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Planting Seeds of Joy

by STEPHANIE KAZA

On my altar at home stands a small bronze casting of Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion. Surrounded by redwood stems and acorns, she listens to the cries of the world with equanimity. On my desk is an image of the Buddha in meditation. He is touching the Earth with his right hand to counter the forces of ignorance. My third friend and teacher is Manjusri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, fierce protector of the truth. With his sharp sword he cuts through delusion, seeking insight into the nature of reality.

The courage and inspiration of the Buddha and bodhisattvas, or enlightened beings, are helpful to me in examining the spiritual dimension of the environmental crisis. They offer a model of radical presence in the world, of no separation between the one who suffers and the one who responds.[1] Like many others dedicated to environmental work, I move through waves of grief, rage, concern, and fear for the health of the planet. The extent of the damage is both debilitating and motivating. It seems certain that the scale of destruction has gone far beyond any ecological suffering known in the Buddha's time, yet I am confident that the Buddha's teachings are very relevant and useful for today's global crisis.

What is a Buddhist spiritual response to this serious state of affairs? What tools does this tradition offer that may be helpful in cultivating spiritual integrity and confidence to act? Which teachings of the Buddha can be applied to the complex environmental

problems we face today? Concerned Buddhists in both the East and West are searching for answers to these questions. As in many traditions, we will need to apply Buddhist practice and philosophy in new ways to develop spiritually informed and environmentally sane modes of survival. I believe the self-disciplinary, analytic, and contemplative practices of Buddhism offer a powerful contribution to the urgent conversation of our times.

It may be no accident that the latest wave of Buddhist spiritual inquiry is most vital in North America, where environmental awareness and activism are most widespread.[2] The development of American Buddhism in the twentieth century will likely be influenced by citizen campaigns, green consumerism, and bioregional planning. Students of Buddhism with strong practice and clear intention may be of great service to the environmental movement—encouraging the greening of Buddhist practice centers, working in conflict mediation, or promoting interfaith dialogue.[3] Likewise, the environmental situation may serve the evolution of Buddhism by generating new expressions of a very old lineage of teaching.

In this essay, I look to fundamental Buddhist philosophy and practices for spiritual direction in meeting the challenges of today's ecological crisis. I begin with environmental suffering and the need to understand root causes. Then I consider how active spiritual attention to peace and love can create a basis for harmonious relations. I emphasize the importance of cultivating intimate relationships with the natural world and undertaking this work in the company of spiritual friends. It is my hope and desire that this writing will serve all beings in the struggle for existence.

Environmental Suffering

If one looks into the environmental situation, even superficially, the suffering of plants and animals, forests and rivers, local and indigenous peoples, is enormous. Wide-scale loss of habitat alone has caused countless deaths of individuals and extinction of an increasing number of species. In the Buddha's moment of profound awakening, he saw that all of life is mutually conditioned, that nothing exists as a separate or independent self. This truth, *paticca-samupadda*, or dependent co-arising, points to the commonality of

impermanence shared by all forms of existence—from mayflies to mountains. Suffering naturally arises from impermanence, from constant change and loss. However, in the last century, the scale of suffering has accelerated significantly, to the point of threatening the continuity of life.

The Buddha's Four Noble Truths offer a path to understanding through the study of suffering. The first truth establishes the nature of existence as suffering. Birth, sickness, old age, and death—whether of house cats, grandparents, creeks, love affairs, or institutions—are all marked by suffering. In his precepts of the Order of Interbeing, Vietnamese Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hanh urges, "Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering."[4] By opening to suffering, one gains a direct and moving experience of the nature of existence. To see a once-whole forest clear-cut to stumps, the soil eroding, the wildlife gone, is to experience the impact of environmental suffering.

The second Noble Truth is that the cause of suffering is ignorance, which gives rise to greed, fear, anger, and other painful mental and emotional states. These states of mind cause people to objectify other beings into consumable goods. Through Buddhist spiritual practice one can examine the consequences of environmental ignorance and see in detail the causes and conditions that perpetuate damage to the Earth. This means becoming aware of physical and ecological ignorance and also of dualistic, objectifying habits of mind.

