

Penetrating the Big Pattern

By Stephanie Kaza

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Stephanie is the author of The Attentive Heart: Conversations with Trees, meditative essays on deep ecological relations with trees, and co-editor (with Kenneth Kraft) of Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism, classic and modern texts supporting a Buddhist approach to environmental activism. This essay offers an example of such an exploration; it was originally written for a Buddhist-Christian dialogue session of the American Academy of Religion meeting, November 2001.

Stephanie Kaza's quest, described here, represents the kind of open-minded seeking and all embracing spiritual acceptance that is needed for times like these.

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When does a personal journey begin? At birth? At the moment of first loss? At the point of spiritual self-awareness? In some previous lifetime? What are the markers? How does one define the journey? What makes such a story meaningful to others?

My personal religious journey, the part I can remember, began when I first discovered light. I was sitting on the second story deck of our house in Buffalo, New York, at age five, spellbound by the dancing shadows of the big apple tree. Shimmering leaves, light and dark changing by the second, alive, dynamic, radiant and mesmerizing. Across the afternoon the light shifted, the sun dropping lower in the sky. Some big pattern penetrated my young consciousness. What was it?

As I dressed for Easter Sunday and dutifully attended Methodist Sunday school, I didn't connect this social activity with the mystery I'd encountered. But when we drove across the country to move to Portland, Oregon, there it was again... the Rocky Mountains! Big, splendid space on a scale way beyond anything I'd ever known. A magnificent landscape, mountains of such measure I could not even comprehend what I was seeing. Despite the barbs of family squabbles, something really big entered my nine-year-old mind.

For the next seven years we attended Unitarian-Universalist churches, first the big downtown church and then a small local fellowship. I sang in the adult choir downtown, getting myself to practice by bus in a proud, independent sort of way. Then in high school I played the piano for fellowship services and enjoyed my role in setting a reflective mood for others. The adults engaged in worthwhile discussions; our youth group visited various world religious temples for field trips. I especially enjoyed the dark smoky mystery of the Greek Orthodox Church and its undecipherable chants.

At Oberlin College, music was my spiritual companion. I had the good fortune to sing in an excellent choir under the

demanding leadership of Robert Fountain, a protegee of Robert Shaw. We took up difficult Bach cantatas, eerie twelve-tone Schoenberg, and tender Ravel vignettes. We practiced five hours a week, including two hours every Saturday, and we were expected to memorize everything we sang. During spring break we performed on tour, a concert each night, traveling by bus across midwest and north Atlantic states. Before every concert, Mr. Fountain would lead us in a moment of silent prayer, indicating this music was serving some bigger purpose. The year after I graduated, the choir sang the Mozart Requiem in Washington, D.C. to honor the dead soldiers and war protestors, and to remember beauty in the midst of agony. Sometimes the harmonies would ring so perfectly in tune and soar so high, I would tremble with goosebumps, electrified with ecstasy. Now the big beauty was in my body, singing, communing, gathering me up in its mystery.

Tree, landscape, beauty, song – what world religion was this? None I had been taught about, or at least in a way I could put these things together. The Vietnam War tore apart any sense of stability and meaning in my small world; I nearly lost my first great love to the killing fields. Where was God in this insanity? Not until things settled down could I turn my attention back to the mystery. By then, I was exploring the gateways of ocean, redwoods, dance, and ritual. When my dance teacher, Tandy Beal, went to Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado its first year, I followed her the next summer. "You should go", she said; "you'd love it". High in the mountain air, sitting by water, walking in the craggy hills, listening to Chogyam Trungpa teach, I fell in love ... with everything! I learned to meditate, zazen-style; I tried dance and improvisational theater based in egoless practice; I absorbed Zen insights from Alan Ginsberg, Phillip Glass, Anne Waldman, crazy wisdom poets drawn to Trungpa.

When I returned to Santa Cruz I took up a sitting practice on my own and sat every day for five years in steadfast

devotion. To what? I knew hardly anything about Buddhism, but meditation seemed like a good thing to do. Only after I finished a Ph.D., taught environmental ethics, left the university, couldn't get a job, and tried living in a Mendocino hippie commune, did I consider formal Zen practice. After some negotiation, I moved into a small sangha house at the Santa Cruz Zen Center and took up daily practice as a way of life, meeting my eventual ordination teacher there.

