

# A COMMUNITY OF ATTENTION

*Green Gulch Farm, a Zen Buddhist community and retreat center,  
embodies a deeply ecological and humane way of life*

by Stephanie Kaza

**C**ommunitas, communis – the Latin root for “community” means *common* or what is held in common, shared by many. At Green Gulch Farm and Zen Center, where I lived for three years, what is held in common is the place, the time together, and the teachings of Zen Buddhism. The community is mutually created by those who stay in this place for a period of time, whether for a few hundred years (as a redwood might) or a single day.

What is the shape of this place? Green Gulch Farm lies in a beautiful coastal valley in the flood plain of Green Gulch Creek, which empties out into the Pacific Ocean at Muir Beach, just north of

San Francisco. It is surrounded by open space protected by the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and Mount Tamalpais State Park. The valley is flanked on the north and south by sedimentary rock and open grassland ridges. It is blessed with fertile soils, mild and foggy summers, windy springs, and warbling songbirds.

Many people come to Green Gulch Farm in search of community, but it is elusive in definition. It is not defined by the experienced Zen priests who have been here 10-20 years; it is not the people who

come for lecture on Sunday; it is not the rolling hills dropping down to the ocean, nor the plant and animal communities known as grassland, coastal scrub, oak savanna, and stream or riparian. It is the *interaction* of all the various parts in any single moment. The task of this community is to offer room for all beings to grow and flourish within the limits of the landscape.

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Given the volume of traffic through Green Gulch, this is no easy task. Retreat centers often suffer from overuse of the land and the staff, and from projections of need for human community. Green Gulch serves thousands of people over the course of a year. A residential staff of 25-30 assisted by 10-20 guest students serves class and conference groups of 25-50 people each day, plus Sunday crowds of 200-300 visitors. Without some clear structure for human traffic flow and behavior, the capacity to offer spiritual and psychological nourishment would quickly erode. Over time, it is the structure which shapes the community and the practice of being together.

## RHYTHMS AND REFERENCE POINTS

The focus of Zen practice is to develop attention or mindfulness in relation to all beings and all activity. Over and over again we ask: Where am I? What am I doing right now? What is guiding my actions? Most of our decisions reflect personal preferences and an orientation to ourselves as enduring entities. Buddhist practice, however, is the constant stripping away of false references to the self to reveal the larger patterns of interconnection and interdependence. One finds one's bearings through temporal and spatial reference points beyond the false sense of self. Thus the schedule and the landscape provide the structure of both community and practice.

The daily schedule shapes the rhythm for the whole human community. Sitting meditation and service in the morning is followed by breakfast and morning work period. After lunch is another work period, with meditation before and after dinner. Through changes in abbots, directors, and water levels, this schedule has remained a constant shaping force, an experience held in common by those who visit or live at Green

Gulch. Meditation and meals are announced by specific rolldown patterns on the wooden *han* and bells. Though apparently consistent in form, the soundscape reflects the quality of mind and attention of those who sound the instruments. These sounds in the empty silence of dusk or dawn are for some people the most powerful impressions of place and community. They represent the possibility of sustainable human relationships in the context of spiritual practice.

The weekly rhythm is marked by Friday – a day off, before the heavily attended events of the weekend. The monthly rhythm is focused around the Full Moon Precepts and Founders' Memorial ceremonies – services that are the same each month and help in developing a kind of community consciousness of the moon cycle and respect for the lineage of teachers through time.

We also mark the four turning points of the year. Spring Equinox service is set up on the east-facing side of the valley where we chant to the rising sun of the new year; Summer Solstice is marked at mid-day; Autumn Equinox with an altar facing west in a service at dusk; Winter Solstice at midnight. Always the chanting is the same; only the timing, location, and dedication vary, grounding the changes of the year in our bodies through a sense of seasonal rhythm and place.