The Third Noble Truth is that there can be an end to suffering, that one can find liberation from the traps of conceiving of the self as a distinct and separate identity. In an ecological sense, this liberation must also be from the nationalistic or local delusions of environmental autonomy. In fact, the movement of air and water transcends political boundaries. Accepting the possibility of liberation, one cultivates a strong intention to overcome barriers of separation.

The path to freedom from delusion lies in the Fourth Noble Truth—the Buddha's prescription for realization of the impermanent and interdependent nature of reality. This is the Eightfold Path of Right Understanding, Right Mindfulness, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Attention, and Right Concentration. Each of these spokes of the wheel offers one arena in

which spiritual practice can bring awareness to the environmental crisis.

The four Noble Truths can be applied as a framework for spiritual inquiry into specific environmental situations by posing four questions: (1) What is the problem or the suffering? (2) What are the causes of the suffering? (3) What would put an end to the suffering? (4) What is the path to realize this goal?[5] This analysis is deceptively simple, yet it is radical in including all forms of suffering—from individual people, animals, and trees to populations, communities, and ecosystems. It is also radical in that it cultivates compassion by directing attention to the actual suffering, thereby evoking a response of kindness and desire to alleviate suffering. I find this a refreshing alternative to technological or politically driven approaches that de-emphasize expression of concern or heartfelt relationship with those who are suffering.

Investigative spiritual practice can be very important in breaking through the mental habits of denial and idealization. When people understate or overstate environmental problems they compound the suffering, obscuring the way to acceptable solutions. A person in denial of global warming, habitat loss, or nuclear contamination—whether from fear, helplessness, or political pressure—blocks effective problem solving. Drugs and television that distance people from the natural world perpetuate an illusion of safety and isolation. Likewise, consumerism, in camouflaging the suffering behind produced goods encourages false relief from moral responsibility. Factory-farmed chickens, for example, are raised in extremely restrictive cages and processed at a pace that causes crippling diseases in very young women.[6] Vegetables grown on large-scale agribusiness farms require pesticide poisoning of the soil.[7]

In contrast, the person who romanticizes nature favors an idealized view, often based in nostalgia. The idealized view obscures the actual reality that may be hard to accept. In the tourist state of Vermont, known for its fall foliage and skiing, many locals ignore severe air pollution in late summer because they are economically dependent on the state's image. In a similar way, those who idealize native peoples and their spiritual traditions may overlook serious health threats for tribes living near nuclear waste dumps.

Buddhist mindfulness practice can be used in observing emotional

and mental responses to environmental suffering. For the concerned and compassionate person, emotional impacts come with the territory of environmental work. When I was teaching a course in International Environmental Studies to 230 undergraduates, I frequently found myself distraught after a lecture, overwhelmed by the dimensions of rain-forest destruction, desertification, or human rights abuses associated with environmental plunder. Drawing on the practices of meditation and compassion, I struggled to be present with the reality of environmental damage while maintaining a steady intention.

Through training with Joanna Macy, activist and spiritual teacher, I have come to accept the emotions themselves as indicators of the unsatisfactory moral quality of existing environmental relationships. Macy uses Buddhist meditation practices to go to the heart of personal response to the environmental crisis.[8] Her work is echoed by feminist theologian Bev Harrison who suggests that anger can be seen as a "feeling-signal that all is not well in our relation to others or to the world around us."[9] She argues that the power to respond to feeling is the power to create a world of moral relations. The spiritual practitioner who cultivates mindfulness in emotional response to suffering can bring compassion and understanding to those engaged in political battles for the environment.

Seeds of Joy

Awareness of environmental suffering by itself is not enough to generate a positive vision for the future. To nourish actively the storehouse of consciousness, Thich Nhat Hanh advocates being in touch with "what is wondrous, refreshing, and healing both inside yourself and around yourself."[10] His *gathas,* or meditation poems, cultivate spiritual attitudes that refresh the mind:

> Breathing in, I calm my body.
> Breathing out, I smile.
> Dwelling in the present moment,
> I know this is a wonderful moment!
>
> Water flows from high in the mountains.
> Water runs deep in the earth.

