces that include clear support roles help people know where to turn when they need support during difficult moments.
- This work asks for equanimity: the ability to stay grounded while many different perspectives, histories, and emotions are present. Trees offer lessons in being anchored in strength and flexibility – sometimes rooting in place while witnessing changes for thousands of years.



- This working retreat took place near an obvious military site. Right action includes noticing “warplanes” around and inside us: disruptive and potentially destructive energies, fears, judgments, and distractions that arise. These are like unwholesome seeds that can grow and become unruly when triggered. This work invites us to practice noticing them, choose what to feed or not feed, and tend to what promotes healing and relationship.
- There is a need to hold power, colonization, spiritual histories, trauma, and wisdom honestly. Being in good relation requires space for truthful speech, careful listening, and repair when harm or imbalance appears.
- Learning could be experiential, not only verbal. Teaching and learning can be powerful when engaged through the senses, the body, emotions, practices, silence, action and service, and direct experience with the land.
- Nature itself offers a different frame for learning about ourselves and each other. Nature can help us notice judgment and discrimination. A tree is not wrong for growing where it grows. A river is not wrong for flooding its banks. These insights can help retreat teachers hold difference without shame while still supporting accountability and growth.

Practical Design Principles for Earth awareness retreats or cross-tradition gatherings:

- Make relationship with Earth central, not supplemental.
- Build silence, spacious transitions, and integration time into gatherings.
- Prepare participants before arrival with cultural, historical, and spiritual orientation.
- Clearly identify support roles beyond facilitation, including elder support, grounding support, and care during ceremony or difficult moments.
- Offer ceremonies and practices with appropriate context, permission, and authentic acknowledgement.
- Include reciprocal action on behalf of the land or surrounding community.
- Make room for difference in people's meaning-making processes, interpretations of words or experiences such as "Mother Earth," histories, and emotional realities.
- Treat trust as something built and repaired through action and relationship over time.
- Practice cultural humility, deep listening, restraint in speech, and accountability to source.
- Let learning be consciously experienced through time on the land, perspective shifts, felt emotions, the senses, and right action as well as silence - not only through verbal teaching.



Supportive Conditions for Gathering in Good Relation

This initiative is surfacing and validating the following supportive conditions for gathering in good relation and ethically bridging across traditions.

Permission

Not a one-time checkbox, but an ongoing relational practice. Permission includes land, elders, ancestors, communities, lineages, and the people in the room. Different communities may approach permission differently – for some, clear relational boundaries are essential; for others, there may also be a sincere aspiration for aspects of their practices or cosmology to ripple outward into the broader culture.

Trust

Trust has to be given, received, earned, and built together. It is a quality of relationships that moves at its own pace. Discussions on the last day emphasized trust and how it is cultivated. Our work together “moves at the speed of trust.”

Patience

Several participants used metaphors of meal-sharing and rope-making to describe a group still in formation – beginning to understand each other’s contributions but not yet able to move at full pace together. The group affirmed that this stage cannot be rushed and that the willingness to fund and support this relationship-building without demanding immediate output was itself an important precondition for what was unfolding.

Participants drew on project management language to describe the group as still in the “forming and storming” phase, with common language and communication patterns yet to settle in a next “norming” phase. Several Tribal participants spoke of the importance of mutual respect across post-colonial dynamics, and of patience as a discipline. Younger participants and those working with youth spoke of patiently reconnecting young people to the natural world as a core motivation. The session closed with collective gratitude and a sense of the work being seeded rather than completed.

Humility

No one becomes a teacher simply because they received a teaching or experienced an insight. Receiving a teaching or participating in a ceremony does not make someone a master or give them the right to teach without permission.

Accountability to source

People need to know where practices come from, what they mean, and when/where/with whom they are appropriate.

