



The Dharma of Plants: Editor's Introduction

by Karin Meyers

The Buddha was born in the forest. Born in the forest, he studied Dhamma in the forest. He taught Dhamma in the forest, beginning with the *Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma*. He entered Nibbāna in the forest. So we take this quiet and tranquility as our friend and helper. Such an environment is conducive to Dhamma practice, so we take it as our dwelling place; we take the mountains and caves for our refuge. Observing natural phenomena, wisdom comes about in such places. We learn from and understand trees and everything else, and it brings about a state of joy.

Ajahn Chah (1918-1992)¹

Trees, rocks, sand, even dirt and insects can speak. This doesn't mean, as some people believe, that they are spirits (*phi*) or gods (*thewada*). Rather, if we reside in nature near trees and rocks we'll discover feelings and thoughts arising that are truly out of the ordinary. At first we'll feel a sense of peace and quiet (*sangopyen*)

¹ "Wholehearted Training," *The Teachings of Ajahn Chah*. Thailand: Wat Nong Pah Pong, 2004, 405.

which may eventually move beyond that feeling to a transcendence of self. The deep sense of calm that nature provides through separation (*wiwek*) from the troubles and anxieties which plague us in the day-to-day world serves to protect heart and mind. Indeed, the lessons nature teaches us lead to a new birth beyond the suffering (*qwam thuk*) that results from attachment to self. Trees and rocks, then, can talk to us. They help us understand what it means to cool down from the heat of our confusion, despair, anxiety, and suffering.

Ajahn Buddhādāsa (1906-1993)²

Lush groves of emerald bamboos,
Are wholly suchness.
Luxuriant clusters of chrysanthemums,
Nothing is not gnosis (*prajñā*).

Nanyang Huizhong (675-775)³

What we mean by the sutras is the entire cosmos itself... the words and letters of beasts... or those of hundreds of grasses and thousands of trees.... The sutras are the entire universe, mountains and rivers and the great earth, plants and trees; they are the self and others, taking meals and wearing clothes, confusion and dignity.

Dōgen (1200-1253)⁴

² *Siang Takong Jak Thammachat*, translated by Donald Swearer in "Environmental Ethics: Thai Buddhist Perspectives," *Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol 42 (2014): 50.

³ The original provenance of the quote is unknown, but it featured heavily in Chan debates on the Buddha Nature of insentient things. See Robert H. Sharf, "How to Think with a Chan Gong'an," in *Thinking With Cases: Specialist Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History*, edited by Charlotte Furth, Judith T. Zeitlin, and Ping-chen Hsiung (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 205-243.

⁴ Graham Parkes, "Voices of Mountains, Trees, and Rivers: Kūkai, Dōgen, and a Deeper Ecology," in *Buddhism and Ecology: The*

The above quotes from Buddhist masters speak to something that many of us feel intuitively: that the natural world expresses or manifests the Dharma, and that, maybe, if we listen very closely, we might even hear the trees preach the Dharma. Trees not only figure prominently in the life story of Buddha, but became a symbol for his awakening. His instructions for meditation also often begin with the advice to resort to the forest or the foot of a tree:

Bhikkhus, here in this Teaching, a bhikkhu having gone to the forest, or to the foot of a tree, or to an empty place, sits down cross-legged, keeps his body erect and establishes mindfulness on the meditation object...
(Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta)

Does this advice merely reflect the fact that trees offer shade and protection while meditating out of doors? Or is there something more that is gained in the company of trees, in intimate companionship with them and their forest communities? Self-consciously emulating the practice of early Buddhists, modern Thai forest masters like Ajahn Chah certainly seem to have thought so. The idea of learning the Dhamma from the natural world was also central to Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu's inspiration for Wat Suan Mokkh, the "Garden of Liberation." Buddhadhāsa, primarily a Therāvada teacher, was also influenced by East Asian Buddhism, where the idea that Buddha Nature is present in (or as) everything, including plants and trees-- as well as stones, tiles (human artifacts), and even particles of dust, became widely influential. Some teachers argued that these "insentient" beings not only manifest the Dharma, but transmit it in their own distinct ways, in their own "languages." If this is true, why do we find it so hard to hear the Dharma of plants?

Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds, eds. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 111-128.

Human beings evolved in intimate relationship with plants and are still wholly reliant on them for the very air we breathe. For millions of years, our primate ancestors lived in and amongst the trees, and even when they came out of the trees to walk on two legs, they continued to rely heavily on plant bodies. We still rely on plants for food, clothing, medicine, and shelter (the four necessities of life outlined in Buddhist scripture). It's not an exaggeration to say that our bodies, minds, and senses were forged through our relationship with trees and other plants. This long intimacy may explain why spending time amongst them, or "forest bathing," is so beneficial for our mental and physical health.⁵ It may also explain why Buddhists have found forests so conducive to awakening and, as Buddhādāsa puts it, helping us to "cool down from the heat of our confusion, despair, anxiety, and suffering."⁶

Yet, modern industrial ways of life have separated us from and fostered disregard for the vegetal world, degrading and destroying forests and driving plant species to extinction at an alarming pace.⁷ Modern industrialized cultures also suffer from an epidemic of "plant blindness": a profound inability to notice plants at all⁸--much less hear them preach the Dharma.

⁵ Modern research has found forest bathing reduces stress, anxiety, and depression; lowers blood pressure and heart rate; boosts immunity; and can even help fight off cancer.

⁶ Siang Takong Jak Thammachat, translated by Donald Swearer in "Environmental Ethics: Thai Buddhist Perspectives," *Journal of Oriental Studies*, vol 42 (2014): 50.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/30/world-plant-species-risk-extinction-fungi-earth>

⁸ Paco Calvo, *Planta Sapiens: The New Science of Plant Intelligence* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2023), 25-42.

This issue of *Insight Journal* explores the Dharma of Plants, the wisdom we might gather from the plant world or through our relationship to individual plants. It does so from a variety of perspectives, drawing on personal experience, modern scientific insights into the intelligence and social lives of plants, as well as classical Buddhist traditions.

In "The Pine Tree Koan," Buddhist teacher, activist, and poet **Mushim Patricia Ikeda** offers a meditation on the topic in four parts, including a poem sung from the perspective of a pine tree and a reflection on practice with the koan, "How do I manifest true nature, buddha nature as a pine tree?"

Next, Insight Dialogue teacher and psychologist, **Janet Surrey** ("Reflections on Insight Dialogue with an Amaryllis Plant in the Depth of Winter") shares her experience of practicing Insight Dialogue with an Amaryllis plant, prompting us to explore how the spiritual friendship and awakening of the heart and mind available through Insight Dialogue with other human beings may also be available in dialogue with other-than-human beings, including our companion plants.

For his contribution, "Zen Reflections on the Dharma of Plants," philosopher and Sōtō Zen priest, **Jason M. Wirth** explores resonances between modern scientific research on trees and forests, Indigenous thought, the Huayan image of Indra's Net, and Dōgen's (1200-1253) teachings on Buddha Nature, prompting us to consider what may be lost when we value other beings and entities according to their similarities to us, and what we may gain by decentering ourselves and recognizing our shared being in this great earth sangha.

My own contribution, "On the (In)sentience and Buddha Nature of Plants," traces various classical Buddhist views on the sentience and Buddha Nature of plants in light of modern research into plant intelligence and the question of the provocative East Asian Buddhist idea that even the what it might mean to hear the trees speak the Dharma.

The issue closes with a guided meditation ("Practicing with a Plant Ally: Exploring a Question from within the Web

of Life") offered by **Santacitta Bhikkhuni** for cultivating greater intimacy with a plant ally and opening to the wisdom available in the web of life. There is a link to the recording of the meditation.

If these inquiries into the Dharma of Plants intrigues you, then you might consider joining Ayya Santacitta and me for our upcoming course, "[Plants and Us: Consciously Re-Rooting in the Web of Life.](#)"