

A DROP IN THE OCEAN



When I first started announcing Community Wildlife Corridor hand weeding events last year at the end of our Zen group sits in Western Australia, I felt a little silly. I thought an invitation to hand weed on a relatively small area of land might be considered a little bizarre as an environmental action project for the Zen group, given the huge damage to the global environment and its inhabitants with associated climate change. ‘What difference is that going to make?’ was the question I figured people might be asking in their heads, And this question is the question underpinning this writing.

Like me, everyone in the Zen Open Circle group is likely to have experienced an ongoing sense of grief, distress, worry and powerlessness in the face of endless news about practices such as widespread destruction of rainforests and land clearing. These leave native animals homeless and very possibly facing extinction. The recent fires in the Eastern States of Australia, which devastated the bush and its inhabitants, are a grim reminder of the effects of climate change. Associated climate warming now urgently threatens the biodiversity which sustains all life on our planet with a recent Global Assessment report concluding that 25% of plant and animal species are threatened with extinction

as the result of human activity. These facts are both alarming and overwhelming in the sense of asking the question, ‘What can we do about it? What can I do about it?’ At Zen Open Circle extended practice events and after every Taking Part in the Gathering meeting we sing the Great Vow *‘the many beings are numberless, I vow to save them’*, but how on earth do you do that when everything seems to be falling apart?

As you would be aware, a drop in the ocean means ‘a very small amount, or a drop, compared to the amount needed’. The ocean and a drop of water are also metaphors used in Zen teaching as a way of referring to the great mystery which we explore in our practice. One example, which is directly relevant to the theme of this writing, comes from Zen Abbott Taiun at the Zen Kanshoji Buddhist Monastery in France. He says, *“When a drop of water enters the ocean, it becomes the ocean. The drop enters the ocean, and the ocean enters the drop. There is no more separation”*. This expression describes a process which I now realize has been happening to me slowly and steadily over the past 5 years, both through continued Zen practice, and also as I have become increasingly involved in environmental protection work. I felt it could be helpful to outline the story of my increasing involvement in action work as a way of answering the question, ‘What difference does a drop of water in the ocean make?’ So I trust you will bear with me in using it as an example.

I realized I felt largely separate from the environment and climate change crisis threatening our planet earth right up until 2016 - whereas many people like Buddhist activist and teacher Joanna Macy spoke about the crisis and the urgent need to take action in the 1990s . For many years I had always loved nature, loved trees, birds, animals, and country....but I had never got to the point of deciding that it was time to stand up and make time to do something to help protect the earth and its inhabitants. I just listened with an increasingly sinking

heart and stomach to ongoing news reports about events such as dolphins and whales trapped in unclaimed fishing nets, and polar bears floating perilously on small chunks of ice which had melted and cracked off glaciers, their former habitat. Before then I believe I kept the deep sadness and increasing dread about what was happening in a well-sealed compartment beneath my belt. I was working hard and long hours in my job, money was coming in, the shops always had plenty of food, I took care of my home, attended Zen practice events and enjoyed seeing friends....I didn't feel I had much extra time to do anything else. These were my so-called "normal" priorities. Joanna Macy describes something similar to this in a talk. She speaks about herself experiencing a form of paralysis underpinned by disbelief about what is happening. Although a lot of her life is taken up with the environmental movement, she often found it difficult to grasp the reality of the dangers facing us. She says, "The toxins in the air, food, and water are hard to taste or smell. The spreading acreage of clear-cuts and landfills are mostly screened from public view. The depletion of aquifers and the destruction of the protective ozone layer are matters of concern, but are abstract. The things that disappear—the frogs or topsoil or bird song—are not as likely to catch my attention as what remains for me to perceive. And the more perceptible changes, like clogged rivers, rubbish choking the sea or trees dying on the roadsides in increasing numbers, seem to become a normal part of life. And so we tend to live our lives as if nothing has changed, while knowing that everything has changed." Macy described this as leading a "double life" where on the one hand we maintain a more or less upbeat capacity to carry on as usual, while on another level there is an unformed awareness in the background that the world we and all other sentient beings depend on is being extensively damaged.

