

One Zen Practitioner's Response to the Climate Emergency

Lizzie Coombs JDPSN

*This dewdrop world is a dewdrop world.
And yet. And yet.*

—Issa (lay Buddhist priest and poet 1763–1828)

Rain, rain, rain. Flood defenses are being increased along the river that runs through our home city of York in northeast England. In Berkeley, California, my sister-in-law closes her windows against the smoke from the Sonoma fires. Now we can really see how everything is changing, having moved from global warming to global heating, from climate change to climate emergency.

Thirteen years ago, I saw Al Gore's documentary film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, about climate change, predicting what is now appearing in the world. In York, I can see children leaving school on Fridays inspired by Greta Thunberg's schools climate strike. And now I'm learning of the environmental advocacy of indigenous and nonwhite teenage activists: Mari Copeny (age eleven), and teenagers Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, Autumn Peltier, Leah Namugerwa, Chaitali Shiva Gavit, and India Logan-Riley, among others.

So I went to London on October 7 for the Extinction Rebellion Autumn Uprising around the Houses of Parliament and government ministries in Westminster. (Extinction Rebellion, or XR, is a global environmental movement begun in the United Kingdom in 2018.) Arriving by train from York, I followed the crowds with their tents and sleeping bags to the various sites surrounding the center of government. Before I'd even got to the Northern UK Rebellion site, I'd handed over my spare waterproof trousers to someone who'd forgotten hers. "That's why I love XR," she said. "There's always someone there to help you when you need it." Later, three of us joined together to go to the nearest supermarket and buy sandwiches for the protesters, because the police had already confiscated all food, cooking equipment, and even portable toilets from the site.

At our site, we were buffered at each end by other XR groups preventing traffic crossing Westminster and Lambeth Bridges, so we didn't encounter any angry and frustrated drivers. In the middle of London we just had birds singing, trees rustling their leaves, pedestrians walking in the road, cyclists swishing by—and no smell or sound of traffic. Tamsin and Melissa held their wedding ceremony on Westminster Bridge, and later a *ceilidh* with bagpipes broke out on the same spot. Among the thousands of protesters were many members of faith groups. A seventy-seven-year-old rabbi knelt in the road and prayed before being arrested and removed by police. The bishops of Liverpool and Col-

chester spoke. XR Muslims, XR Buddhists, XR Christians, XR members of the Jewish faith came together, chatted, prayed, meditated, and, in some cases, were also arrested. I saw disabled people in wheelchairs, and a blind man with a white cane, and some of these also chose to be arrested.

Everyone made their own call as to whether or not to take arrestable action (such as not moving on when ordered to by the police), depending on their circumstances. Although I was in the majority who'd decided not to be arrested, I was surprised at how afraid I felt once close to the lines of police, whom previously I have experienced only as a benign or neutral force. How intimidated I felt by both their numbers and expressionless faces—as well as by the police helicopter hovering overhead. I felt how comforting it would be to walk away, back to "feeling safe" and "in control," but managed to stay put for the day. Being surrounded by the police reminded a protester friend of being in prison for political protest in Madrid in the early 1980s. At mealtimes, the guards with their machine guns would watch the inmates eating from overhead walkways. He remembered he'd been issued an oversized wooden spoon with which to eat his prison meals and that holding it took him back to being a child at mealtimes in his Christian Brothers school.

Sometimes we think we've settled something: "I won't be acting that way anymore" or "I'm not going to feel like that again." But then we can experience something that brings it right back. That's why we have the vow to see delusions as endless, and so we vow to cut through them all. And hence the following Zen story.

A monk decided to go for a long solo retreat to rid himself of anger. He would practice diligently all alone until there was no more anger. One day, on his way up to his mountain retreat, he passed a farmer who asked him what he was up to. He told him his mission and the farmer said that he looked forward to seeing him after the retreat to learn how he'd got on. The monk completed his retreat and was pleased to notice he no longer experienced any anger at all. His retreat had worked! On his way home he passed the same farmer who asked how he'd got on. The monk replied, "Oh it was great. No more anger."

"Really?" asked the farmer.

"Yes, absolutely."

"Gosh, amazing, but are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," said the monk, starting to get a little peeved.

"Really? No more anger?"

"Yes, no more anger!"

"So, you really don't get angry any more?"

The monk grabbed the farmer and screamed, "THAT'S RIGHT, NO MORE ANGER!"

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What does it mean to be a complete human being? Can we keep our center and direction, staying resolute and not completely overwhelmed when challenged? “How may I help you” sometimes means just remaining, with the strength of practice keeping us in place as witnesses, not turned away, even while afraid or angry or sad or depressed.

About twenty years ago some trees were going to be cut down across the road from our house, because neighbors said they partly obstructed their view of the water. My husband and I, among many others, didn’t want the trees to be killed, and I became quite distressed. We tried to save them, but nothing worked. Very unhappy, I told Zen Master Soeng Hyang, and she suggested I be present for the felling. I really didn’t want to watch, or be seen to be watching after how bad things had gotten in the neighborhood.

But I took the moktak to the edge of the site and chanted Kwan Seum Bosal as the chainsaws began and the birds flew away. The energy of the felling and the energy of the chanting came together as the trees crashed down until finally there were no more trees, just mounds of branches and logs and sawdust all around. When the men took off in their truck there was just quiet and the air smelled of fresh-cut wood.

