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The Philosophical Roots for Greening Our Life Styles:
Self-Organization in Liberal Modernity and Ecology

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Twelve strangers gather at Pepperwood Ranch, in Sonoma County, California, during a weekend in April, preparing for two days of work and meditation. Pepperwood Ranch is maintained by the California Academy of Sciences as an oak woodlands reserve. Oak savanna is considered one of the most endangered types of plant communities in California. On this weekend, the conservation director of the ranch has brought Stephanie Kaza, a Buddhist teacher, ecologist, and environmental educator, to help a diverse group of people gain deeper understanding of our place – as humans – in the flow of change in nature.

Following Buddhist tradition, we mix periods of sitting meditation, called *zazen*, with *samu*, mindful, physical work. “Breathe into your experience,” Kaza tells us. “Breathe clearly with each breath as you walk the road in the dark, each step following your breath.” We are on a midnight silent walk on a ranch road; the air is warm for April, the sky is clear; and the north star is visible to guide us back to the ranchhouse should we become confused as to our direction. Returning from our silent walk, we go to bed without conversing, settling our minds from the distractions and business of the work week.

In the morning after a silent breakfast of hearty cereal, fruit, and tea, Kaza explains the ecological meaning of our work. The oak woodland savanna in which we are spending the weekend has been heavily grazed by domestic cattle over the past hundred years. Exotic grasses, brought into the region in the intestines of domesticated, imported horses and cattle, have taken over the meadows from native bunch grass. Moreover, cattle have eaten the young oak sprouts throughout the ranch. Virtually all the oak trees on the ranch are older trees. Some are dying. Since cattle grazing was ended on parts of the ranch a decade ago, young Douglas fir trees have sprouted under the cover of the mature oaks. Young Douglas-fir like the shade and protection provided by the oaks – shade from the summer dry season when the sun bakes down on the savanna in this Mediterranean- type climate. The Douglas-fir are outcompeting the oaks. In several more decades, if left as they are, the Douglas-fir may overshadow and kill the mature oaks, and young acorns will not have a chance to sprout.

Our job, for the weekend, is to cut the young Douglas-fir trees under a certain grove of mature oaks and, in a fenced-in parcel of the ranch, to plant acorns of five native species of oaks, which were collected the previous fall by the conservation director of the ranch from various parcels in the watershed where the ranch is located. If we cut the Douglas-fir, we protect the mature oaks and

give fallen acorns a chance to sprout.

In Buddhist tradition, we work not only to work on the work, but to work in the moment while realizing the far different future. Gary Snyder, poet and teacher who has spent several decades realizing his life within the Buddhist tradition, calls this type of work the “real work” – the work of becoming real to ourselves, realizing the consequences of our actions, taking responsibility for our actions while breathing into the moment.

The morning begins to warm us, sweat appears on some of our brows. It is not easy to cut Douglas-fir saplings four to six inches in diameter with a handsaw. After curving the saplings we drag them into a pile in the center of the meadow. It is noon, and Kaza asks us to gather around the pile of saplings we have cut. We have taken the lives of these trees. It is time to honor their lives.

“Why don’t we just leave the Douglas-firs alone?” a college student asks as she stands near the pile of saplings. “I think it is bad to cut any more trees when so much deforestation is occurring on our earth.”

Kaza asks us to think of the oak woodlands five hundred years in the future. Could a minor intervention in the system today enhance chances for the survival of the whole system? Are we going with the tendency of the land, the tendency of change in the landscape toward cycles of change that can occur without human intervention? Our physical work today is part of a long-term management plan for the ranch. The hope, based on advice from ecologists who have studied oak regeneration in other places in California, is that once the human influences on the landscape have been removed – especially cattle ranching – that the natural process will tend toward healing the landscape. Our mindful practice is directed to becoming aware of each breath, breathing in the joy of the moment, breathing out the joy of the moment.

Kaza explains that after the pile of Douglas-fir saplings we have cut has dried under the summer sun, it will be burned in a controlled burn in the fall, and the ashes will help fertilize the meadow under the winter rains. Native American informants tell us that it was common, before the arrival of Europeans, for aboriginal peoples to collect seeds from native grasses in the meadows of the California savanna areas and then burn the meadows in late summer to stimulate the growth of new grass.

The work project after lunch is more satisfying for some of us than cutting young trees. We plant acorns in a fenced enclosure that is designed to test the ability of acorns to sprout when planted by humans. The acorns have been held in moisturized plastic bags for several months, allowing them to begin sprouting from their hard shells.