Self-awareness and inner work

Deep self-reflection and self-awareness are part of coming into right relationship with Earth and one another. Challenging material can arise when people begin engaging in deep relationships, including experiences related to age, ethnicity, race, gender, practice, lineage, acculturation, and trauma. Ongoing inner work helps with navigating challenging terrain.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a living practice of right relationship. It involves mutual recognition, co-existence, and exchange among Tribal participants, Buddhist participants, land, living communities, and past/future generations. In practical retreat contexts, reciprocity can mean fair compensation or meaningful gifts. It can also mean returning benefits to source communities, caring for Earth when and where we gather, sharing knowledge only with permission, and nurturing and maintaining relationships beyond a single event or activity.

Care with language

Words carry different meanings across peoples, cultures, and traditions. It is important to seek to understand how, why, and when words are used, and to create meaning from experience expressed through language. Examples of words that may need careful interpretation include: Earth, nature, awareness, mindfulness, meditation, ceremony, spirit, lineage, and permission.

Embodiment and experiential learning

Learning through listening, doing, feeling, sensing, and practicing—not just talking—is critical for a felt sense of being in good relationship.

Repair

Harm can always arise. The work we are doing needs practices for noticing, naming, holding, and repairing harm. We can co-create a brave space with trust, authenticity, vulnerability, and community support, while knowing that we cannot always guarantee a safe space.



Next Steps

This initiative is in an incubator stage, requiring a supportive environment that offers patience and careful tending. Moving prematurely into launching public programs or adding too many new participants could disrupt processes that have taken root. A dedicated core group is carrying the work at this early stage. The next phase is about deepening the roots so that future practices and public offerings emerge with integrity. There is clear momentum forward to clarify why these traditions are being brought into relationship, define how to bridge in good relation, and create and refine new practices that draw from multiple traditions and help people return to being in reciprocal relationship with Earth.

Why bridge across traditions

This group will further clarify why these traditions are being brought into relationship in this historical and ecological moment. One way to understand this is through the history of Buddhism itself. As Buddhism moved from the Ganges Valley to Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, China, Korea, Japan, Tibet and beyond, it adapted to cultural and ecological contexts. It met local peoples, lands, languages, cultures, and spiritual worlds. Over time, this gave rise to very different expressions of Buddhism, such as Vipassana, Chan/Zen, Pure Land, and Tibetan Vajrayana, which share core teachings while taking distinct cultural forms.

This raises an important opportunity for North America and Turtle Island today: What would it mean for Buddhist practice to meet the lands, peoples, histories, and cultures of this place more deeply and respectfully? This does not mean absorbing Tribal Nations traditions into Buddhism, or vice versa. It means asking how people rooted in distinct yet overlapping living traditions can meet in good relation, without collapsing their differences, to respond creatively to this time of great ecological change.

How to bridge in good relation

The group would like to develop clearer principles and protocols for bridging traditions. These include permission, elder guidance, land acknowledgement, source communities, accountability, reciprocity, cultural care, and clarity about what can and cannot be shared. The 2025 report on Bridging Tribal Nations & Buddhist Practices¹ offers a good starting point. The next phase will build from these foundations while also learning from other related work.⁴ The aim is to create practical guidance for future Earth awareness gatherings that helps people act with humility, avoid extraction, repair harm when it arises, and honor the communities and lineages from which teachings come.

Create and refine new Earth awareness practices

The group expressed interest in moving from “why bridge” to “how to bridge well” and onward to co-creating new practices. An Earth Awareness Practice Space is being held as a protected, structured format for offering, experiencing, and refining new practices together. Participants will not blend traditions casually, borrow ceremonies, or create a generalized spirituality. Instead, they are working together to develop new Earth awareness practices that are grounded in relationship and held with care. Over time, this will generate Earth awareness practices that are ethically grounded in good relation and responsive to what is needed now.



Public resources

The group is generating written and recorded resources that are publicly available, such as the 2025 report on [Bridging Tribal Nations and Buddhist Practices](#), the 2025 [Earth Awareness study](#), Tricycle programs (for example, a session on Listening to Earth: Tribal Nations and Buddhist Mindfulness Teachings with Karen, Belinda, Ayya Santacitta, and Stephen [available online](#)), [Garrison Institute programs](#), and a [curated resource list](#) from Aloka Earth Room on Buddhist ecology, Tribal Nations perspectives, reciprocity, permission, cultural humility, and Earth care.

