The Arrow explores the relationship between contemplative practice, politics, and activism. We investigate topics in politics, economics, ecology, conflict transformation, and the social sciences. Inspired by the vision of meditation masters Chögyam Trungpa and Sakyong Mipham for a “union of social life and spiritual wakefulness” in society, The Arrow provides a critical and much needed space for investigating the meeting point of contemplative wisdom and pressing issues of climate change, racism, inequality, and conflict.
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Guest Editor’s Note

Dear Readers:

We are pleased to share with you our first thematic collection, focused on Teaching Contemplative Environments. With these essays, we seek to explore the connections between contemplative practices and our human relationship with nature, broadly understood. The challenges of the current environmental state of the world can be overwhelming; students of environmental issues at all stages of action may be overwhelmed by the range of problems they see and end up feeling helpless rather than empowered to create change. Contemplative practice can offer a way to help develop comfort with seeing problems clearly without giving up the possibility of meaningful change. How can we bring this practice into classrooms and experiential learning spaces in a grounded and effective way?

The three essays in this collection consider possible engagements from different perspectives. With “Inner and Outer Ecologies,” Jacob Richey and Paul Wapner offer us a window into a broad conversation about ways in which contemplative practice and environmentalism might be mutually beneficial to each other. My contribution to the collection, “Teaching a Practice for Nature,” grounds the opportunity to engage the impacts of our environmental choices in a traditional Buddhist practice of tonglen by extending compassion into the natural world. Amy Ryken’s “Teaching and Learning in Nearby Nature” creates space for student voices as she reflexively considers the ways in which she teaches about a local sense of engaging and understanding the environment around us. Together, these three pieces aspire to help us contemplate not just our individual relationships with the natural world, but to open up space in which we might share our practices and engagements with a more inclusive community.

We hope you enjoy reading them, and perhaps also find yourself provoked by the possibilities for action explored within.

Best wishes,
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At first sight, it may appear that contemplative practices stand at odds with environmental protection efforts. After all, the word ‘environment’ generally refers to the natural world outside of us, rather than the internal one within us. Moreover, environmental work aims to change widespread behavior and thus focuses on government policies, economic incentives, technological innovation, cultural norms, and other structures of power. These operate in the political realm, and thus call on environmentalists to externally project their efforts.

In contrast, contemplative practices seemingly invite one to go ‘inside.’ They involve exercises that allow the practitioner to become more aware of one’s interior landscape. Whether they involve sitting meditation, yoga, journaling, dance, prayer, or textual study, contemplative practices cultivate a sensitivity to subjectivity. They encourage becoming intimate with one’s experience and using such intimacy to transcend the ‘ego mind’ or ‘small self’ that often preoccupies us and animates our activities. In this pursuit, some contemplative traditions eschew the external world; they see social engagement—and thus environmental politics—as a distraction from self-inquiry and inner awareness.

This special issue of The Arrow seeks to clarify the relationship between contemplative practice and environmental protection. It seeks to go beyond the misperception that they are at odds with each other,
tapping into the socially engaged dimension of Buddhism and other wisdom traditions to emphasize how contemplative practice can play an integral role in environmental protection. This essay contributes to such efforts by bringing into relief several avenues of connection between our interior and exterior lives in relation to environmentalism, and thus underlining the compatibility between contemplative practice and environmental work.

In the budding field of what could be called “Contemplative Environmentalism,” many thinkers have described how contemplative practice can enhance environmental activism. They have explained ways in which meditation, yoga, and other practices help one become more skillful at environmental engagement, and we explore this important dimension first. However, we add a significant complement by pointing out how environmental work can, in turn, enhance the contemplative life. We show how working on behalf of environmental wellbeing opens deeper wells of sanity within the self, expands the bounds of awareness, and in general deepens one’s contemplative experience. Ultimately we argue that addressing the environmental predicament is now an essential part of practicing the Dharma; it is part of the ‘toolkit’ of wakeful spiritual practice.

The Gifts of Practice

Contemplative practice has much to offer the environmentalist. In this section, we discuss four ways that it can enhance our engagement with environmental issues: It can help us cultivate subjective clarity when engaging with environmental issues, refine our ability to respond, overcome fixation on measurable outcomes that can interfere with transformative action, and dismantle our sense of separateness of the earth and each other. In the following, we explain each of these benefits. Before doing so, however, it is useful to define contemplative practice. Contemplative practices usually involve two basic elements: first is concentration, a steadying of the mind to direct one’s focus. By its very nature, the mind wanders; it flits about in unpredictable ways. Concentration aims to stabilize the mind, strengthening its ability to stay focused on an object of attention. Such stability of attention is essential to contemplation because without it, one is unable to look or reflect upon anything in a sustained manner.