I'd like to say I had a sudden awakening and realized I needed to take care of the earth and its interdependent inhabitants including Lizzie. But that isn't the

case.... even though I was, and am still, living with the bush just 50 metres from my current garden gate, and I enjoy this rare gift in suburbia - I took it somewhat for granted. I knew it was zoned for a Roe 8 6-lane freeway, but that prospect seemed to be hazily distant. NO, it was the earth and its inhabitants which stepped forward one day in December 2016 and shouted at me to ‘wake up!’ On that day WA State Liberal Government-funded bulldozers arrived on the bush in front of my gate and systematically began to raze it to the ground to make way for the freeway. Birds were screeching as giant and beautiful trees came crashing down. I saw young birds from nests in those trees walking around in a daze, or dead on the ground. A huge crowd of protesters had arrived and along with them droves of police and security guards to keep the protesters off the land. That is the day that I began to wake up to action, albeit then with the ulterior motive of saving bush right in front of my home. There were several other Zen Group of WA members also attending protest actions over many days, sometimes going right into the sacred and magical wetlands. Fortunately the Liberal Government was voted out in early 2017 and the newly-elected Labour Government, in response to effective community protest, took Roe 8 off the transport map, for the present moment at least.

After Labour was voted back in, I could very well have returned to my ‘normal’ routine, but an inner voice which came from the unknown, wouldn’t let me do that and my priorities started to change. The land bulldozed to the ground, now stark and empty, was renamed the Community Wildlife Corridor (CWC), which recognized its important role as one of the few remaining urban ecological corridors allowing connection, in this case from the Fremantle sea to the wetlands at Bibra Lake near to where I live. As such, the corridor’s presence promoted the genetic diversity, health and resilience of urban native fauna and flora. A CWC committee was established to help rehabilitate the land. Something drove me to attend their AGM later that year and I put my name

down on their emailing list. Not long afterwards I decided to join their bushcare volunteer group which met once a fortnight and still does. I have encountered many rewards in doing this work, not least listening to the descriptions and stories of the retired botanist who leads the bushcare effort, Diana Corbyn. She always spends some time on weeding days telling us about the idiosyncracies of bush plants and trees, such as the palm- like *Microzamia* which dates back to prehistoric times and is used as a food source by Noongar Aboriginal people.



And the generous giants, the Tuart trees, up to 40 metres high, which are now critically endangered. Noongar people considered these trees as relatives and honoured their role as providing homes for the many birds and small mammals living under their canopies. I'm also beginning to see these trees now as relatives. When I sit at home in meditation practice, looking through glass sliding doors into my garden, there is a huge Tuart tree in front of me, stretching in the distance into the sky, a tree which is a wonderful teacher of the Way.



I identify with Joanna Macy when she describes involvement in action work for the environment as being a ‘kind of coming alive’. She believes that when we honour and acknowledge the growing grief, anger, and fear we experience about environmental destruction and climate change, we are freed from paralysis and can start to engage in action work that reconnects us to our source and reconnects us in working with other people to care for the land. This has been my journey. I find myself fascinated by what I am learning and my intimacy with the bush is deepening.

In the last couple of years I have slowly been drawn into more action work. I joined the Buddhists for the Environment group started by a Zen Group of WA member which is working towards bringing Buddhist teachers in Perth, across sects, together to discuss what they can do to support the environment and prevent climate change. In our Zen Open Circle group our teacher Susan Murphy Roshi has raised concerns in her teaching about environmental

destruction and climate change for many years, particularly last year and this year in the Taking Part in the Gathering fortnightly meetings which are now attracting a global audience. In WA teachers Ross Bolleter Roshi and Mari Rhydwen Roshi have also started to bring environmental/climate change concerns directly into their teaching at practice events. Then last year an approach was made to the Zen Group of WA Council to offer opportunities to Zen group members engage in land care, and the Council backed this proposal. Since then several of our Zen group members have joined action activities on the Community Wildlife Corridor which, according to the season, includes hand-weeding, plant/tree mapping, seed collection and plant/tree planting.