Miraculously, water comes to us
and sustains all life.[11]

He urges maintaining a half smile to stimulate positive energy, even under difficult conditions.

By planting seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in one's self, one facilitates the work of transformation in the inner consciousness. Reactions of anger and frustration, for example, in dealing with recalcitrant corporate polluters or uncooperative government officials, can be greatly mitigated by cultivating experiences of deep joy. The joy itself softens and outlasts the anger, reinforcing a sincere desire for the happiness of all beings. Joy may come from outdoor sensory contact with the natural world or quiet meditative practices that renew a sense of connection. By cultivating an internal reference point of joy, independent of shifting external circumstances, a spiritually trained environmentalist prepares to work for the long haul. This strength of intention can inspire others to steadiness in their efforts.

Joy and peace develop most easily through love. The Buddha emphasized two kinds of love: *karuna,* or compassion, and *metta,* or loving kindness. *Karuna* arises as the natural and spontaneous response of the heart to the suffering of others, often felt as the desire to help alleviate their pain. The capacity for compassion grows through opening the heart to circumstances filled with difficulty. This kind of spiritual effort can be extremely challenging in the face of massive forest destruction or slaughter of endangered species for trade. But to turn away from the pain is to close the heart, and therefore the mind, to the complexity and suffering of the ecological web.

Metta, or loving kindness, may be practiced independently of specific situations of suffering. The cultivation of metta is a matter of prayer, offering well-wishing on behalf of one's self, one's friends and family, even one's enemies, and then all beings. Cambodian monk Maha Ghosananda offers this prayer as an expression of metta in the Theravadin tradition of Southeast Asia:

May all beings exist in happiness and peace.
The suffering of Cambodia has been deep.

From this suffering comes great compassion.
Great compassion makes a peaceful heart.
A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person.
A peaceful person makes a peaceful family.
A peaceful family makes a peaceful community.
A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation.
A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world.[12]

To say such prayers on a regular basis develops the habit of thinking positively of others, whether plants, animals, or people. The internal mantra of well-wishing becomes more than a nice idea; it can be an actual force of renewal in the universe, affecting a person's environmental negotiations and creative problem solving. Words of loving kindness can encourage others to experience the love and beauty of the Earth, thus planting seeds of joy that may motivate and support a life of ecological sanity and sustainability.

For His Holiness, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, kindness is the heart of Buddhist practice and human relations. He advocates following a "policy of kindness"[13] no matter how troublesome the situation, preferring this approach to the lofty declaration of institutional doctrines or ideals. This might be called Buddhism with a small *b,* the everyday invisible challenge of simply getting along with the environment and each other.[14] As an example of this policy of kindness, the Dalai Lama has proposed that Tibet be declared a zone of *Ahimsa,* or nonharming, i.e., a nationwide ecological reserve.[15] Though Tibetans support this idea, Ahimsa is not possible because of Chinese suppression of human rights and escalation of environmental plundering.

A policy of kindness toward trees, rivers, air, and mountains implies careful attention to each relationship that makes up the interdependent web of life. This policy extended equally to human beings would smooth the way toward resolution of polarized, dualistic battles pitting forests against loggers, medicinal plants against indigenous tribes, dolphins against fishermen. A Buddhist approach to environmental conflict resolution is fundamentally based on metta and karuna. When people are motivated by a genuine desire for harmonious relations, they bring a creative openness and refreshing willingness to the problem at hand. One person's capacity to refrain from defensive

postures can allow a breakthrough in communication for a whole group. In combination with the compassionate force of Buddhist analysis, the practice of metta can generate forward movement in the midst of great crisis. As His Holiness points out,

> When we talk about preservation of the environment, it is related to many other things. Ultimately, the decision must come from the human heart. The key point is to have a genuine sense of universal responsibility, based on love and compassion, and clear awareness.[16]

Cultivating Intimacy

Of all the Buddha's teachings, one of the most central is that each person must find the Way of Truth for him or herself. The Buddha claimed no ultimate, absolute source of wisdom and enlightenment and offered no easy answers to those who engage in spiritual inquiry. He insisted that each person must study reality in depth, understanding suffering and dependent co-arising in the context of his or her own life. In the Buddhist texts, true knowledge is not seen as any final doctrinal truth, but as deep awareness of the process of knowing itself.