In the evening, we say grace before a vegetarian meal, remembering, in the words of Gary Snyder that “eating is a sacrament. The grace we say clears

our hearts and guides the children and welcomes the guest, all at the same time.” Again we eat in silence in the Buddhist tradition, contemplating each bite, remembering that we too are edible. After supper we gather in a circle to speak from our hearts about the work we did during the day and the work to be done in restoration.

A young woman graduate student studying ecology wonders why many of us found it more satisfying to plant acorns than to cut trees. Are we sentimental? Have we been conditioned by numerous Arbor Day exercises at school to the idea that we should plant trees rather than cut them down?

Why not burn the young Douglas fir and the grasslands in a controlled fire sometime in the fall, another woman asks? Some forest ecologists recommend that prescribed burns be set in many areas of northern California. Fire is part of healing the forest. Fire is also a powerful teacher. During the past eighty years, fire has been suppressed by massive efforts of the U.S. Forest Service and the California Department of Forestry in an effort to save harvestable timber and to prevent fires from burning through historically burned- over forested lands, including many areas that now have farms, suburban developments, and even large cities. Suppression of natural fire cycles in millions of acres of the American West has led to a huge buildup of dead material, which, during the summer drought, can be sparked – by numerous causes including lightning, carelessly thrown cigarette butts, ashes from a camper’s fire – into catastrophic fires.

Our discussion of the role of fire in the ecology of oak savannas leads to a more general discussion of the meaning of “natural” and “restoration”. How can we ever “restore” an area to naturalness after massive human interventions in the system, a philosophy student asks. Isn’t a “restored” oak savanna merely an artifact created to meet our human conceptions of what nature should look like, to satisfy our human interests? On the most fundamental level isn’t restoration another manifestation of human domination of nature? Perhaps our work today, cloaked in the fashionable label of “ecological consciousness” is simply a continuation of that same age-old urge.

One of the “laws” of ecological systems is that they are complex, perhaps more complex than human beings can ever explain or understand through contemporary scientific methods. By imposing what we think the process of the oak savanna is, are we continuing to reconstruct nature for our own purposes, albeit more aesthetic and even creative purposes than grazing domesticated cattle on the oak savanna to provide us with meat? If “natural” means independence from human domination, how are we liberating natural processes by continuing to manipulate the oak savanna on this ranch by cutting Douglas fir and planting acorns?

These are more than questions of semantics, a philosophy student in the circle reminds us. Indeed, a philosopher who has considered these questions at some

length suggests what he calls the principle of noninterference as a primary moral duty in his ethic of respect for nature. By putting aside our human interests and personal preferences for a landscape we acknowledge the ability of nature to sustain its own proper order.

Those questions were not resolved in conversation around the campfire that evening, but the conversation illustrated to me the importance of deep questioning in exploring the problems of developing greener lifestyles.

Most of the people in the circle after our work day in the oaks, expressed their sense of suffering and confusion. Our lives seem fragmented, unsettled, disrupted, much as the natural processes of the oak savanna have been fragmented by human impacts – especially over the past hundred years. Many in the circle said they want to live in harmony with nature, but questioned what harmony means. One young man wondered if the words wild and wilderness will pass from our language during his lifetime.

I express my feeling that I am in a process of recovery, that my culture has encouraged me to become addicted to the need for more – more education and more information, as well as more material possessions. I admit that I am addicted to “keeping upon the news” just as some people are addicted to going shopping for new clothes when they feel depressed. I feel one way to recovery is to recover my rootedness in the oak savanna, to become the oak savanna, to give voice to the oak savanna for what it is, not for what I want it to be. I want to be alert to the changes of the seasons. I want to watch the first wildflowers bloom and know when the gray whales are most likely to be seen along the coast migrating northward to their summer feeding grounds in the Gulf of Alaska.

One of the first premises of working in the recovery process is to remember that people in recovery are beautiful. We are facing our situation in all its complexity. We are living each day fully, looking directly at our need for hope, looking at our need for everything to be normal even though we know in our hearts that these are not normal times. We are facing up to the fact that during the rest of our lifetime, our relationship with nonhuman nature may never be “normal” again.

It is deep in the night when we realize we have exhausted our ability to discuss these deep questions in one meeting. Kaza suggests we have short sitting meditation. Folding our legs under us, we face outward from our thoughts into what Buddhist teachers call the great emptiness. Emptying our minds of thoughts, we open our minds to letting in the night.

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