

Green Dharma

► How Is the World Changing?

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From a talk given at Providence Zen Center during the Whole World Is a Single Flower Conference on October 9, 2017.



Photo: Allan Matthews

The idea to use green dharma as a theme for this conference grew out of Zen Master Ji Haeng's (Thom Pastor's) concern that the Kwan Um School ought to address the common feelings of confusion and dread emerging from unprecedented global change. The whole team behind the Whole World Is a Single Flower is grateful to Thom for his inspiration and his trust in us to carry this idea forward. We found these feelings of confusion and apprehension in sanghas all over the world as we interviewed them to prepare for this conference. Change is happening in ways no one has ever seen, both in nature and in society. Our practice is centered on letting go of the *need* to understand and to know. But then how do we go forward in such totally new territory?

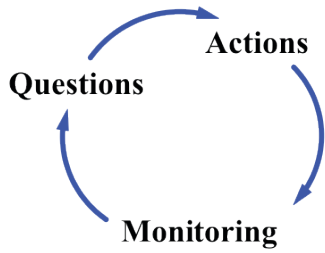
Green dharma may sound like something new, but actually it follows an approach our school has used for four decades. For all the many faiths and directions that our guests bring with them, we open the door to the same question: What am I? *Don't know*. The details of any particular path were unimportant. Sharing don't know is. We can forget about the color of our various robes and cushions, and share a vast silence.

The confusion arising from great change now drives many people to really question the world, even scientists whose reputations are based on knowing. Actually, such confusion is not new. The complex mystery that everyone now sees emerging was already surprising and humiliating scientists more than fifty years ago. Ecosystems (lakes, grasslands, forests, coral reefs) that had seemed calm and stable for centuries could almost overnight suddenly flip into degraded states and resist all attempts at recovery. Sudden, drastic change that appeared irreversible would resist explanation or solution despite decades of intense research. However, all these disasters share one common initial cause: the first actions that eventually set up the disaster emerged from a sense of certainty. We were confident of our knowledge, certain of what worked and arrogantly pushed it through despite all evidence. So how do we move beyond certainty?

Science, like our Zen practice, starts with questions, but immediate successes can turn eventually to disaster if the science only strengthens certainty. Scientists realized that they had to learn to unlearn. They had to keep a mind that was much more open. That effort to open up prompted their attempts to expand their don't-know mind. For natural scientists like me, that meant decades learning to listen to, talk to and work with a much wider circle: engineers, social scientists and others even outside the sciences such as politicians (from presidents to local mayors), farmers, fishermen, hunters, shepherds. Without knowing science, many of these people had better questions and insights than scientists, and good questions were proving much more valuable than answers in a world changing so fast that solutions rarely worked for long.

So how have ecologists tried to keep an open mind in helping people engage uncertainty that threatened their communities and landscapes? They had to build trust by humbly admitting that they do not have the answer (No one has the answer, actually.) and then listening and inviting everyone to admit no one knows. In this way they extended their don't know to the entire community as they tried to deal with mysterious change. Ignorance is no excuse for running away from our responsibility to help others and manage our communities, so we have to learn as we go along. Keeping don't know is how we stay open and flexible, adapting to changes in the climate and society. On that basis everyone (not just the specialists and the scientists) could agree on what kind of change is really important to address and how to address it. The easiest way for everyone to agree on what critical change is important is to define it as a trend, like rising unemployment or falling water quality. Then we can look at how this trend

arose and what causes combined to create this troubling change. Based on our agreement on those causes, we can agree on what we want to do about it.



An Adaptive Learning Cycle

The diagram shows an example of a learning cycle that helps us adapt. That is one way a community can work together in the spirit of don't know to define what trends of change are important and what can we do about them. Notice the circle does not rely on *solutions* or *answers*. Those may occur along the way, but they rarely last long. The cycle focuses on sustaining the questioning, staying open to how we need to change our questions and our practice to evolve with a changing world. This cycle is the model for our 2017 conference. I am a scientist and we have brought other professionals here *not* to tell you what the problems are or what to do about it. It is our job to help you work together and agree on what trends are critical and how we might engage change. We will offer our experience and ideas to stimulate your discussion, hoping you will move far beyond our initial ideas to those that resonate deeply with you and your communities.

