



Natural Dharma Fellowship 2023 Annual Report

October 21, 2023

NDF Annual Letter from Lama Willa and Lama Liz

Dear Friends and Sangha of Natural Dharma Fellowship,

Here in New England, as the leaves ignite into colors of flame, our hearts are filled with gratitude for the community of Natural Dharma Fellowship: for dharma friendships, for our amazing staff and volunteers, for dedicated mitras and teachers, for local practice groups, supportive members, and kind benefactors. How fortunate we are to live interwoven in such circles of care!

Our gratitude extends beyond the human, to the land, trees, forests, animals, fungi, water and skies—to the profound mother of all life. This beautiful planet, the Buddha of our time, reflects the dharma of interdependence back to us, reminding us of our true roots. Always, she reminds us to live in harmony, to step lightly on the earth, to befriend and tend, to bend but not break.

Our gratitude extends also to the lineage, to our spiritual ancestors, those who lived before us and who passed down the precious teachings that we receive today in this time and place, an ocean away from the motherlands of India and Tibet. We offer our gratitude to the ancestors who help us understand what it means to live a life of wisdom and compassion, who invite us to empty out in order to fill up, who pass down the legacy of bodhicitta, more precious than gold. To the lineages of native wise ones beyond label or religion that knew of abundance and compassion, that offer us methods for turning poison into nectar, we pay homage.

Since 2009, Natural Dharma Fellowship has supported the transmission of the indigenous wisdoms of Tibetan Buddhism to the West in a form synchronized with this time and place. Our intention has been to weave a mandala—a community of teachers and practitioners— that

expresses a sincere, lived commitment to nurturing innate love and compassion, and to deepening our relationship with the essence of the heart-mind, primordial wisdom.

In 2011, our community found a spiritual home in Wonderwell Mountain Refuge, a beautiful ecosystem of land and structure where, over the years, our mission has organically expanded to include an emphasis on embodiment, on the idea that dharma lives in our entire being. We have focused on how integrating cherished principles of compassion, wisdom, and non-harm into deeper levels of our lived experience—our life, work, and relationships—helps build a foundation for a better world.

Our pillars of development at Wonderwell include training in wisdom and compassion as emphasized in the Margha Program, fierce love and selflessness as emphasized in the Vajrayana program, and non-dual awareness as emphasized in the Rewilding training and Dzogchen teachings. Retreats on other aspects of the Dharma, from shadow work, exploring the Buddhist teachings on death and dying, and relational training enrich our development as full human beings.

The last few years have made it abundantly clear that we are living in an unprecedented, powerful age. We have entered, to borrow from popular terminology, the time of the Fourth Turning. The dharma we have inherited is about compassionate evolution and we clearly recognize that our “sacred” must now expand to embrace the non-human world, the plants, the animals, the soil and the water—to include the mother that we call Earth.

We live at a time when the Dharma is consciously expanding to meet the challenges of this time. We see the possibility of joining so many others as midwives of a fresh dharma, one that acknowledges the colonial past, leans towards social justice, and recenters the more-than-human world. It is an exciting time to be alive and to be together as a community of practitioners.

This year of 2023 has been a memorable one in our world history as the pandemic lifted and we reconnected with one another. In our dharma realm, this reconnection has been poignant and powerful. It has been a joy to watch our online sangha—who met Natural Dharma just recently during the pandemic—visit Wonderwell Mountain Refuge for the first time, and to witness the delight of our old sangha friends reconnecting with one another again in person. Many tears of joy have been shed in the driveway of Wonderwell and in our Dharma temple.

In February of 2023, we welcomed Karen Kharitanov into the role of Co-Managing Director of Natural Dharma Fellowship, working closely with her partner Barbara Waldorf. With Karen and Barbara as Co-Managing Directors, Natural Dharma Fellowship is moving into a new phase of integration and stability. We feel deeply fortunate that our vessel is in such good hands. Barbara and Karen lead with expertise, patience and care, embodying a unique and important model of dharma-infused co-leadership that is becoming a hallmark of NDF’s organizational structure.

This autumn, our sangha has experienced both heart aches and poignant joys. In September, we lost (in body but never in spirit) a very dear teacher with Natural Dharma Fellowship, Joel Beahr. His courage and grace throughout a long bout of Parkinsons inspired and instructed us. He has left us forever transformed. At nearly the same time, we joyfully welcomed Natalia and Peter's golden child Yaroslav Blank, whose vital energy and strong singing voice bring joy and laughter into our lives.

This autumn has also been memorable for a milestone in our history as a retreat center. Due to the kindness of many, Natural Dharma Fellowship has made a significant development that promises to expand the potential for our long term continuity. Our neighbor Alice Nulsen II (who passed away last year), and her two children Charlie and Alice Nulsen III, invited us to make an offer on her stunning 170 acre farm adjacent to Wonderwell known as Faraway Farm. Due to more kindness, this time from several generous sangha members who extended gifts and loans, we made that offer.

While we have yet to begin the fundraising to make this purchase viable, the wheels are turning. To steward Faraway Farm would open doors for the community of Natural Dharma Fellowship to protect the quiet open space of the ecosystem of Philbrick Hill, to offer longer solitary retreats, to support wilderness retreats onsite (an extended trail system), to cultivate community (a house and beautiful barn), and to expand capacity at Wonderwell.

In addition, we are exploring with Ausbon Sargent Land Preservation Trust the possibility of putting some portion of the land into conservation to more fully embody our values of sustainable stewardship of the more-than-human world. Please stay tuned for more developments!

As for updates from us as individuals, I (Liz speaking here) returned from my sabbatical after having spent the year immersing myself in experiencing the intersection between Buddhist meditation and indigenous plant wisdoms and medicines from South America. I learned how plant medicines can profoundly facilitate deep levels of personal and collective healing, while enhancing a direct experience of awareness of the truth of how things actually are, beyond all our limiting impressions. I look forward to learning more about how the wisdom and compassion of the plants can guide us into deeper levels of recognition of our inseparability from the more-than-human world.

As the fall turns to winter, I (Willa speaking here) will continue a rhythm that began for me during the pandemic, traveling to North Kohala on the Big Island of Hawaii to live at Kohala Sanctuary, a dharma refuge established by Joel and Michelle Levey. There, I am collaborating with beloved others to explore eco-village life, seeding roots and weaving relationships with friends, the land, and the plant world.

This winter, I am excited to explore food forest permaculture, while continuing my work and teaching with Natural Dharma Fellowship online. I look forward to sharing more with the sangha at Dharma Sundays and when I return to Wonderwell next June.

When we (both of us again!) look back on the last fourteen years since we were incorporated as a non-profit organization, it seems miraculous that we have grown so much and with such stability. This flourishing is due to the kindness, generosity and volunteer work of all of you—our supporters, friends, members, staff, core and visiting teachers, the Board of Directors, mitras, Zoom hosts, and so many others. This weaving of many hearts and hands is truly a blessing. Thank you for your part!

Wishing you abundant blessings, health and happiness,

Lama Willa and Lama Liz

October 10, 2023