Deepen comparisons across traditions

Ayya Santacitta and Reverend Tenku updated and expanded the comparison of traditions in the 2025 report on Bridging Tribal Nations & Buddhist Practices. This work provides valuable perspectives on Buddhist and Tribal Nations teachings related to Earth awareness. The [table available here](#) discusses common ground and diverse ways of being among these traditions⁵.



Closing Reflection

Participants departed the working retreat with new relationships, deeper Earth awareness, a shared vocabulary, and practical commitments to one another and to the land. The work ahead will clarify why we bridge across traditions, practice bridging in good relation, and co-create new Earth awareness practices. This next phase will protect the trust that has begun to form and strengthen relationships among participants, allowing shared practices to emerge with mutual respect, permission, humility, reciprocity, and accountability to source.

The retreat closed with a circle of intentions and a shared dedication that the benefit of this work and philanthropic support be for the good of all Earth. The fire that helped hold the gathering was smudged out at the close, and participants were invited to consciously choose embers to keep going, marking not an ending but a continuation of the work that this group came together to carry.



From left to right. Top row: Joseph Stacey, Alexander Sterling, Silvermoon LaRose, and Jessica Harjo. Middle row: Reverend Tenku Ruff Osho and Ayya Santacitta Bhikkhuni. Bottom row: Stephen Posner, Mac Hall, Karen Waconda-Lewis, Belinda Eriacho, Haley Laughter, Adam Lobel, and Sylvie Rokab.

Acknowledgements

On behalf of participants and the convening team, we offer deep gratitude to the BESS Family Foundation for the trust placed in this work and to the Garrison Institute for hosting and supporting the Gathering in Good Relation initiative.

Thanks to the following teachers and practitioners from Tribal Nations and Buddhist traditions who participated in online sessions: Adam Lobel, Alexa Sutton Lawrence, Alexander Stirling, Ayya Santacitta Bhikkhuni, Belinda Eriacho, Chris Googoo, David Loy, Haley Laughter, Jessica Harjo, Joseph Stacey, Karen Waconda-Lewis,

Kristin Barker, Landon Pollock, Lupe Avila, Mac Hall, Michael Yellow Bird, Nikayla Jefferson, Reverend Tenku Ruff Osho, Silvermoon LaRose, Stephen Posner, Susie Harrington, Sylvie Rokab, and Tiokasin Ghosthorse.

Thanks to the following teachers and practitioners from Tribal Nations and Buddhist traditions who participated in the in-person retreat and contributed to the development of this document.

Retreat Participant Bios

Stephen Posner, Co-Facilitator



Stephen Posner, PhD, is originally from Baltimore and is currently based in northern Vermont. He is a Senior Fellow for Planetary Health with the Garrison Institute. His work aims to transform how we understand, value, and care for nature.

Currently, he focuses on frameworks for assessing nature, integrating ways of knowing, creating conditions for ethical action, and promoting positive change toward a more compassionate and resilient world. He is also a global affiliate for environment and agroecology with the University of Vermont and an appointed co-author for a national assessment of nature with The Nature Record.

His perspective is shaped by over two decades of environmental leadership across sectors, through which he has convened powerful coalitions and developed multi-year initiatives related to biodiversity and climate.

He received a Ph.D. in natural resources and ecological economics from the University of Vermont, studied science education at Stanford, and earned a B.S. in astrophysics from Haverford. He has completed training in Earth awareness, global sustainability, complexity, and Indigenous environmental health with organizations such as the Santa Fe Institute, Columbia University, and the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center.

Karen Waconda-Lewis, Co-Facilitator



Karen Waconda-Lewis is a Tribal native of the Isleta and Laguna Pueblos. After her initiation into Native Medicine, she introduced traditional healing practices into an urban American Indian health clinic in Albuquerque, NM. She continues to expand this program into local hospitals, the Indian Health Service, the VA Hospital, and surrounding organizations. Karen integrates Western medicine with Native healing in preventive health, mental health, and overall well-being. She is the founder and director of the Center for Native American Integrative Healing, LLC, located in Albuquerque, where healers from various Tribal nations practice their traditional medicine and extend their services to the community.