The second element of contemplative practice is awareness. This is often considered the backdrop of consciousness within which
thoughts, feelings, and sensations occur. Once we are able to access awareness—through, for example, noticing the activity of thinking without becoming caught up in it—insights are possible. In becoming aware of the mind’s gyrations and recognizing that we are not defined by our thoughts or feelings, we can more skillfully penetrate the moment-to-moment experience of our mind and phenomenal reality. Put differently, as we see our thoughts as thoughts, or recognize emotions as insubstantial, transient colorful energy, or sensations as fleeting occurrences, we can peer more deeply into and beyond them, and thus come into contact with experience itself.\(^2\)

**Practice** is critical because repetition develops greater levels of concentration and awareness, ultimately helping to cultivate an absorptive state wherein one relaxes one’s tendency to become lost in mental chatter, loses self-consciousness, and settles into a state in which one can clearly and directly experience one’s mind.\(^3\) While usually associated with formal sitting meditation, contemplative practice can include everything from journaling, yoga, and prayer to labyrinth walking, visualization, dance, qigong, and similar techniques. These practices bear fruit to the degree that they enhance our intimacy with experience and, as we shall see, the world around us.\(^4\)

The first way contemplative practice can assist environmentalism is by providing a tool for cultivating greater awareness of one’s inner landscape so as to allow more subjective clarity when engaging environmental issues. Too often our individual views skew our perception of environmental harm and of how best to respond. Furthermore, we often fail to see the connections between how we simultaneously experience and contribute to environmental degradation. Contemplative practice can help illuminate these connections and assist us in addressing environmental challenges with greater self-awareness and effectiveness.

Environmental problems arise for multiple reasons. Corporations adopt an extractivist\(^5\) attitude in pursuit of profit; states compete against each other for natural resources; and too few of us have the ethical stamina to sustain care for the more-than-human world and those humans living at the frontlines of environmental degradation. While each of these is true, underneath them all—or at least animating many of them—is simply the deep proclivity to over-consume material resources. During the past few centuries, many cultures have grown consumerist, equating happiness and wellbeing with material abundance and instilling a persistent yearning for material wealth. This
yearning—or, more accurately, the attempt to satisfy it—sits at the heart of climate change, water scarcity, soil degradation, loss of biological diversity, and a host of other environmental challenges, in that each of these results from ever-increasing resource extraction and dumping of waste. Contemplative practices can help us explore the nature of material hunger and our attraction toward accumulation, creating the possibility of freedom from our addiction to consumer products and opulence. They offer methods for noticing and detaching from the desiring mind, and allow us to taste a form of contentment that doesn’t depend on the transient enjoyment of consumer products and luxuries. Glimpsing this contentment can provide a critical perspective on the view that having more stuff will make us happy. To be sure, contemplative practices will not necessarily free us completely from material desire, nor will environmental problems disappear if people simply consume less. Furthermore, let us not forget that many people in the world are not economically well-off enough to over-consume and thus contemplative practice is a limited form of environmental protection. Nevertheless, contemplative practices can uncover the dynamics that drive overconsumption and thereby provide an important perspective on underlying causes of environmental harm.

Secondly, aside from analyzing the causes of environmental problems, contemplative practices can assist in refining our ability to respond. Like our reactions to certain political challenges, many of us adopt an impulsive attitude to the injustices, violence, and exploitation that mark environmental harm. Thus, upon learning about or witnessing environmental degradation, many of us lash out too quickly at an apparent perpetrator and thereby unskillfully channel anger and despair. This can lead to actions that alienate potential allies and undermine possibilities for greater communication and political negotiation. More generally, it can polarize environmental dilemmas beyond what is necessary by turning things into an “us versus them” mentality that often exacerbates environmental conflict. Contemplative practices can help guard against this by encouraging less reactivity. In this sense, they do not eradicate anger—since doing so is almost impossible and because anger can often serve an important purpose in indicating injustice, discrimination, unethical action. Rather, these practices help slow down the reaction process and thereby provide a wider range of inner resources with which to respond. Ideally, contemplative practice can instill a pause in our experience from which we can better understand anger and translate it into discernment and then effective action.
In Buddhist language, contemplative practices cultivate the “inner witness,” which can quiet the impulsive voice that too quickly wants to react. As Chögyam Trungpa points out, “Mindfulness practice is not just about what is happening to you individually and personally—it is about how much you are going to transmit your sanity and your insanity to the rest of the world.” Contemplative practices, in other words, can encourage skillful action.

