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Buddhism and spiritual ecology

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To explore how Buddhism relates to nature, conservation and sustainable development, a group of US teachers recently travelled to the North to engage in an uplifting exercise in 'spiritual ecology'

Chiang Mai, Thailand -- The course only lasted a week but this is a school with ample resources for year-round classes. Sometimes the day's activities took place in a watershed forest, sometimes on the ridge of a steep limestone cliff, sometimes in a remote hilltop village.

Doi Chiang Dao, a mountain Chiang Mai people regard as sacred, was a most fitting backdrop for an unusual programme called "Buddhism and Community-based Conservation". An innovative joint venture between US and Thai educators, it was an effort to bridge East and West, wherein the ultimate teacher was none other than Mother Nature herself.

For those seven days, 20 secondary-school teachers from the US reverted to being students. They went trekking, did walking and sitting meditation, listened to talks on dharma by a Buddhist monk, devoured tales from ethnic-Karen villagers, or simply sat still and watched the clouds floating by. And, judging from the feedback, each one of them seemed to have discovered a rich mine of wisdom from lessons readily provided by the forest.

"I really liked the day we went into the woods where we were asked to contemplate on nature," said Maria Schwartz, who hails from Ohio. "I realize that in order to live well, we need to be like big trees in the forest. For them to grow strong and tall, their roots have to dig deeper into the ground to tap the underground water so that, no matter what happens outside, they'll always have fountains of life from underneath. I look back at myself. I need a good and strong foundation of life and it is deep inside my mind."

"For me, it was the day we had to climb up that rocky, muddy hill to reach the Karen village," said Page Prescott from New Mexico. "It was such a soulful experience and I still feel connected to the Karens and their rice-farming way of life."

Randy Merker, from Nevada, chipped in: "It's a great irony that Americans rarely feel connected with the rest of the world despite all the high technology. Most of us don't travel outside our country and we tend to believe what the media say, which sometimes leads to prejudice and conflicts."

"But here I have established a personal connection with Thai and Karen people and I'm sure no one can tell me otherwise what they are." This last he delivered with a gentle smile.

Such shrewd and honest insights seemed to please Chris Myers, director of Earth Expedition, the US partner in this course.

"Thailand is rich and unique in its natural resources, wildlife and its people," he said. "I'm impressed with the community-based work that has been happening here, especially in the area of conservation and education. I think such work [provides] good examples for us to develop work in similar veins."

"Buddhist philosophy and values not only provide a good model for individual development, but also serve as a great example for how it can be applied to and benefit community-based education and conservation tasks."

Every year, a group of graduate students in Miami University's Project Dragonfly get the chance to spend some time overseas. And this year it was Thailand's turn.

To enable his charges to really explore the spirit of the Kingdom, Myers enlisted the help of Thai friends of his. They included academics and activists from the Green World Foundation in Bangkok and the Chiang Rai-based Kwan Muang Institute.

Everybody agreed that one of the highlights of the week was a one-day trek through the woods with Phra Phaisan Visalo, the conservationist monk. But why take this forest-and-Buddhism slant?

"What is unique about Thailand is Buddhism and its people," Myers explained. "An understanding of conservation in Thailand would be incomplete without understanding how Buddhism relates to nature. Buddhism provides approaches to promote self-reflection and a healthy relationship between oneself and others, including nature."

His Thai colleagues agree: The human element is a must.

"For the idea of conservation to work, to be sustainable, we need a shift of human consciousness. On their own, scientific knowledge and technological developments cannot help us conserve nature," said Surrayut Ratanapojnard, director of the Thai Spiritual Health Programme, an offshoot of the Thai Health Promotion Office.

"Learning at the intellectual level, that is to read, think and remember, is still very limited and far from enough. We need to create a new consciousness, one that can be cultivated from inward or spiritual learning."

In its broadest sense, Surrayut continued, the term "spiritual ecology" encompasses how humans find meaning and value in their environment. It is, indeed, one of the earliest forms of learning and in some cultures is still passed down from generation to generation. Take the Karen, for example. Every Karen child has to learn where exactly the 32 kwan (spirits of life) reside in the forest; some live in trees, they believe, some in animals and some in rocks. And each child is taught that the destruction of the abodes of these kwan will lead to the end of his or her own life.

"Spiritual ecology is experiential, contemplative and participatory learning," Surrayut said. "It has to be first-person education, by which one uses one's body and mind as tools to learn about the world and the truth."

"Each individual must have direct experience or contact with the subject of learning, must contemplate deeply on the subject and be able to relate it to him or herself. From there, we will develop a deeper understanding, the right consciousness of how we should utilise and conserve nature."

When the connection between spiritual wisdom and wilderness was first mooted, many of these teachers must surely have thought of their compatriot, Henry Thoreau, the transcendentalist who led a reclusive two-year existence in Walden Woods and later wrote about the deep insights he gained from his experiences there.

And although it only lasted a single day, that trek through the forest covering Chiang Dao must surely have given the US visitors a taste of the transformative power of nature.

"Truth is expressing itself to us all the time and everywhere. It is we who need to clear our hearts in order to see it," said Phra Phaisan Visalo, the monk, writer and conservationist who led the party to the top of the mountain to visit Wat Pa Pang Ma-o. "There have been cases of monks who reached sudden enlightenment at the very moment that they saw leaves falling, or clouds in the sky."

