



WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

The photo above shows the same place as the photo below. This is our “Horse Barn Site” at the Meadowood Recreation Area, on northern Virginia’s Mason Neck Peninsula. (There is a huge horse barn just upslope—hence the name.) The top photo, taken in March 2008, shows the site just before we started work on it. The bottom photo was taken in September of this year. Just 18 months have taken this site from a barren, gully-scarred slope to a lively field on its way to forest. At least 40 species of native herbs, shrubs, and trees are now growing here. The site is now creating soil instead of

losing it to erosion. It is filtering the water that passes through it, instead of polluting it with nitrogen-laden silt. It is drawing carbon out of the atmosphere. It is providing habitat to wildlife. It’s just one little spot of earth—less than an acre—and not much in the grand scheme of things, but it is cause for hope. Especially when you consider that the Sangha is working on dozens of sites like this.

On line: Time-lapse comparisons of other sites are available in the “Site Visit” slide show on our home page, earthsangha.org, and on our DC area field map, at earthsangha.org/dca/dcamap.html.



LISA GRABS HOLD OF IT

The Earth Sangha was founded 12 years ago, in the hope that a green Sangha—a Buddhist community focused on environmental action—would benefit the Washington, DC, region and maybe, eventually, other places as well. And by many measures, the idea seems to be working. How big a difference are we making? Lisa and I are constantly asking ourselves that question, and when it comes to the Sangha’s environmental work, we have many ways of answering—many measurements that we can apply. But what about the benefits conferred by Buddhist practice? What use is Buddhism in the context in which we work? Good answers to questions like these are not so easily had. We won’t find them in measurements, or in any of the other things that we usually want answers to do for us. To get them, we’ll need to make a fresh effort to notice where we really are, and then ask, and ask again. I try this below, in three different ways, and Lisa answers. – Chris Bright

1. *We are at war with nature, and little by little, our conquests are enslaving us. We are destroying the planet’s great treasure-houses of biological diversity—tropical forests, for example, and coral reefs. We are disrupting ecosystems all over the world through the release of weeds, pathogens, and other invasive exotic species. We are over-fishing all of the major ocean fisheries; some have already collapsed. As a consequence of these and other assaults, extinction is no longer just the fate of individual species; we are wiping out entire natural communities. And as so many other living things die out, our own numbers continue to grow—but this is no healthy increase. Already, over 2.8 billion people, about 40% of the total human population, live in regions prone to drought; at least 834 million people are chronically undernourished. Millions more will likely suffer these deprivations. And climate change will make all of these crises even worse. This is our world—the real world. This is it. What has Buddhist practice to offer in such a place? If practice is just a matter of personal comfort—meditating to feel better about oneself—it would hardly seem to be worth the trouble!* – Chris

Let’s start with a Buddhist way of looking at trouble. The Buddha discovered that we create our own suffering because we are not open to the totality of our experience. To be liberated from our suffering, we must first see how we create suffering. But of course Buddhist practice is not just about seeing suffering. The Buddha insisted that our practice should lead to experiencing the true nature of everything.

To do that, we have to acknowledge our own mistakes and change the course of our own actions. That’s a lot of work! It’s much easier to refuse to acknowledge the way things are so that we don’t have to own the problems. That’s what we usually do. Instead of struggling to see the true nature of things, we become obsessed with arranging and rearranging the ideas and opinions that we’ve already got. Essentially, we want it both ways. We want to be comfortable and we also want to feel justified. We do not want all the hard work and sacrifice that profound experience requires, but we also do not want to feel bad about ourselves for not taking the right actions!

Unless we can recognize that we created all these huge problems—every one of us, through our own misguided perceptions and actions—we will never fix any of them. Maybe the thing that we most need is the strength to really look at how we are managing our lives, and how much harm we are doing to other lives in the process. Even if we can’t do this all the time, if we could just push ourselves a little harder during our clearer moments, then maybe it would be easier to see how much better life is when we’re living for the benefit of others. In Buddhism, that’s why we meditate and study the Sutras, and do



EARTH SANGHA

BUDDHIST VALUES IN ACTION

The Earth Sangha is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) charity based in the Washington, DC, area and devoted to ecological restoration. We work in the spirit of Buddhist practice, but our members and volunteers come from a wide variety of religious and secular backgrounds.

Want to donate or join the Sangha? You can support our work by becoming a member. Membership starts at \$35 per year. Donations are tax-deductible. You can mail us a check or donate on our web site. We will send you a receipt and include you in our mailings. Our mailing address is: Earth Sangha, 10123 Commonwealth Blvd., Fairfax, VA 22032-2707. Our web site is earthsangha.org. Comprehensive program information is available on our web site.

Want to volunteer or meditate with us? We work with volunteers at our Wild Plant Nursery and our field sites in northern Virginia. We meditate in the Del Ray section of Alexandria on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings, and on the mornings of the first and third Sundays of the month. For more information see our web site or call Lisa Bright at (703) 764-4830.