Thirdly, contemplative practices can further refine environmental action by helping to contextualize and focus our sense of exigency. Too often activists are moved by an unproductive sense of urgency based on sober assessments of our environmental predicament. Make no mistake, environmental dilemmas represent some of the most profound challenges facing humanity and threaten not only the quality but the very viability of life on earth. Thus, it makes sense that many environmentalists want to instill transformation as quickly and as deeply as possible. The injustices and ecological ramifications of environmental harm are simply too grave to approach lightly or in a measured pace. And yet, we know that constantly sprinting into environmental engagement can be self-defeating. Without a capacity to sustain activism, many environmentalists burn out. They work passionately and often skillfully for a while but frequently find themselves beaten down by the sheer magnitude and unending onslaught of environmental problems. Too many environmentalists experience genuine psychological hardship, and this forces some either to leave the effort or, in the best cases, to search for more satisfying ways to engage. Contemplative practices do not necessarily alleviate burnout or the challenge of sustainable engagement, but can provide perspective on what is at stake.

One source of perspective comes from adopting a wider timeframe for environmental activism. For instance, Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone recommend particular practices that help one adopt a longer view that encourages one to see environmental work not as a series of battles but as a way of life, and thus filled with a combination of the usual ensemble of disappointment, achievement, sorrow, and joy. Macy and Johnstone encourage us to remember, for example, that life on earth is roughly 3.5 billion years old and that environmental efforts are part of that long, evolving story. Toward this end, they recommend meditation techniques focused on tortoises, whales, and other “old” species to cultivate a type of resonance with the long duration of life and thus offer a sense of spaciousness for environmental effort. They also encourage deep reflection on our place in the long flow of evolu-
tion. Importantly, Macy and Johnstone suggest these practices not to console us with a sense that, over the long run, all will be well; rather, they remind us that our lives are part of larger processes and that, when we align our efforts accordingly, we can sustain ourselves campaign after campaign.8

Cultivating the long view also helps activists avoid unnecessary and often painful attachment to the results of their efforts. Sometimes environmental protection involves goal-oriented action. There are, in other words, genuine battles to be won with the prize of actual achievement. Many efforts aim to stop actual instances of toxic contamination, species extinction, unjust land use, and the buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. When we lose such battles, we can often find ourselves dejected or otherwise drained as we must confront our own disappointment. Almost more burdensome, however, is the fact that many environmental problems don’t have finite endpoints. Tackling long-term problems means that one’s efforts aren’t always visible, which can lead to feeling disempowered. Whether our goals are clear or ill-defined, when we link our sense of worth with outcomes that are largely beyond our control, we are vulnerable to burnout and despair. Contemplative practices can assist here by helping distinguish effort from achievement, and putting primacy on the former over the latter.

Focusing on the ends of action intensifies a contingent sense of happiness. It suggests that one can only be genuinely satisfied if certain conditions exist. At the mundane level, it suggests that I will only be happy when, for example, I land a new job, come to a better place in my relationships, buy a new car, etc. Such contingency replicates on the political level, as many environmentalists understandably peg their happiness on winning particular campaigns. But, as often becomes all too clear, this is a defeatist orientation, since no one can completely control external events. For all their hugely important efforts, environmentalists are always losing battles: oil pipelines win approval, toxic practices find legal support, habitat-destroying development projects are built, and climate protection efforts get undermined by more powerful interests. Contemplative practices can help one weather such defeats by concentrating awareness on the efforts rather than the results. As it is often put, one strives impeccably to advance particular efforts but gives up the fruits involved. That is, outcome, while important, is not the full meaning of one’s activist labors. At the most extreme, one sees this in the bodhisattva commitment to continually reincarnate, postponing one’s own enlightenment until all beings are free from
suffering—a practice that underlines the importance of not being attached to outcome. David Loy writes about the bodhisattva, “Someone who has signed up for such an unachievable task is not going to be intimidated by present crises, no matter how difficult or even hopeless they may appear.”

A final but essential way that contemplation contributes to environmental engagement is by helping us dismantle our sense of separateness. It can facilitate our recognizing that the self is not an independent entity but instead interdependent with other beings and the wider biophysical world. This is the heart of environmental consciousness. The environment is not something external of which we partake but is something of which we are inescapably part. While scientists catalogue such interdependence in material ways, contemplative practices enable one to come in direct contact with it. Contemplative traditions refer to such interdependence in terms of inter-being, co-arising, dependent origination, or simply a sense of mutual connectedness. At the heart of this is a kind of unity or ground of being that underpins all forms of manifestation. When one experiences such interconnectedness, one recognizes the plight of others, including that of the more-than-human world. One sees oneself in the conditions of others. It is as if the more aware we become, the more responsible we feel for the world.
this way, contemplative practices heighten our sense of injustice and often inspire us to work for greater ecological and social wellbeing.

