

# Wake Up and Garden Your Life

*Sophie Vandenkerchove*

You probably recognize the feeling when you open up the news or walk around the city and become aware of so many people suffering. Global problems are more life-threatening than ever, and still no one is doing anything! It feels very discouraging. But you have to see that there is also a wonderful opportunity inside this: all of our problems have the potential to become great stories of love, abundance, understanding and peace.

As a young member of the Kwan Um School of Zen, I'm concerned about social and environmental issues. I am aware of the consequences that my daily actions have upon the existence of many other beings on Earth. I know my privileged position as a Western, white, middle-class woman. At the same time, I feel that my love for the Earth and its inhabitants is so strong that I want to step into my responsibility and leadership, and inspire others to do the same.

In the Brussels Zen Center, we decided last year to begin a permaculture garden experiment. With this project, we want to create a link between sitting and together-action in our sangha, connect with the neighborhood and explore interrelations between spirituality and ecology. We started the project after I spoke with Koen JDPSN about my willingness to act around ecology inside the Zen Center. Soon, we organized a first meeting with the sangha to explore these ideas a little further. One meeting became several; we found a common vision and started to plan the project. By now we have a wonderful garden, with a schedule of regular working days; we have organized a successful crowdfunding walk and a first workshop for growing edible plants. Most of the grown veggies are shared among helping neighbors, but will also be used to cook food for homeless people who are living in the city. In the future, we would like to organize exchange circles around the theme of Zen and engagement for young people, propose cooking and fermenting workshops, and much more.

## **Everything Gardens**

Permaculture, which stands for “permanent culture,” finds inspiration in nature on how to live sustainably and offers tools on how to work together as humans. Nature has an incredible amount of experience on how to live resiliently; she has been around for 4.5 billion years on our planet! So, almost all of the testing has already been done. Permaculture started as a philosophy in the late 1970s and found its application in many garden projects around the world. Nevertheless, it is not purely a land-based practice: social interactions are considered equally important. Through the techniques and principles of permaculture, it becomes possible to “garden” your life, your projects

and even your own culture. It is not a rigid system, but rather a holistic practice. Therefore it has an almost limitless amount of meanings and understandings: its core aim is to create harmony within ourselves, between people and with our planet, so that abundance can arise.

Behind permaculture lies a long tradition of indigenous, earth-based practices that have enriched the lives of our ancestors during many generations on Earth. These traditions already see the inherent importance of Earth as a teacher. So, permaculture didn't have to reinvent the wheel, but it did adapt this ancient wisdom very well. Its principles and ethics respond directly to the actual existential problems of our human species and they offer useful pathways toward a more sustainable future. Generally, a garden is a great experimental ground of awareness; since we spend some time in it every day, it becomes easy to observe the interactions that are going on. A garden can be a great teacher and show us how to live without harming other beings. A garden is also a great mirror that directly shows the consequences of our actions. In our garden, we observed it for a long time before taking action, and then we worked with what was already available on the land. We set in renewables, trying to create as much wealth and diversity as possible, so as to give less chance to pests. When we work together as a group, we do our best to stay mindful of others, opening our hearts and keeping conscious of blocking patterns that emerge inside us. Inside the Zen center we are mindful of our energy and plastic consumption. We only buy necessary items (secondhand, if possible), fair and organic food in bulk, use self-made, natural cleaning products and allow ourselves to be more happy than before.

In Zen, we use our don't-know mind and “just do it” actions to eradicate the root of suffering. This is a simple and powerful teaching because of its direction to save all beings and its power to solve a lot of problems. It is important though that not only do we say, believe and understand those things, but also act upon them. We need courage, and we need to reach out to our sangha, because we can't do it all alone. If we want to offer a solution for the problems of our times then we need to wake up and find out who we truly are. Climate change, wars and famine are consequences of our collective ignorance. So we need the collective power of together-action to understand and cut the roots of this karma.

Through our permaculture experiment, we learn important skills as a sangha on how to work together for the world: we learn to communicate clearly, divide tasks, take up responsibilities and listen deeply to each other. At the

same time, we are learning to grow beyond our fears, taking up responsibilities that we would normally not dare to do. We also become aware of the gifts of others, what each person is good at, or what they love to do. As a dharma-teacher-in-training, the possibility to lead this project helped me to become much clearer about my direction, claim my own path and share my gifts with others. It is just wonderful to see people from our sangha opening up, coming to the events and having the opportunity to get to know each other better and even become friends.