The yearly temporal reference points are Arbor Day in February, Buddha's Birthday in April, and Thanksgiving. The whole community participates, including the wider group of children and families from around the Bay Area. For both residents and those who visit infrequently, these celebrations are important patterns that form a sense of human community in relation to the land. On Arbor Day we plant 300-500 tree seedlings, restoring the lost forests of the hillsides and creating windbreaks for crop protection. On Buddha's Birthday, we survey the local wildflowers and chant the names of all in bloom as a part of the joyful service giving thanks to the baby Buddha. And on Thanksgiving we offer abundant gifts to the altar of the year's harvest of potatoes, squash, lettuce, pumpkins, beets, and herbs. Each of these ceremonies contributes to the group sense of place, the traditions of honoring the valley and our interdependence with it. They work and are effective because people want to participate in them; they want to reconnect with the land in a spiritual context.

## A SENSE OF PLACE

Just as temporal reference points form a framework for community experience, so do spa-

tial reference points serve to contain and shape each person's journey through this particular landscape. External or geographical reference points are marked by the four directions and the high and low points of the landscape. Within this container, people, owls, and field mice find special spots of solitude, shelter, and perspective.

At Green Gulch the four directions are conveniently aligned more or less with the landforms, making it easy to find one's bearings in the larger universe. The creek flows south to the ocean from the lip of the watershed a few miles inland. The ridges run north-south, so the rising sun and moon shift along this axis as the seasons turn. We know the high winter moon of the Solstice will rise at the high end of the hill when the low winter sun shifts to the south. Several times each year on a full moon night, we walk the big loop up to Coyote Ridge on the south flank, along its spine, down by the ocean and back through the valley. This is a way of incorporating the landscape into our bodies, of knowing community through knowing place.

The low points of water also mark the shape of this place, and the limits to human, plant and animal activity as well. The last five years of drought have been particularly constraining, especially in September and October before the rains (we hope) come. At the end of a long summer, the creeks are virtually dry and the water tank fills much more slowly from the hillside spring. We ask guests and residents to limit shower and laundry use. All toilets are already low-flush and kitchen practices are relatively water-efficient for the feeding of 50-100 people each day. Water limits also define irrigation practices for the farm, worked out in cooperation with the local Muir Beach water district. The nature of this water determines how we exist here, the size of the



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community, and the necessary mindfulness practices for water.

The strongest sense of place and spatial reference at Green Gulch lies in the farm and garden areas. Two acres at the head of the valley are planted in organic perennial and annual flowers; 20 acres down the valley support potatoes, squash, and 16 varieties of lettuce. The soil has been greatly enriched by organic compost from food scraps and green clippings, carefully cooked to ripe perfection – a metaphor for the transformation of delusions. Zen students and staff tend



Green Gulch Valley

flowers and vegetables as part of mindfulness work practice, reinforcing a sense of connection with the land that generates their lunches and altar arrangements. The garden is often used for walking meditation practice during retreats. Here students can breathe deeply and enjoy the efforts of gardeners and plants in realizing beauty. At New Year's, we recognize the role of the farm and garden as practice sites, and light incense at the site altars as part of a center-wide circumambulation and renewal ritual of place.

As poet and Zen student Gary Snyder suggests, "There is strength, freedom, sustainability, and pride in being a practiced dweller in your own surroundings, knowing what you know." For many people who come to Green Gulch, the place is the draw. Their sense of community, of

*communing*, is being at a place that is beautiful, that is cared for, that is a container for spiritual practice. It is not the same as a park or a backyard; it is a place to find orientation in the context of landscape and schedule. It offers the possibility of finding one's self by joining the flow of life through this community of time and place.

## TO BENEFIT ALL BEINGS

A Zen practice center is distinct from other country retreat spots because of the shared intention to practice certain guidelines and teachings. Here community is sustained not just by external spatial and temporal reference points, but by cultivation of internal reference points for choices of action. The central Buddhist teachings naturally encourage an ecological awareness and thus serve as ethical criteria for community practices. "An ethical life is one that is mindful, mannerly, and has style." In Soto Zen tradition, the emphasis is very much on ethical or mindful acts in everyday practice. The simple, repetitive acts of eating, breathing, walking, and greeting others become opportunities for deepening a sense of interdependence and community. Each moment in place reflects myriad causes and conditions that all contribute to the particular experience of community at that instant for that person.