I was warned by other students that Zen practice would only make my life harder. And certainly the next few years had their ups and downs. I suffered severe chronic fatigue after a difficult season of field teaching in the Sierra Mountains; I lost jobs and grants, and wondered about my future. But Zen took hold of me and wouldn't let go. Even when I was too sick to sit, others sat for me. When I realized a life of practice was my top priority, I moved to Green Gulch Zen Center for three years, steeping myself in the Dharma and all the complexities of sangha life, even while I continued my work as an environmental educator.

The rest is a blur of entering the landscape of mountains and rivers at more levels than I can name. Now I am swimming in it, no escape. I teach, I write, I stumble around in the chaos of it, stretching to stay conscious in the tests of life. What matters is the practice itself: taking up the precepts, working with mindfulness, offering kindness and compassion. The absolute emphasis in Zen on direct experience grounds me in the immediacy of the moment, pointing always straight at the mystery, leaving me groping with emptiness. What is it? Pre-verbal nondualistic perception — what truth exists in *this* space that can be known by *this* body? Sesshin retreats are the best, the deepening silence across seven days, relaxing into the fullness of the whole conviviality. I love the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic of the Japanese tradition — black robes, elegant flowers, clean food, nothing extra. While others were shopping around for spiritual teachers, I bonded with Zen and never turned away. Now the

Four Noble Truths, the Six Paramitas, the law of interdependence — these core philosophies come alive for me in my environmental work. This is my life work: finding the meeting place of ancient practice tradition and modern love of landscape.

This new permutation of Zen for me reflects influences of other lifestreams; Zen easily overlaps, engages, supplements, deconstructs other traditions, keeping them honest and helpful. From the Unitarian tradition and my Master of Divinity training at Starr King School for the Ministry, I take up the embrace of social justice work as religious work. From the Goddess traditions and bold feminist theologians I celebrate love of the body as primary contact. From Native Americans and nature writers, I deepen my experience of land as sacred, believing that living in place is a holy practice, keeping one humble and aligned with the elemental. From Christians, I accept the power of prayer to manifest one's intention. But from a Zen perspective, such prayer is not to bow before an absolute other, but rather to stabilize one's own commitment to ethical behavior and insightful awareness.

Is dual or syncretic practice possible? Effective? At one point I flirted with the idea of becoming a Zen Unitarian-Universalist minister. Though this combination was a not a problem for either lineage, I personally could not make them work together. The U-U emphasis on the verbal gate to wisdom was in direct clash with the Zen emphasis on the nonverbal. I could not find a clear U-U aesthetic or set of rituals that took me to the same depth of journey as the Zen approach. And I knew for certain that I could not manage the politics of two major traditions as they dealt with their own governance issues.

For me it was much easier to blend the Goddess tradition with Zen through the parallel practice link with the natural world. Celebrating the seasons, marking the days of solstice and equinox, the full moon cycles — this we did at Green

Gulch in a rural setting where it seemed natural and easy. As the daughter of a feminist, I knew I had to free myself from debilitating social conditioning impugning women as inferior, impure, second class. If the body of Earth was beautiful, then so too were the bodies of all the creatures, including humans, especially women – beautiful in their own right, unfiltered by the male gaze. The Goddess tradition exalted the power of women in their connection with nature; this helped mitigate the Japanese patriarchal standards that came with Zen to America.

Interreligious dialogue is something that has gone on in my head for as long as I have been seeking a spiritual path. Since nothing really fit, I had to keep asking each tradition what it had to offer. One would speak for a time, then another, and over time the questions were forced to penetrate deeper than my intellect. I wanted to see what lined up with my own experience of truth. Talking with others in recent dialogues has been helpful, but mostly as a supplement to my own inner dialogues. One semester in divinity school, I was determined to have an intimate encounter with Jesus. If his spirit and love were so accessible to millions of people, I

thought I should be able to contact this directly myself. In fact, it did happen through the study of the gospels, but he was not alone! In one visionary experience, I felt Jesus walking on my left side, while the Goddess held my right hand. Ahead of me danced Coyote, leading the way, and behind me, keeping me steady, was the Buddha. Surely with all that help I would find my way!

Now my primary dialogue is between Zen and ecology. I want to know how the philosophy and practice of this wisdom stream can help us deal with the tremendous environmental challenges facing the world today. We are literally overwhelmed by the magnitude of global climate change, species extinction, air and water pollution, toxic waste, landscape disruption. Forces of disconnection dominate most political and economic arenas; the cultural climate is rife with violence and dysfunctionality. In this careening volatile instability, the discipline of a Buddhist approach may provide some points of clarity. I keep swimming with it, even as the trees fall and my heart breaks over and over again.

BUDDHISM AND ECOLOGY

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