I believe that projects like our permaculture one are a good response to important challenges in the Kwan Um School: working together like this offers a pathway for a younger generation toward the school; it makes us more aware of what works and what doesn't; and it motivates us to integrate all we learned in order to realize meaningful change inside ourselves. Through adaptable projects, we learn a lot about what our future students need. And they will understand our vow to try, try for 10,000 years and longer, to help and offer them a wonderful life of abundance, clarity, wisdom and compassion, now and in the future.

### **Earth As a Lover, Earth As a Self**

Ecology and spirituality are interrelated, just as Zen and permaculture are. The problems and conflicts we experience now arise from our fundamental belief in the separateness of life and an inner distinction inside ourselves. A large part of our problematic behavior happens unconsciously inside of us, so we need to continue our practice to become more awake and alert. Our suffering and the Earth's suffering are one and the same. If we allow ourselves to see our world as our lover, then we cannot harm her. If you start with "Who am I," then you can see that you are already the Earth and that she is you. When you eat, you can see the farmers that produced the food, the bees that pollinate the flowers, the love that radiates from your bowl.

Each of us has something unique to offer to the world, our greatest gift and most authentic, true self. Every Zen center has a melting pot of wonderful individuals that can make it work together. Many hands can make work more challenging, but also more interesting and valuable. Each of us can help in endless ways: you can start an ethical company, travel less by plane, become a monastic, teach meditation to kids, offer cooking classes about vegan food for your family, organize exchange circles around white privilege, and so on. You can help the planet we live on by using your head, heart and hands right now.

### **Blueprint for Initiating a Sangha Project**

*These reflect the processes and conversations that we had in our local sangha to bring the permaculture project into life.*

Abbots, guiding teachers, and dharma teachers: Allow opportunities for people to speak about how they would like to engage in practice in their daily lives, making the most of their special gifts and qualities. If someone al-

ready has an idea, give them an opportunity to test it out, follow up with them and give them useful feedback. There are many hidden gems in our sanghas, people who are burning to do something and those who need a just little help to become aware of how they can contribute.

Members and dharma-teachers-in-training: Tell the sangha about your dreams, passions and visions; propose ideas to the abbot, senior dharma teachers or guiding teacher, and experiment. You have so much wonderful things to offer that can help others.

Organize a meeting(s) with the sangha: Which social or environmental issues are we interested in? What is specifically needed in our sangha? What can we do together as a sangha? What does each of us want to do? How can we enable people to do more what they would love to do? Work out a common vision for your sangha, or a vision for each person individually. Ideally, choose what you want to focus on *before* you organize the meeting.

For a together-action project: After a couple of meetings of exploring the vision, work out a strategy on how you are going to realize that vision and what is needed for that. Make a yearly plan and a list of tasks, and divide responsibilities. Plan a first, concrete together-action event, or test out some first ideas and give feedback of your experiences to the group. Continue to clarify the vision and the tasks list during regular monthly meetings, while having more together-action moments. Celebrate your achievements regularly and have fun together. Reclarify the vision and strategy, or have evaluation meetings every couple of months.

For an individual project: Choose a dharma friend to exchange ideas with on your journey. Work on fears and blockages together, do extra chanting, bowing or other practices, exchange ideas, give each other feedback and celebrate achievements together.

To learn more about the permaculture project visit PermaSource on FaceBook, or visit <https://permasource.wordpress.com> on the web. ♦

### **Resources for Further Reading**

- Stefan Gey. *Zen in the Art of Permaculture Design*, Permanent Publications, 2016.
- Thich Nhat Hanh. *Love Letter to the Earth*. Parallax Press, 2013.
- Stephanie Kaza. *Dharma Rain*. Shambhala Publications, 2000.
- Llewelyn Vaughan Lee. *Spiritual Ecology*. Golden Sufi Center, 2014.
- Looby Macnamara. *People & Permaculture*. Permanent Publications, 2012.

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