Direct knowing frees the mind to grasp fully and immediately the truth of the environmental web of relationships that support human life. Practices that quiet and focus the mind allow a person to cultivate intimate familiarity with the subtle aspects of consciousness. Opening to the true nature of existence, one may experience an intimate and awesome sense of connection with all beings. As one enters fully into the web, one gains a legitimate voice to speak of environmental relationships that have been ignored or damaged. Torn by the accelerating loss of temperate and tropical forests, I have felt compelled to speak out on behalf of trees. I have gone directly to the trees of my region to ask for counsel and stories.[17] It has taken time to learn to listen deeply in each encounter. I have attempted simply to be present with the trees, allowing them to guide my spiritual training and political responses. Each meeting has deepened my desire for intimacy with nonhuman beings and increased my confidence in the joy of relationship.

This work has not been without difficulty, however. As a Westerner, I have inherited the cultural conditioning of seeing plants and animals as separate objects or resources. The habit of objectivity easily overrules and silences the voice of intimacy. To reawaken spiritual connections with the environment requires deconditioning the objectifying mind. Through the Buddhist practice of discriminating awareness, one can see through concepts such as "board feet of timber," "game management," and "economic development." One's spiritual goal is to penetrate the objectifying mind to meet another being genuinely. This means going beyond generic archetypes to the unique history, geography, and relationships of each individual plant, animal, or ecosystem. The yearning for spiritual intimacy and interaction cannot be satisfied by generalized, oversimplified impressions.

Anthropocentric bias, central to Western ideology and economics, is perhaps one of the greatest deterrents to intimacy. If one sees the environment as primarily for human use—whether for food, shelter, recreation, or spiritual development—it is difficult to perceive the intrinsic nature of another being. Observing and correcting Western anthropocentric habits in all their complex and varied guises offers a lifetime of spiritual work. The Buddhist discipline of rigorous observation of the body-mind is very helpful in undertaking this challenging process of deconditioning.

I see this work as spiritual practice because it goes to the core of the ego-generating habit of mind. A primary effort in Buddhist training is to see how the mind constructs the illusion of a separate self. I believe the parallel environmental work is to investigate the cultural concepts that perpetuate the illusion of society as separate from the larger interdependent web of the natural world. This is not easy work; it is not a matter of false ideas being embedded only in someone else's mind. To acknowledge them in one's own mind is to face full complicity with the destructive effects of jet planes, automobiles, imported food, shopping malls, and copy machines. With some humility, one accepts the difficult struggle of simply seeing what we are doing.

Waking up Together

Liberty Hyde Bailey, an American naturalist at the turn of the century, said, "The happiest life has the greatest number of points

of contact with the world, and it has the deepest feeling and sympathy with everything that is."[18] I interpret this to mean that the joy of relating with others is the source of spiritual happiness. By this I do not refer to the generic experience of "at-one-ness" or cosmic unity with the natural world. I mean the actual day-to-day participation in specific relationships with specific nonhuman and human beings. This is what I call the cultivation of *relational richness.* One may engage in relationship with the moon, observing its waxing and waning cycle, position in the sky, and effect on one's moods and energy. One may cultivate relationships with migrating shorebirds, hatching dragonflies, or ancient redwoods. One may learn the topography of local rivers and mountains. These relations are not onetime encounters; rather they are ongoing friendships. Over time, they grow richer and come to define the terrain of one's existence. The greater the number of these points of contact and the longer the history of engagement with each one, the richer the experience of participating in the interdependent web.