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One of the best: The Earth Sangha has been recognized by the *Catalogue for Philanthropy* as “one of the best small charities in the Washington, DC, region.”



GREATER WASHINGTON

other kinds of practice. Would you say this isn't worth the trouble? I would say that it's one of the best things we have going for us!

– Lisa

2. *At least for me, one of the most attractive things about the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings) is its apparent compatibility with the natural sciences. It's often said that Buddhism is about seeing things as they really are; the same claim could be advanced for physics, chemistry, or biology. That's not to say that science and Buddhism are identical, but only that there may be no fundamental contradiction between the two. From this perspective, practice can become a way of discarding much of the anxiety that tends to accrete around the great issues of life and death, but without the addition of all sorts of metaphysical clutter. And yet an important theme in the Dharma is the idea of reincarnation. I realize that the Dharma explicitly denies the existence of a soul, but even a kind of "soulless" reincarnation—movement of karma from one life to another, or something like that—may be tough to square with the world that the sciences show us. That doesn't make the idea of reincarnation automatically wrong, of course, but it does raise an Occam's razor kind of question: why bother with the idea at all? – Chris*

The idea of reincarnation is not exclusive to Buddhism. But to see what reincarnation means in the Dharma, you have to understand a much more fundamental concept: the law of conditionality. This was the first thing that the Buddha taught—and his first teaching resulted in the enlightenment of several people!

There is a vast literature on this subject. I'm not a scholar so I couldn't give a lecture on it even if I wanted to, but I can tell you that the basic idea is very simple. What the Buddha saw was that all phenomena, whether physical or psychological or whatever, are conditioned states. Nothing exists on its own. Anything that comes into existence does so as a result of certain conditions. If the conditions are removed, it ceases to exist. In essence, this is Buddhism! And because everything is, in a sense, dependent on everything else, everything is in constant flux, either fast or slow. Each particular thing comes about because of certain preceding conditions and, in turn, it contributes to the things that follow. You could say that the universe is just all these relationships that are constantly changing. Nothing has a permanent identity of its own. Incidentally, this is what is meant by the much misunderstood idea of "emptiness" in Buddhism. It doesn't mean a void or nothingness. It means that everything is empty of a permanent, singular, unchanging identity.

Now let's look at this idea of karma. Karma is one kind of conditionality—it's the law of conditionality at work in living things. But there are many layers of karma—biological, psychological, ethical, and so on, so karmic results are extremely complicated. That's why the popular notion of one kind of action always bringing a certain kind of karmic result is incorrect. It's much more complicated than that.

How does karma actually work? The most important factor is the state of consciousness in which an action or thought occurs. The Dharma says that this state can be either "skillful" or "unskillful." This terminology is important because it emphasizes the role of intelligence in Buddhist ethics. Doing the right thing demands not just benevolence but intelligence! Unskillful states of mind are characterized by craving, aversion, and ignorance. The result is a sense of self-contraction, an experience akin to unhappiness. It's not like we're being punished

Photos: On the opposite page, Lisa at work at our Native Arboretum project in Fairfax County, Virginia. At right, Chris at a forestry station on the Dominican side of the DR – Haiti border. Chris and Lisa Bright are the cofounders of the Earth Sangha.

On line: For more on Green Buddhism, go to earthsangha.org/depth/gb.html.

exactly; it's more like, either quickly or slowly, we tend to make ourselves miserable. Skillful states of mind, on the other hand, are characterized by contentment, love, and clarity of mind. The reward for skillful actions is obvious: one experiences a sense of expanded being and happiness.

Reincarnation, or rebirth, is connected to the law of karma. In traditional Buddhism, rebirth is regarded as the result of all our karmic burdens—all the desires and fears that drive consciousness from life to life. In the traditional teachings, the purpose of Buddhist practice is to achieve enlightenment, liberation from the prison of the self, to stop being reborn. Being reborn is definitely not considered a good thing! Of course, this is a spiritual idea and not a scientific one. It cannot pass the tests of science, which require verifiable data. But it is correct to say that the basic orientation of Buddhism, the emphasis on conditionality, does not fight with science. It's just that that's not all that Buddhism offers. There is a kind of spiritual realm too. Whether you think it worth your trouble to try to have that in your practice, that's your choice. – Lisa

3. *Buddhism seems to encourage a radical view of "personal development," if I could put it that way. The Sutras insist that enlightenment is possible—over and over again. So do many eminent teachers. The same sources remind us frequently that, whatever else it may be, enlightenment is a liberation from the mirage of the "self" as we generally perceive it. Achieving enlightenment would obviously be a feat of profound importance for the practitioner, but since enlightenment is a kind of radical selflessness, shouldn't that feat also be a matter of profound importance for others—and perhaps for society in general? Does enlightenment have a social dimension? – Chris*