Other times we take a particular action, keep trying, and never give up. From the Jataka Tales (Lives of the Buddha) comes this story. A little bird flying along saw that the forest was on fire. So it flew to the nearest water, took what it could in its beak, flew back, and dropped it on the fire. Then it flew back, got a little more water, went back and dropped that on the fire. It did this many times and never gave up even though it could not succeed. The fire raged on and eventually the little bird dropped exhausted into the flames, having done all it could. Also in the story were the gods watching from their heaven realm, detached and not inclined to lift a finger, laughing at the bird’s folly and the anguish of life on earth. Certainly our practice direction does not lead that way. If we perceive clearly that we are not separate then turning away from suffering is not possible.

By the time I was Greta Thunberg’s age now—in the 1960s—the effects of human beings taking carbon compounds from the earth and spritzing them into the atmosphere were already known, just not by most people. Now cause and effect are clear to more people, only, just as we’re waking up, we’re being told it’s already almost too late to avoid suffering for millions.

How might we as individuals, Zen practitioners, Zen centers and groups, regions and the whole Kwan Um School of Zen respond? The Buddha told Ananda that admirable friends are the whole of the path—a part of and a reflection of each life—so how can we work together, supporting, giving inspiration and sharing resources?

Some Possibilities

First, it’s complicated, and we’re all in this together, so no blaming. Keep a wide and open mind and don’t waste energy checking others. Remember that just by being in the

world we create suffering even when we’re trying not to.

Allow our Zen practice to guide us. We have the precepts, temple rules, four great vows, and paramitas. We can do extra practice: kido, extra bows, night practice, retreats. Practice has a great impact.

Bogomila Malinowska JDPSN has suggested **kido** for the situation, so we encourage sanghas and individuals wherever they are to do Kwan Seum Bosal chanting on Fridays (to coincide with the schoolchildren’s climate strikes). Those who can’t manage Fridays of course can chant at another time. Zen Master Bon Shim is leading a Friday kido at Cambridge Zen Center in the United States.

Have lots of **conversations**. More important, listen, and then listen some more, especially to those who have a different perspective from your own on what’s happening. I was inspired to write this article after having one-to-one conversations with several teachers in our school.

Part of the conversation could be to **challenge** one another to try changing a habit that has environmental consequences for an agreed-on length of time. Then one can also see that what might be easy for one person or sangha might be very challenging for another due to local conditions. So we can also use this practice to grow in wisdom and compassion. Myong Hae Sunim JDPS and I have pledged to each other that we would not accept any new plastic bags, me in the UK and she in Hong Kong. While rather easy to do in my situation, her new challenge is how to avoid causing offense when refusing plastic bags while still teaching others. Recently she went to buy flowers with a sangha member and the flower seller tried to put them in a plastic bag. When she asked not to have one, the sangha member could do the same. Now we’re asking what to do about plastic packaging . . .

Among many other possible challenges are flying less, taking more public transportation, giving up or eating less meat, and planting trees. Of course many are already taking some of these actions while others may not be able to. Yesterday, while Igor was planting twenty Korean Evodia trees in his village in Lodz, Poland, I was helping to plant oak, alder, rock maple, and birch trees in York. Although my husband and I would like never to use a car, he cannot walk far, nor easily use public transport, so driving or a taxi are sometimes necessary.

Igor has developed a **Green Dharma workshop** for his sangha and is starting to share it with others. (*See the accompanying article in this issue: “Green Dharma Workshop” by Igor Piniński JDPSN. —Ed.*)

Be with suffering. Myong Hae Sunim JDPS suggests that if we tried going someplace where environmental change has caused suffering, and if we spent time helping, then we would experience how life is for those affected and we would be motivated to make change in our own lives. After helping in refugee camps a friend also has people hoping for political asylum and recovering from torture staying in her house. For example, someone who helps out in refugee camps might then invite into her home some asylum seekers who are recovering from being tortured.

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Or a wealthy man who just managed to save his wife and small child from their house going up in flames from one of the fires near Los Angeles might go from denying the climate crisis to helping.

If moved to act, use **skillful means**. A desire to try and fix things is natural, but perceive when to reach out and when to stay put. If you become or already are an environmental activist, remember that anger hurts us first—keep practicing and going on retreats. Igor Piniński JDPSN said that when Zen Master Seung Sahn came out of the army, his teacher, Zen Master Ko Bong, sent him on a long retreat to take care of his “army eyes.”

We are most fortunate to have encountered the teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn. We are most fortunate to be practicing people. How do each of us choose to live out our bodhisattva vow now? ♦

*Everything is impermanent, but there is truth.
You and I are not two, not one:
Only your stupid thinking is nonstop.
Already alive in the Prajna ship.
—Zen Master Man Gong (1872–1946)*

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other, it is easy to succumb to the self-deception that we have achieved something. It is like the story of the ascetic who practiced alone in a cave for ten years and then claimed to a farmer to have completely mastered anger. When challenged about this, the ascetic ends up screaming at the farmer in rage. (See “One Zen Practitioner’s Response to the Climate Emergency” in this issue. —Ed.)

Therefore, I wish all of us that we find the patience to work on relationships within sangha—and outside of it too of course—and that we can find time to listen to others; to be able to help another selflessly and devote our time and energy to them. I hope we all achieve enlightenment and save all sentient beings from suffering. ♦

Lucie Votrubcová has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen since 2015 at the Sam Bo Sa Zen Center in Liberec, Czech Republic. She took five precepts at the Vrážné Zen Center. She lives with her two small children in Liberec and works as a librarian and proofreader.



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