Karen is a Spirit Rock Community Dharma Leader program graduate and has been practicing mindfulness from a young age, guided by her grandparents in her traditional Tribal practices of caring for the land, gardening, cooking and animals. She regularly provides dharma teachings incorporating Native teachings in her community and nationally. She has intertwined Native teachings with Vipassana meditation, incorporating these practices into ceremonies, sweat lodges, and her community at Laguna Pueblo. At Laguna Pueblo, the ancestral teachings of mindfulness have complemented the Buddhist teachings at the Detention Center, providing insight and wellness to inmates and their families.

Additionally, Karen co-founded the Annual Indigenous and Native Healers Silent Retreat and the Albuquerque People of Color and Allies Sangha. She has also been appointed volunteer faculty at the University of New Mexico's School of Medicine, where she guides faculty and staff on Tribal health issues and wellness support to medical students and residents.

In her personal life, Karen enjoys spending time with her family, including her daughter and two grandchildren. She manages the family ranch and loves spending time with ancestral lands and caring for its inhabitants.

Belinda Eriacho



Belinda Eriacho is Diné (Navajo) and A:shiwi (Zuni Pueblo) — a traditional healer, wisdom carrier, and founder of Kaalogii LLC. Raised on the Navajo reservation, her life and work are shaped by ancestral teachings and a deep reverence for the sacred relationship between people and the natural world.

With formal academic training in Health Sciences, Technology, and Public Health, Belinda bridges ancestral knowledge with modern practices which are rooted in heart-centered and compassion. Through Kaalogii LLC, she leads transformative cultural and healing programs that center identity, wholeness, and belonging. As an educator, advocate, and bridge builder, Belinda works at the intersection of culture, health, and community empowerment.

Ayya Santacitta



Ayya Santacitta Bhikkhuni Theri (she/her) was born in Austria and did her graduate studies in Cultural Anthropology, focusing on dance, theatre and ritual. She also worked in avant-garde dance theatre as a performer and costume designer. In 1988 she met Ajahn Buddhadasa in southern Thailand, who sparked her interest in Buddhist monastic life.

She trained as a nun in England and Asia from 1993 until 2009, primarily in the lineage of Ajahn Chah and has also received teachings in the Shechen lineage of Tibetan Buddhism since 2002.

Santacitta Bhikkhuni co-founded Aloka Vihara in 2009 and received Bhikkhuni Ordination in 2011. She is committed to Gaia as a living being and resides as senior weaver at Aloka Earth Room, currently located in San Rafael, CA.

Sylvie Rokab



Sylvie Rokab is a Brazilian animist of Egyptian and Mediterranean ancestry, certified mindfulness teacher, Forest Bathing guide, and award-winning filmmaker. A devoted student of Amazonian Indigenous wisdom, her work is rooted in Earth-based and ancestral ways of knowing, while also drawing from evidence-based science. It honors the natural world as breathing, relational, and sacred.

Through gentle, experiential practices, Sylvie supports participants in softening limiting stories of the mind and reconnecting with the beauty and sacredness of being alive - in relationship with self, one another, and the living world.

Narrated by Liam Neeson, her film Love Thy Nature earned 27 awards and sparked over 300 global screening events. The film explores how our distancing from nature has shaped personal, social, and planetary suffering - and how remembering our belonging can become a source of healing.

In her workshops, Sylvie creates spaces where loving awareness, sacred reciprocity, embodied presence, communal rhythms, and shared joy can naturally emerge. Participants often reflect that they leave with a renewed sense of belonging and aliveness, along with a deepened care for Earth.

Fluent in four languages, Sylvie is known as a warm, attentive, and intuitive guide who brings mindfulness, heart-centered, and nature-based practices to support inner and outer transformation.

More about Sylvie's work can be found at LoveThyNature.com

Adam Lobel



Adam Lobel, PhD, MDiv, practices at the threshold of ecology, Buddhist-inspired meditation and philosophy, contemplative education, and psycho-social political change. He is a father, partner, practitioner-scholar of philosophy and religion, environmental justice activist, and Ecodharma guide whose work weaves together contemplative practice, ecological thought, and cultural transformation.