In sum, contemplative practice is not an exercise in self-involvement but rather a way to engage more skillfully in the wider world around us, including environmental affairs. It helps us look more deeply at our internal lives and thus enable us to identify interior causes of environmental harm, cultivate more responsive rather than reactive forms of engagement, avoid burnout by adopting meaningful time-frames and focusing more on effort rather than achievement, and recognize biophysical and other forms of interdependence. In these ways, coming to know oneself more fully or, pejoratively, “working on oneself,” is a boost to environmental efforts. Environmentalism needs a turn inward.

The Gifts of Environmentalism

Many thinkers have noted how contemplative practice can make us more skillful environmentalists. What is less recognized is that environmental engagement can enhance our contemplative lives. That is, working on behalf of environmental protection is not simply a matter of external action in the world; it also provides a tool for inner exploration and understanding. If environmentalism needs an inward turn, our inner work also needs an external, environmental one.

One reason people care about environmental dilemmas is because issues like water pollution, climate change, and loss of biological diversity are not simply outer phenomena but occurrences that get inside of us. On the one hand, this is merely a biophysical fact: Humans, like all of life, are made up of the very elements that circulate throughout the atmosphere, hydrosphere, pedosphere, and lithosphere. Environmental change, then, does not simply happen “out there,” but gets registered in the body. Today, for instance, most people carry around 200 different environmental contaminants in their blood, creating what has been called a “chemical body burden” that we bear and respond to throughout our lives. This can lead to acute illness among more vulnerable people or simply stand as a biochemical condition to which our bodies must react and adapt. In both cases, environmental conditions get “inside” and thus color, to varying degrees, our somatic experience.

On the other hand, environmental conditions also impact our psychological and spiritual states. Ecopsychologists Lise Van Susteren and Kevin Coyle point out how simply knowing about climate change, spe-
cies extinction, and habitat destruction breeds feelings of loss, sadness, anger, and lamentation in those of us who are aware of such devastation. They document, for instance, that many environmentalists suffer from chronic depression by virtue of simply knowing about various forms of environmental harm. In this sense, environmental conditions lodge not only in our cells, membranes, or endocrine systems, but also in consciousness, stealing themselves into our minds and hearts. Yet this also means that positive environmental experiences or successful environmental protection efforts can generate their own sentiments, as people often feel joy when they witness encouraging environmental change or a sense of awe when they behold a beautiful landscape.

That environmental circumstances shape human interiority underlines the two-way relationship between our external and internal lives.

The notion that environmental engagement can enhance the contemplative life stems from a sense that one can actually use the two-way relationship to build deeper levels of insight and compassion. That is, one need not be passive in how environmental conditions register themselves within our bodies, minds, and spirits. Rather, environmental challenges can become grist for the spiritual mill, an opportunity to practice spiritual warriorship or, as contemporary Buddhist teacher Sakyong Mipham often says, to “rise to the challenge” of these unique times.

Environmental degradation has reached such proportions that geographers categorize the current geological era as the “Anthropocene”—the age of humans. This refers to the fact that humanity has placed its signature on every ecosystem on earth and has become an ecological force in its own right. Today, one can find the pesticide polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) in the most distant oceans, dams on almost every major river, chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) scattered throughout the stratosphere, and mines littered across the earth’s crust. Furthermore, through deforestation, over-hunting, and agriculture, humans now determine which species live or die, and thus steer the process of evolution itself. Combined with anthropogenic climate change—wherein humanity influences the planet’s carbon cycle and thus has its fingers on the earth’s thermostat—it becomes clear that there is no place on earth devoid of human presence and that our actions have planetary, biospheric consequences. This influence represents an unparalleled qualitative leap in humanity’s environmental reach, as it marks the first time in our species’ long history when we have become the unwitting
governors of the quality and very viability of life on earth. It also represents a potential qualitative leap in humanity’s contemplative life.

Consider anthropogenic climate change. It may be that our increasing awareness of global warming is opening up chambers within the human heart that have never existed or been explored before. The profound sadness that many feel, the sense of love for all that is at risk and disappearing, the visceral impression of interdependence that is emerging as we watch our fellow humans and nonhuman companions suffer in the face of climate change, and our feelings of awe as we generate collective efforts to combat climate change—the depth to which these are felt and the quality of that experience may be unique to our time. Thus, they can be invitations to get to know ourselves in deeper ways and to strengthen our interior experience. Put differently, climate change is not simply a dilemma that we must confront externally or that we must soldier through; it is also an opportunity for growth and self-knowledge. It provides avenues toward developing more sensitive and aware selves. The human spirit may actually expand and deepen in a climate age.