Unfortunately, the opportunities for relational richness have been severely curtailed in many places because of ecological damage. Water pollution, loss of forests, and pesticide contamination have reduced local populations, limiting the chances for even first-time meetings. In these cases, ecological restoration becomes a practice of spiritual restoration, motivated by the desire for a relationally rich life. On Arbor Day at Green Gulch Farm and Zen Center in California, our tree planting is a joyful invitation for birds, wildflowers, and deer to return to the area. In this request lies the need and desire for spiritual community, the yearning for friendships not only with people, but also with animals, plants, land, and water.

Central to Buddhist practice is taking refuge in the Three Treasures—the *Buddha,* the *Dharma,* and the *Sangha.* In vowing not to abuse the Three Treasures, one acknowledges internal reference points for acting in the world. The Buddha is the teacher or source of teachings manifesting in many different awakened forms. The great horned owl Buddha offers teachings on stillness and the dark night; the creek Buddha speaks the teachings of water. Gophers, redwoods, and prominent peaks all carry their own evolutionary truth that informs and enriches our lives.

The Dharma is the truth of relationship and interdependence.

Each step, each moment, each place is a manifestation of co-conditioned relationship, shaped by the landscape as well as the mind of the one who walks in the landscape. Each experience of connection with members of the environmental web is a taste of the deeply intimate and intersupportive nature of reality.

Sangha has traditionally meant the monastic community or those who practice in a specific group or setting. As Buddhism matures in the West, the definition of sangha is evolving to include nonmonastics and for some, the plants and animals of the local environmental web. The largest sense of community is all beings practicing together, sharing a commonality of impermanence. Deep ecologist Bill Devall describes this as the *ecocentric sangha,* in which spiritual practice is a practice of place, where one is located in community and responding to a wider web of relationships.[19] One then sits in meditation not only with people but also with the surrounding oaks, maples, jays, warblers, and lupines.

Under the pressures of modern life, one of the most difficult tasks is to slow down enough simply to "be present." To listen to the teachings of owl Buddha or pill-bug Buddha requires time not dedicated to other tasks. The time-proven spiritual practices of restraint, moderation, and simplicity increase the odds for more time in relationship, more time for waking up together. The ecological need to reduce consumption of material goods can be a spiritual practice, based in the desire for more genuine contact with others. The desire to reduce clutter and possessions can be the desire to live actively in relationship rather than protected from it. Reducing time spent in dealing with objects (cars, videos, furniture, toys) allows time for actively cultivating intimacy with rivers and mountains, moon, and stars. Television alone may rob American culture of many hours that could be spent fostering relationships with real animals and real trees rather than cartoons and advertisements. Zen teacher Robert Aitken suggests a vow of simplicity:

> Hearing the crickets at night
> I vow with all beings
> to keep my practice simple—
> just over and over again.[20]

One of the Buddha's students once remarked that it seemed to him that having good friends was half of the holy life. "Not so," the Buddha replied. "Having good friends is the whole of spiritual life." *Kalyana mitta*, or spiritual friends, can help each other by offering compassion in the face of tragic environmental suffering and by working together to restore environmentally damaged areas. Dharma friends can investigate rigorously the mental blocks to relational intimacy. They can share delight and offer gratitude for the Earth as home. American Buddhists have tended to place primary dependence on relationships with spiritual teachers, reinforcing a hierarchical view of authority. I am coming to see that shifting the balance of learning toward spiritual friendships is critical for environmental work. Hindu teacher Dr. Raymundo Panikkar suggests that the real work of the future is not to build great temples of religion in search of understanding, but "to simply follow the well-worn paths between one another's houses."[21]

As spiritual friends in a complex, ecological world, we can help each other wake up to the splendid, if troubled, multidimensional reality of the environment. I believe it is our spiritual task to help each other bear the generational responsibility for turning the tide of ecological destruction. In the company of spiritual friends, we can learn to be present with the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual suffering of environmental loss. We can help each other maintain our courage and motivation to act boldly. Together we can plant the seeds of joy that will nurture sustainable spiritual relations with all beings far into the future.