Adam holds a PhD in Religious Studies and a Master of Divinity from Harvard University, where he helped develop a program in Buddhist Ministry. His academic work has focused on Tibetan Buddhism, Dzogchen and Bön, phenomenology, ethics, and contemporary philosophy. He has taught Ecopsychology at Chatham University's Falk School of Sustainability, Buddhist and Phenomenological Psychology at Point Park University, and has lectured at institutions including the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and Arizona State University.

His teaching explores ecological awareness and practice, open awareness and elemental methods, spiritual "warriorship," contemporary theory, and what he describes as the Four Fields of eco-political contemplative practice. He is also a Guiding Teacher for One Earth Sangha, where he teaches in the EcoSattva Training and supports Buddhist teachers in developing more responsive forms of Ecodharma.

Earlier in his career, Adam served as an Acharya and senior teacher in the Shambhala tradition, where he helped develop curriculum and train teachers. He resigned from that role in 2018 amid the tradition's ethical crisis and revelations of abuse of power.

Based in Western Pennsylvania, Adam is involved in local environmental justice movements in a region shaped by the legacies of steel, coal, fracking, plastics, and petrochemical development.

He has guided bearing-witness retreats to fracking pads, oil sites, plastic plants, mines, and polluted waterways, and regularly co-leads meditations listening to the Ohio River. Through 4F Regeneration, he supports nonprofits, government agencies, and practitioners working in climate solutions, environmental justice, and regeneration. Across his work, he remains attuned to the possibility of reverent, just, terrestrial civilization.

Alexander "Brave Journey" Sterling



Alexander "Brave Journey" Sterling is an enrolled citizen of the Ramapough Lenape Nation, as well as Black and Cuban, with roots in Rhode Island, California and New Jersey. He leads a life shaped by the ongoing work of relationship: to community, to spirit, to land, and to the possibility of building futures our people can recognize as our own. He is the Founder and CEO of Turtle Island Community Capital, a Native-led community development financial institution working to expand access to capital, technical assistance, and economic infrastructure for Indigenous and underserved communities across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic.

Alexander's work lives at the intersection of Indigenous economic sovereignty, clean energy, philanthropy, and community-rooted finance. He is known for helping translate complex systems like investment, lending, institutional design, and philanthropic strategy into tools that can serve people with greater dignity, reciprocity, and self-determination. His approach is shaped not only by professional experience, but by lived experience, ancestral responsibility, and a belief that capital can be practiced as a form of repair rather than extraction.

Alongside his work in finance and institution building, Alexander has a long relationship with contemplative practice, especially Zen Buddhism, and with broader traditions of inquiry rooted in Classical, Modern, and Eastern philosophy. That formation has deeply influenced how he leads: with attention to presence, ethics, impermanence, discipline, and the inner work required to meet complexity without losing one's humanity.

Alexander "Brave Journey" Sterling (continued)

Over the years, he has moved through healing arts and spiritually grounded community spaces on both coasts, including time in circles connected to The Center SF and other practice-based communities where ritual, reflection, dialogue, and embodiment were held as essential parts of collective healing.

He has facilitated and supported meditation workshops, reflective gatherings, and community conversations in both intimate and public settings, bringing together people across difference with warmth, candor, and care. Whether in contemplative spaces, leadership circles, philanthropic rooms, or Native community settings, Alexander is often called into the role of bridge-builder and community facilitator — someone able to hold vision and vulnerability at the same time, and to help others find language for what they already know in their bones.

A speaker, strategist, and field leader, Alexander has shared his perspective in spaces spanning community development, clean energy, impact investing, Indigenous leadership, and healing-centered practice. But at the center of Alexander's life is his family. He is a father of three small children, and much of his work in the world is rooted in the responsibility and wonder of helping shape a future they can grow into with dignity, belonging, and possibility. His understanding of love, kinship, and commitment is also shaped by a polyamorous family life, and by the care, honesty, and daily practice of relationship he shares with his two lovely partners. For Alexander, family is not separate from his public work, it is one of the places where he most deeply learns reciprocity, accountability, tenderness, and the courage it takes to build a life aligned with one's values.