For Earth Day 1990 we held two ceremonies to highlight key Buddhist teachings in an environmental framework. The Animal Memorial Service was an occasion to express our sadness and grief for the animals and plants who died inadvertently or deliberately as part of the organic farming and gardening work at Green Gulch. We also invited people to submit names of endangered species, or pets who had died, or any other specific animals of concern. We repeated a litany of interdependence, the primary law of Buddhist philosophy, also expressed as "co-dependent arising." In the ancient Pali Canon, this is simply stated:

*This being, that becomes;  
from the arising of this, that arises;  
This not being, that becomes not;  
from the ceasing of this, that ceases.*

Following this service we honored the Three Treasures and the Three Pure Precepts in front of an altar set up by the central coast live oak tree. This ceremony was inspired by stories of "tree ordinations" in Thailand: monks give priest vows to the local ancient tree elders. These ordained trees then serve to bless and protect all the other trees in the area and, in consequence, the village is also protected.

The Three Treasures are the Buddha or teacher, the Dharma or truth, and the Sangha or practice community. By vowing not to abuse the Three Treasures, one establishes internal reference points for acting in the world. In an ecological sense, all beings are Buddhas with teachings to offer. One can see the great horned owl as having Buddha-nature, and listen to the gophers as teachers as well as the redwoods. One can sit by the side of the creek Buddha and learn the teachings of water. The Dharma is the truth of relationships, of interdependence, of the emptiness of all things of a separate self. In each step, each moment, each place is a truth of co-conditioned relationship – shaped by the landscape as well as the mind of the one who walks in the landscape. The Sangha is the wider community of all beings practicing/being together, sharing our commonality of impermanence. The *ecocentric* sangha, as Bill Devall describes it, then practices in the context of place, in witness to place, and in service to place.

In repeating our vows to tree and place, we chanted the Three Pure Precepts, often condensed to “Do no evil, do good, and save all beings.” The act of saying vows is a practice that shapes the internal landscape, the realm of choice and intention. It is also a practice that bonds people into a community. The vows represent an agreement to behave well together, with human as well as plant, animal, and landscape beings. They acknowledge the impacts of our actions and encourage awareness and restraint. By vowing to benefit all beings, we vow to benefit our own lives in turn.

### COMMUNITY AS TEACHER

As a visible public practice place, Green Gulch is in a position to serve as a model for ecological community living. In this regard, consistency is important – consistency between the teachings, the place, and the practice. With the inspiration of various staff members, Green Gulch has made great strides over the last two years in its efforts to recycle everything from incense ash to batteries. The 1991 winter practice period focused on tree planting for its daily work, including public work days every Saturday. Meals have always been vegetarian, thus reducing the impact on animals as well as the consumption of grain, water, and energy that support meat production. In the last year, the officers have undertaken the task of “eco-monitoring” Green Gulch, Tassajara, and the San Francisco City Center for environmentally effective and ineffective practices. Two of the appointed Board members this year represent ecological interests and concerns.

Still, there are many areas open to improvement. Though many of the practices I’ve described here are now seen as traditional (in the short space of 10-15 years), not everyone who spends time at Green Gulch becomes environmentally enlightened. We do not always make sure people see the landscape outside the zendo. I would, for example, be tempted to require a ridgetop hike and introduction to the water system for all incoming guest students. But the

practices are evolving, and they are guided by the traditional monastic model of restraint, simplicity, and moderation. I have watched the greening of the residential abbott and the stable presence of the farm and garden staff. People keep coming in large numbers to learn from the land and the teachings and to participate, at least for a time, in this elusive event called community. They come to taste, as Gary Snyder puts it, “a life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humor, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking to bring us close to the actually existing world and its wholeness.” ▲



Arbor Day

### FOR FURTHER READING

Devall, Bill. “Ecocentric Sangha” in *Dharma Gaia: A Harvest of Essays in Buddhism and Ecology*. Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990.

Roberts, Elizabeth and Elias Amidon, eds. *Earth Prayers*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991.

Snyder, Gary. *The Practice of the Wild*. San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990.

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