This year I decided to go onto the Community Wildlife Corridor Committee, putting aside habitual worries about overloading my time. I find myself on a steep learning curve, working with a group of smart and seasoned campaigners. I was a journalist at one time, and I've turned my writing skills to task again. I'm writing a new column for their newsletter called 'Corridor Neighbours' in a bid to make the lives and roles of the corridor fauna and flora more intimately alive and vivid to people. It's much harder to bulldoze trees and clear away bush habitat when this is the case. The first neighbour off the rank for the next newsletter is the Quenda, a smallish marsupial which can be mistaken for a rat except for its elongated box-like nose and hair on its tail. These mammals are known as 'the eco-system engineers' of urban and country bushland. Using elongated snout and long foreclaws, one Quenda can displace around 11 kilograms of soil a day in its hunt for favourite foods including truffle buried underground. In doing so they bring about several important ecological processes encouraging plant growth, such as bringing a mixture of organic matter into the soil and enabling water infiltration. The mighty digger, the Quenda, offers a fine example of dependent origination. I'm also planning an article later on this year for the local newspaper the Fremantle Herald to raise

awareness of just how a freeway would impact on the lives of inhabitants on this important ecological corridor.



So...that's the story of what happened to me and I want now to return to the theme of this writing. I've been describing action work that can be considered a drop in the Ocean compared to what is needed to protect the environment and deter climate change. You may, however, have seen how that work has slowly spread right across and into my life, and appreciated the several rewards it has offered, the main one being to become more intimate with who I am. I am becoming more alive as this work wakes up my heart and I encounter at closer quarters fauna and flora like the Quenda, the giant Tuart and the prehistoric *Microzamia* plant. ... I both learn and get a real buzz out of writing about them.

In a bid to encourage people to engage in environmental activism, Zen Master and ecologist David Loy, who teaches in the Sanbo tradition of Japanese Zen Buddhism, says that the 'don't-know-mind' that Zen practice explicitly cultivates, helps us to do the very best we can to protect the environment, right where we are, without knowing if anything we do makes any difference whatsoever. He says, "We act without attachment. We don't know if what we do is important, but we know that it's important for us to do it." Joanna Macy

emphasizes that, “You don’t need to do everything. Do what calls your heart. It’s like walking on the razor’s edge of the sacred moment where you don’t know and you can’t comfort yourself with any sure outcome. All you can know is your allegiance to life and your intention to serve it in this moment that we are given. And in that sense this radical uncertainty liberates your creativity and courage.”

And this is where I find myself today. I no longer feel a silly when making announcements about hand weeding to the Zen Group in WA. I am doing what needs to be done, right where I am, right now. And in Australia there are numerous groups across the land similarly called to action to protect the environment. Drops in the ocean have helped to ease my heart – even if the worst case scenario happens, I have been presented with opportunities to honour and love and show great care to the fauna and flora living close to me. Who knows how the caring energy put out by me and many others can change the balance of destructive energies on our earth – this love may even help to prevent our precious ecology from tipping right over.

The great care expended on the Community Wildlife Corridor, started by a small group of dedicated campaigners, has led this year to significant positive developments for this land. A bill to protect it into the future has been passed in the WA State government Legislative Assembly, but is being blocked in the Legislative Council by Liberal and Independent Senators. However, the land on the corridor extending into the magic of the wetlands has just recently been awarded Class A Conservation Status which means it is now protected for the future. All of this prompted by a small initial group of people who put their hands, hearts and minds to the task of conserving this important natural land link. Plans are also now being developed to build educational walking trails along the corridor for all, and particularly school children, to enjoy.

I'll close with a final statement by Shodo Harada Roshi, the Head Abbott of Sogen-ji, a 300-year old Zen temple in Japan. His teaching aligns completely with the theme of this writing when he says, "As the raindrops fall from the sky, one after the next, they land on the leaves or trunk of the tree or the stone wall, and only when all these drops come together can a small stream be born on the earth. These small streams meet and join, and with this gathering a river is born. When the waters of many rivers all join together, an ocean becomes possible. The source of the ocean is the drop of rain that falls from the sky, and each and every one of these drops has its own functioning. A small amount of water has its functioning and a large amount of water has its functioning. To be able to use the potential of any amount of water, be it large or small, this is our deep wisdom."