Across all of his work, he is guided by relationship, courage, and the conviction that strong communities deserve systems — financial, cultural, and spiritual — designed in their image

Jessica Harjo



Jessica Harjo is a soul embodied human being and lifelong learner. She's a mother of three daughters, three stepchildren, and four grandchildren. For the past eighteen years, Jessica has worked in the nonprofit sector as the Director of Operations for the Tribal Law and Policy Institute. Her multicultural ancestry (San Carlos Apache, Chicana/Mexican, Filipina, Japanese, and English American) has been a source of strength in her life and is reflected in her work to recognize and uplift multicultural and Indigenous knowledge.

As a nonprofit leader, Jessica specializes in policy development, administrative infrastructure and team development, project management, HR implementation, business, and financial operations management. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Film, Media, and Social Justice and a minor in Business Administration. Jessica also holds a Masters in Business Administration from Mount Saint Mary's University.

Jessica has volunteered on numerous nonprofit boards that serve Indigenous communities. She's a graduate of the Hoffman Process, which she credits as an important platform to continue healing, visualizing, and growing. She's an active volunteer for the Hoffman Inner Work for Indigenous Leaders Advisory Circle and the Indigenous outreach team. She provides support for other Indigenous Process fellows and graduates. She's also on the Board of Benefit Honoring, a 501c3 nonprofit whose mission is to build a global community rooted in Indigenous traditional life ways, bio cultural conservation and education.

A student of Yoga philosophy, Buddhism, and Indigenous Mindfulness, Jessica is currently working on her RYT500 Yoga Teacher Training and expanding her consciousness to be a better mother, human being and steward of the earth.

Jessica and her husband, Tim Harjo, live in Oklahoma, where they balance their careers, family life, and running Sovereign Ranch, a first-generation, Native owned bison ranch.

Joseph Stacey



Joseph Stacey is a Hopi-Laguna Pueblo multi-media artist whose work brings Pueblo culture, design, and contemporary expression into dialogue. He describes his art as “Contemporarily Indigenous,” weaving the past of his traditional and cultural upbringing with an abstract contemporary vision.

His work spans colorful representational images of animals, abstract expressionist pieces, graffiti-inspired forms, and art installations rooted in Pueblo design.

Joseph’s creative process is grounded in prayer, relationship, and intention. He begins each painting with a short prayer, blessing the canvas with positive energy. For him, each piece carries part of himself and reflects a living connection to culture, land, memory, and spirit.

Through visual elements, he honors the natural world, Indigenous roots, the importance of the elements, and the original peoples of place. His work asks viewers to pause, breathe, acknowledge their relationship with the land, and recognize the continuing presence and creativity of Indigenous peoples.

Haley Laughter



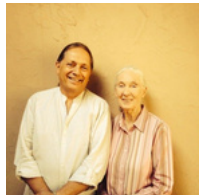
Haley Laughter is the founder and CEO of Hózhó Total Wellness, a mobile yoga and meditation studio rooted in Diné teachings of holistic wellbeing. Through yoga, meditation, Indigenous philosophy, and community-based wellness education, she works to support healing among Indigenous people and communities affected by historical and intergenerational trauma.

Haley is Diné, with family roots near Gallup, New Mexico, on the outskirts of the Navajo Nation. Her clans are Bit’ahnii, Tódich’ii’nii, Dibéłzhíní, and Táchii’nii. Raised in Salt Lake City, Utah, she grew up amid the impacts of assimilation and disconnection from Native language, culture, and identity. As an adult, she returned to the region where her mother was raised and began reconnecting more deeply with her ancestry, culture, land, and Tribal traditions.

This return became a turning point in her healing journey. Haley found that yoga helped her integrate mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing, while Diné teachings offered a powerful framework for living in balance. The word Hózhó refers to a way of thinking, speaking, walking, and living in beauty, harmony, and right relationship. For Haley, this path includes care for the body, breath, mind, spirit, community, land, Mother Earth, Father Sky, the elements, and the wider web of life.