To Phra Phaisan, falling leaves reveal the impermanent nature of all things. As do the constantly shifting clouds, everyday demonstrations of the interconnectedness and ceaseless transformation of all beings.

To reach this level of understanding requires some training, of course. But this training does not depend at all on the religious beliefs to which one subscribes. Nor is it particularly esoteric. Any newcomer to Buddhist philosophy can learn simple ways to cultivate awareness.

As part of their "Mindfulness in Nature" lesson, the teachers were asked to walk slowly behind Phra Phaisan and try to be mindful of every single step they took.

"Spend time in a natural environment for a while and your mind will absorb the peaceful nature of its surroundings and you will feel calm," he told them. "To realise the benevolence of nature, we need to listen to her sound and respect it. A lot of tourists go into the woods but unfortunately they bring along all their electronic gear to occupy themselves. Or they keep talking or singing or playing music."

After a while the monk called a halt and told everyone to find a spot to sit alone. "Keep the silence for a while," he said. "After that, contemplate on your current situation or your state of mind."

Except for the rustling of leaves and the humming of insects in the background, all is quiet for a time. Then Phra Phaisan spoke up: "Choose one natural thing around you; whatever attracts your attention the most. Contemplate on it. Try to see if it has some truth or message for you."

At the end of that al fresco session the revelations of what the party had discovered were both varied and remarkable.

"I used to see myself as a rock immovable, strong and in control," said one. "Not any more, though. I realize now that rocks can crumble into pieces. They can be moved by wind and water. I don't think I'm in control any more. In fact, I'm subject to change and impermanence."

"While I was sitting in silence," another member of the group said, "I heard leaves moving. Then I realized that it was the work of the wind. The wind can move leaves, branches and plants without being seen. Sometimes, things can be done without having to be seen."

Several others in the group related themselves to climbing plants, noting that for life to progress, both people and vines need to be flexible, make gradual but steady movements and depend on strong foundations roots or community in order to grow up and some day reach the sunlight at the top of the forest.

At this point Phra Phaisan began speaking about the benefits that nature has to offer us. "Nature is the source of wisdom and ethics. When you are in despair, for example, look at the bees. These small creatures never lose heart. When someone takes away their hive, they don't drop dead or stop [moving]. What do they do? They go on and build a new one.

"If one goes out to find empowerment or moral support from nature, it always works," he added. "What we should do is open our hearts in order to see the wisdom and the lessons.

"Forests are considered sacred. Many Buddhist monks, from the Buddha's time up to the present day, became enlightened during pilgrimages in the forest," he said.

One such example was Phra Ajaan Mun Bhuridatta Mahathera (1870-1949), a highly revered forest monk who, as it happens, is believed to have attained enlightenment during a sojourn on this very same mountain.

But then, as Phra Phaisan noted, Buddhism is all about nature.

"The Buddha's life, from birth to Nirvana, was spent close to nature. He was born under a tree, attained enlightenment under a bodhi [pipal] tree and throughout his 45 years of teaching, he resided and preached in the forest. And even when he was dying, he lay down under a tree.

"Thus Buddha advised his disciples to practise and learn from nature. He often said that dharma was nature."

So, conserving nature could be seen as the duty of both Buddhist monks and laity, a fulfilment of their responsibility to cherish the source of wisdom. Which is why there is a long-standing Buddhist tradition of monks making pilgrimages into the forest and establishing monasteries there.

"Nature has a more powerful wisdom than any building or artificial material can offer," Phra Phaisan said.

On a more mundane level, he continued, nature provides us with the basic requisites for survival, from food, clothing, shelter, medicine and, most crucially, oxygen and water. "The quality of nature will define the quality of our lives."

Above and beyond the purely physical benefits, the beauty of nature entices us and gives us sensual pleasure a quality which, more and more these days, is being commoditised for "consumption" by tourists.

"For us to see the all-encompassing benevolence of nature, we need to respect it as our teacher and not [regard it as] material for economic growth, senseless consumption and exploitation," Phra Phaisan said.

"[If we possess] this right view, it will be hard, even impossible, for us to abuse nature, our teacher and life-giver."

CULTIVATING WISDOM FROM NATURE

Regardless of whether you're in the heart of the city or out in the countryside, you can always re-establish a connection with nature and learn from it. The sky, wind, stars and moon; flowers, rocks, grass, trees, animals and human beings; they all carry some pearls of wisdom inside. Here are some tips on how to enhance your sensitivity to "natural truth".

Seek a location, preferably in natural surroundings, where you can sit undisturbed and contemplate. It could be your own garden, a park, a beach or some wild place in the middle of nowhere. But it could equally be a city street choked by rush-hour traffic.

Sit still and be silent for a while, at least five minutes until you start to feel calm and peaceful.

Then take a few minutes to reflect on your current situation or your state of mind.

Next, look at whatever nature is around you and choose the thing that most attracts your attention. It could be a bush, a bunch of weeds, a bird, a patch of sand, some seashells whatever. Even if you're stuck in the middle of a ferocious traffic jam, you can always look up at the sky, at the clouds or focus on a roadside tree, at the insect on your windscreen, even. Pick something and concentrate on it for a while.

Contemplate on its meanings, and the wisdom it brings to your mind. The first time you try this you may have difficulty concentrating but after repeated practice, insights from nature will reveal themselves faster and more clearly.

And, every now and then, do make the time to get out into real wilderness. For, according to Phra Phaisan Visalo, deep in the forest is where the power of wisdom, and the insights it brings, is most intense.