The don't know of Zen or of science: same or different? There is a wider, more promising question: if scientists and Zen practitioners both reach for the openness of don't

know, then how can we work together? Centuries of Zen practice can contribute to anyone's efforts to be open to the mystery of a complex, changing world. This is a possible entry point for Zen practitioners who seek to help others in engaging change and uncertainty.

Such a partnership becomes especially important in an era where many people do not know how to question with an open mind. Confusion and anxiety have channeled frustration and rage into an unhealthy skepticism that scorches everything without responsibility to work together for all beings. It masquerades as questioning to hide a judgmental bias fueled by fear. This skepticism has torched all the institutions that have held our communities together: churches, public schools, local and national government. In this void we navigate without any rudder, for no one can agree on where to take our questions to find the truth. Science, journalism, religions—everything is suspect and therefore rejected as useless, or worse, deceitful. Where there is no bedrock to build on, no place to test ideas. We are reduced to slogans based on unfounded and untested "certainties." What is needed is questioning that points us toward where to test ideas to build a future.

Zen admonishes us that our practice is not complete without *direction*: How can I help you? To partner with science in developing a healthy questioning channeled by our common direction is one way we can help everyone to face great change. Together we can courageously admit our ignorance and make our openness available for all beings by experimenting and learning how to live in a changing world.

Jan Sendzimir is a senior dharma teacher and abbot of the Vienna Zen Center. He has practiced Zen with the Kwan Um School since 1974. He teaches ecology and citizen science in Europe, America and Africa in the search for ways that Zen practice, science and politics can support those who engage a changing and unpredictable world.

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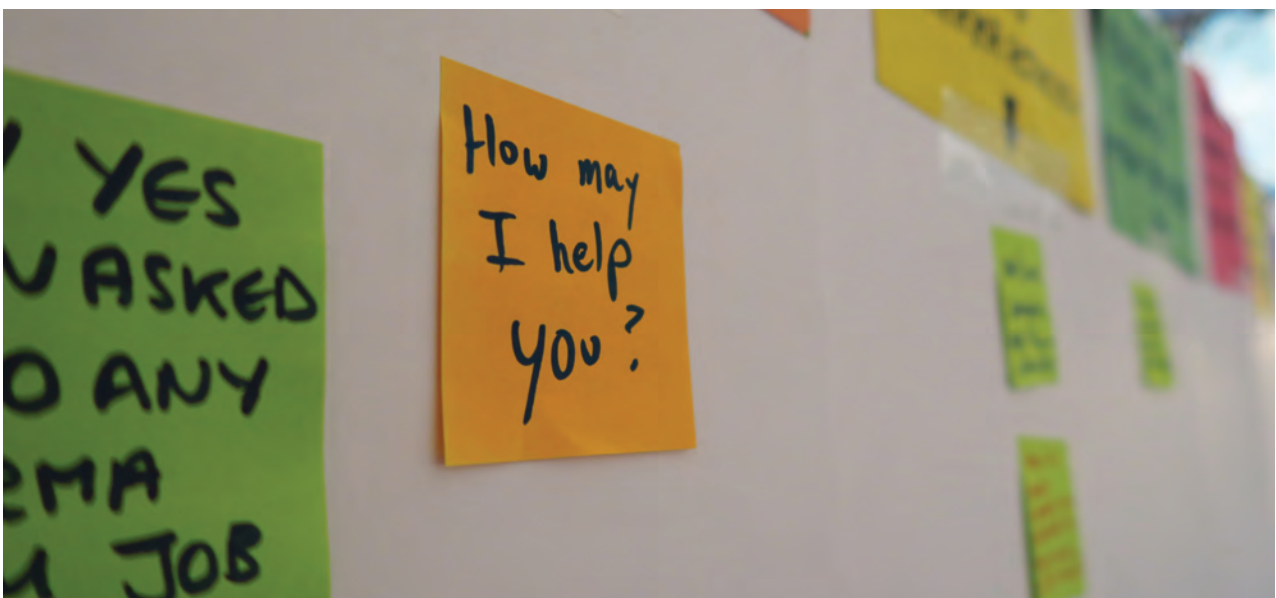


Photo: Francis Lau