In 2016, Haley founded Hózhó Total Wellness to share these practices with others, especially in rural and reservation communities where access to wellness resources can be limited. She teaches classes, workshops, and presentations on yoga, self-care, Indigenous consciousness, and healing from historical trauma. Her work emphasizes that yoga is not only about movement or physical flexibility; it is a way for people to experience their bodies as sacred, reconnect with breath and spirit, and restore balance within themselves and their communities. Haley is also the founder of the Indigenous Yoga Instructors Association, which supports the growth of Indigenous yoga teachers and expands access to culturally grounded yoga practices through online and community-based offerings.

McClellan (Mac) Hall

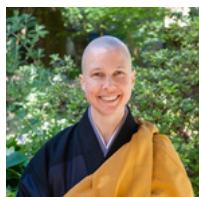


McClellan (Mac) Hall is of Cherokee descent, with the Overhill Cherokees. Mac is a former teacher and principal of Tribal schools and founded the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, nearly 40 years ago. Mac developed the Project Venture program, designated as the Most Effective program for Native youth, in the SAMHSA National High Risk Youth Study.

He has dedicated nearly 50 years to Native youth development. Mac is a graduate of the Native Teacher Education Program at the University of Washington and holds a master's in education from Arizona State University.

Mac has been practicing meditation for nearly 50 years and is currently working to integrate Indigenous Mindful practice into the nonprofit's work with Native youth. Mac and his wife Pauline have been together 48 years.

Reverend Tenku Ruff



Tenku Ruff, Osho, MDiv, BCCI is a Soto Zen Buddhist priest and Kokusai Fukyōshi (International Representative of Soto Zen, Japan). She currently serves as Head Priest of Beacon Zen Temple in Beacon, New York (www.beaconzen.org). Tenku's novice training took place in Zen monasteries in both Japan and North America, giving her a unique perspective on how Buddhism is practiced in different cultures.

Tenku served as President and (later) Ethics Committee Chair of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, holds a Buddhist Master of Divinity degree from Maitripa College, and is a board-certified chaplain with the Association of Professional Chaplains. She has a strong interest in ethics, inter-Buddhist / interfaith dialogue, and ways people can support each other and grow through challenges in life.

Silvermoon Mars LaRose



Silvermoon Mars LaRose is a citizen of the Narragansett Tribal Nation and the Assistant Director of the Tomaquag Museum. She has worked in Tribal communities for over 20 years, serving in the areas of health and human services, education, and humanities.

As a public servant, Silvermoon serves on the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission. Additionally, she is a board member of the Rhode Island Foundation. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology, a minor in Justice Law and Society from the University of Rhode Island, and continued her studies at Western Washington University in Rehabilitation Counseling.

As an artist and educator, she hopes to foster Indigenous empowerment through education, community building, and the sharing of cultural knowledge and traditional arts.

Notes

¹ The BESS Family Foundation. 2025. Discussion and Partnerships: Bridging Tribal Nations and Buddhist Practices. [Available online.](#)

² Posner, S. M. 2025. Earth Awareness: Mapping an Emergent Relational Field. Challenges, 17(1), 1. [Available online.](#)

³ John Stokes and Kanawahienton (David Benedict, Turtle Clan/Mohawk). Original inspiration: Tekaronianekon (Jake Swamp, Wolf Clan/Mohawk). 1993. Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address: Greetings to the Natural World. Six Nations Indian Museum and the Tracking Project. [Available online.](#)

⁴ For example:

- Protocols for Non-Indigenous People Working with Indigenous Knowledge, developed by the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Labs at Algoma (Canada) and Deakin (Australia) Universities ([available here](#))
- A book titled The Gatherings: Reimagining Indigenous-Settler Relations ([available here](#))
- A report on Working with Indigenous Knowledge holders to advance equitable and inclusive nature and climate initiatives ([available here](#)).

⁵ The comparisons of teachings from Buddhist and Tribal Nations traditions is [available here](#) and will be updated over time.

Suggested citation:

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