Let's look at it this way. We tend to think as if we own a life. I own my life and you own yours. So our lives are distinct. You have to solve your own problems. Your problems don't concern me unless they get in my way somehow. That's how we usually think. But as our practice gets deeper, we begin to see that this is almost completely wrong. We don't own a life after all—it might be better to say that Life owns us, or that we belong to Life. It's like we are all working together, weaving this inconceivably huge, intricate tapestry, but we are all just part of the tapestry at the same time! So we are deeply related to one another, and we have great responsibilities to each other. The more skillfully we weave, the finer the tapestry becomes. The more unskillfully, the coarser it gets. So there can be no such thing as "personal" enlightenment. Enlightenment without social expressions is no enlightenment at all. – Lisa



7 BIG THINGS FOR 2010

Even little organizations ought to have big agendas. Ambitious goals encourage innovation. The Sangha is really little—we usually take in less than \$200,000 per year—so our goals are enormous. Hey, it's worked out so far! If we can find the funding, here is what we hope to achieve in 2010.

We have four big goals for our work in the Washington, DC, region.

1. More efficient propagation of wild native-plant populations. At our Wild Plant Nursery, where we are propagating over 180 species of native plants from the wild, we will continue to renovate and expand our container-yard “growing trough” system. The system consists of a series of big, shaded concrete-block troughs, lined with pondliner and equipped with sprinklers and drains. The troughs let us manage water much more efficiently, thereby greatly improving production. Our trough arrays now cover nearly 14,800 square feet. In 2010, we hope to extend the system by another 5,500 square feet, through the remainder of our nursery's container yard.

2. A better method for rolling back the “worst case” invasions. Next year we will begin testing more techniques for controlling multiflora rose thickets, dense ground-layer infestations of English ivy, and similar alien plant infestations, where little of the native flora survives except for established forest canopy. Such infestations are a big problem for conservation; large-scale control is usually very expensive and there is little public interest in it. But progress on this front could open up a great deal of valuable habitat for native plants and animals.

3. Our first meadow restoration project. Meadows are among the most threatened natural communities in the DC region. Like forests, meadows are being lost to development; unlike forests, there isn't much political interest in replanting them, and opportunities to restore meadows are likely narrowing because of an understandable

interest in extending tree canopy. Yet meadows are important habitat for hundreds of native plants and animals, many of which can live nowhere else. Our nursery upgrade will allow us to increase our inventory of meadow species. In 2010, we plan to begin extending our restoration work from forests alone to both forests and meadows.

4. Buffers that work better for conservation. The stream buffer restoration sites that our volunteers planted on parkland throughout Fairfax County are, for the most part, well on their way to becoming little patches of forest. But some sites are in poor condition, and even the good sites have problems—especially infestations of invasives. Many sites also present important opportunities for enrichment or expansion—or both. In 2010, we hope to begin managing some of these roughly 30 buffer sites in a more systematic way, to extend the conservation potential of these places.

For our Tree Bank / Hispaniola project region, along the northern section of the Dominican Republic – Haiti border, we have three big goals for 2010. (Our Tree Bank helps the region's impoverished farmers improve their income and restore native forest on portions of their land.)

1. A pickup truck! Thanks to our many generous donors, especially two very magnanimous (and anonymous) ones, we can finally afford to purchase a used pickup for our Tree Bank Nursery. Our Tree Bank Nursery produces both native Hispaniolan trees and a range of tropical orchard species. The truck will make our operation much more efficient. We won't have to rent a truck every time we need to bring in supplies, and we'll be able to move more trees out to the farms for planting. The truck will also allow us to organize a fruit marketing program—something that we couldn't do before because we had no reliable way of transporting our farmers' fruit.

2. A credit system. We plan to start a small credit program for our Tree Bank farmers—for people who plant a portion of their land in native trees, or who agree to conserve a forest patch remaining on their farms. Our farmers need credit for many of the same reasons that US farmers need it, for example, to pay for seed and fertilizer. But credit is very hard to come by in our project region, and even when it's available, the interest charged is typically equivalent to 40% APR or higher. A reliable source of reasonably priced credit will help our farmers improve their yields and create a powerful incentive for restoring forest. In 2010, we plan to make our first loans.

3. Our first shipments of coffee. Our Tree Bank farmers produce excellent coffee but they make very little money from it. Regional buyers purchase their coffee at low prices, and resell it to various vendors. As soon as we emerge from all the necessary paper work, we plan to offer our farmers a much better price for their coffee, which we will then import into the United States and sell to help support the Tree Bank. In our project region, coffee is almost always grown in shade. That makes it a forest crop, so a coffee program could be another powerful incentive for forest restoration. We hope to launch our coffee program in 2010, assuming that we don't have to spend the entire year applying for permission to ship the coffee off the island.



Photo: In Los Cerezos, our Tree Bank project region, Catana sat for a picture last June, while Wilma (foreground) and Mari offered a prop. Catana is the sister of Gaspar, the Director of our Tree Bank Nursery.

On line: Look for updates on our news page, at earthsangha.org/news.html.