
Permanently connected

Zen practice and environmental crisis

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My first contact with Zen was a short television broadcast on a temple in Japan. At that time - I was a young environmentalist in the 1970s - I found the very economical use of water by monks for their morning toilet exemplary. And this in a rainy Japan! What also impressed me a lot was that they let themselves be hit with a stick, not to fall asleep during zazen ... and I realized that they were serious about it!

Today, I am a monk myself, and for my morning shower I need at most two minutes of hot water. It is not necessary to keep the water running while I soap myself.

Does the Zen mind have anything to do with the environment?

I'm even surprised that this question has been raised. After all, traditional Japanese culture lives in close relationship with nature. We, Zen practitioners, live in a spirit of compassion and know the Dogen mode of non-separation: "To know the Buddha's Way is to be in unity with the 10,000 things". So, having said that, it is of course painful to know that some species are becoming extinct, that other people are suffering from the climate change we've helped to bring about, and it can be deeply disturbing to know that some people far away have to get rid of our computer waste in garbage dumps burning like hellfire.

Understanding the suffering associated with our huge ecological footprint is a good thing: with our current lifestyle, we consume the equivalent of two planet Earths. And we produce an enormous amount of *karma* that will weigh heavily on future generations and limit their freedom. Even the certainties of the Diamond Sutra are changing: "In the beginning, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers. Then the mountains are no longer mountains and the rivers are no longer rivers. In the end, the mountains are mountains again and the rivers are rivers again".

Even we Buddhists must realize that nothing will ever be the same again, not even mountains and rivers. For we are living in a completely new, Anthropocene era: the consequences of our actions as human beings are irreversibly reshaping the planet. Adopt an expanded consciousness, a self that includes all sentient beings and the nature, is therefore necessary and urgent ... Such unity is what Arne Naess and Joanna Macy meant twenty years ago by the term "deep ecology".

What can we do about it?

Right vision, Right action, Right livelihoods are elements of the Eightfold Path which, of course, also have an ecological dimension through our intimate connection with the world.

Consequently, our motivation should be the compassion for all beings, including future beings, rather than an ecological fear for ourselves. This is based on the driving forces which are provoked by this negative evolution: in zazen, we notice that it does not take much to know

happiness and Master Roland Yuno Rech often tells us: "Everything is there, we just have to realize it".

So, let's start by asking ourselves what we really need, and what are the effects of our daily actions on other people and sensitive beings, in distant countries, but also here at home. It sounds complicated, but we are on the way with many other people. As far as our impact on the environment is concerned, many things are simple and easy to do, while others require common political action and social commitment. And the first cannot be achieved without the other. Ultimately, it is a matter of correcting our way of life which requires such immense resources, and rebalancing our material and immaterial goals in life.

Zen culture - like the whole of Japanese culture - is closely linked to the experience of nature: *koan* with stones, bamboos, lotus flowers, temples on the mountains, the spontaneous transition from the everyday to the universal consciousness ... A deep appreciation of nature is rooted in the images of these stories. From there, we can put into practice some of the virtues of the Lotus Sutra: "Let go, reduce our so-called desires and necessities, examine them and doing that, give a *fuse* to those who will come after us, as well as show an ethical attitude, perseverance, and a sincere and constant diligence".

The climate can still be saved. It is too late, however, for some species already extinct and also for the nitrogen pollution resulting from over-fertilization, pollution which affects biotopes, on land and in the water. We human beings, have already caused damage that our planet can no longer heal. For us in Central Europe, a factor 5 must be applied to climate protection! We have to reduce our CO2 equivalent from 11 tonnes to 2 tonnes, if we take the global average as reference.

So, we have to check our way of life, and that also applies to our Zen activities and Zen dojos! (This can be done, for example, with the CO2 calculator of the Federal Environment Agency of Germany: <https://uba.co2-rechner.de>).

But let's stick to the subject of climate: what causes the most damage is mobility - especially by plane - heating, and by far the high consumption of electricity, the level of private consumption and the nutrition. At home, at work or in the dojo, 5 measures can contribute to climate protection: do with less, abandon certain things, recycle, walk (or use public transport or bicycle), and modernize for greater energy efficiency.

When it comes to consuming resources, it may also make more sense to drive an old Citroën "Deux Chevaux" until it falls apart than to order a new Tesla ... Plane flights can be partially compensated by donations for climate protection measures, such as reforestation. A small but equally important contribution will also be made by adopting a conscious diet, especially one with less meat. A vegetarian diet, more organic, more regional and more seasonal divides the climate impact of our way of eating by half.

Measures can also be taken for the places where we practice. Each Zen group, each dojo, each Zen leader could determine the measures to be taken and check them once a year to make sure they are respected. In this way we could, in our sangha as well, contribute to this task of the humanity, show a good example and work in the direction of our connection with all beings.

Furthermore, it makes sense to become politically active in this sense, as in the Frankfurt dojo for example, with open-air zazen during the Friday climate demonstrations, or through other concrete initiatives.

Ultimately, the question is whether connectivity and freedom can still be linked in the future, or whether natural or social constraints should be used: for this, we must now develop and practice a new consciousness. We need to do this calmly, in the joy of being able to follow the path of Zen in this life, knowing that this Path brings peace to the mind, and with an attitude of the heart that deeply take the freedom of others into account.