Climate change and the Anthropocene in general offer not simply a different inner landscape for the contemplator, but also a sense of planetary responsibility that has its own introspective benefits. Almost every spiritual tradition includes an element of compassion for others and the encouragement to be of benefit to the world. In the age of humans, where humanity’s actions shape the biophysical and socio-emotional character of life for all beings, the outward gaze takes on intensified meaning and thus offers deeper levels of inner engagement. When the planet’s life support systems are at risk, the idea of being of benefit to the world expands its parameters. Developing an internal sensibility toward the suffering of others does not stop at the edges of the human family or even the world of plants and animals, but extends to the ecosystemic dynamics of the earth as a whole. We are faced with the challenge and opportunity to expand our circles of compassion to encompass the more-than-human world. This challenge invites an expansion of practices like loving-kindness, in that they now can include awareness of ecological harm in an increasingly fragile world.

Similarly, in committing to be of benefit to the world in the Anthropocene, one chooses to expose oneself to unbounded qualities of pain, and this can have profound consequences for practice. So much meditation, yoga, journaling, and textual study use suffering as a tool for inner exploration and enrichment. Rather than turning away from
distress and anguish, investigating these experiences represents a route toward greater self-knowledge, inner clarity, and richness by exposing vulnerable parts of the self that ordinarily would remain hidden or under-explored. Once exposed, these dimensions of ourselves widen the template of inner material with which we can work. Doing so, of course, has great risks, because such vulnerability can derail a spiritual path or otherwise increase confusion and pain. However, from many perspectives, this offers even more occasion for accelerated growth and illumination.

Environmental engagement can boost contemplation in yet another way to the degree that it offers a unique gateway into understanding egolessness. Contemplative traditions often speak of the concept of no-self, the lack of an unchanging entity within our being that exists independent of the world around it. Many practices seek to reveal the way the mind constructs the illusion of the self, or to expose the flimsy character of ego. They do this in the service of greater liberation, since over-identifying with one’s personality, according to many traditions, constrains inner growth. Environmentalism can help root out the tendency to cling to the self because ecosystems materially express the falsehood of autonomy. Nothing exists on its own in nature. The blade of grass not only depends upon water, sunlight, and soil to grow, but is actually constituted by those elements; without them, it would cease to exist. Likewise, without the grass, the water, sunlight, and soil would assume a different character. This is the core insight of ecology. As Barry Commoner explains, the first law of ecology is “everything is connected to everything else.” Or, as John Muir famously puts it, “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.” What better instruction can there be for softening the ego? If I am part of everything else—if my experience and very existence extend beyond my skin’s edge and are saturated by everything around me—how can I remain attached to my separate self? Thus, working on behalf of environmental wellbeing can enhance contemplative practice by exposing one to ecological interdependence and thus to the profound reality of inter-being. Inter-being is the concept of, as Thich Nhat Hahn puts it, “this arises, because that arises.” This, arguably more than anything else, can help us see the concept of the self as a manifestation of thought rather than an apperception of primordial reality.

In both our intentional and unwitting neglect of interdependence, which in Buddhism is often said to be the highest realization, we've
created a huge problem. The truth of our interdependent relationship with the environment is lapping at the feet of coastal cities, burning down homes, and starving essential crops of water. The wellbeing of the environment can no longer be distinguished from our own. The immediacy of our interconnectedness with the environment offers the contemplative practitioner a particularly potent gateway into deeper levels of understanding the truth of our connection to the natural world and its inhabitants.

The same teaching emerges regarding impermanence. If ecological study reveals one thing, it is that things change; nothing in nature stays the same. Exposed to and constituted by everything around them, animals, plants, minerals, bacteria, and all the rest possess no internal solidity or stasis. Environmental protection involves stewarding ecological change—finding ways for systems to evolve at a sustainable pace that preserves biological diversity and respects social justice. Engaging in environmental work, then, provides hands-on experience with impermanence. It forces one to take seriously the “changing nature of nature” and thus the changing character of everything. Seen in this way, environmentalism represents an adjunct to contemplative practices aimed at realizing ephemerality. It offers a way to cultivate a felt intuition, a visceral experience, or an understanding of the transient quality of existence.

In the previous section, we explored how contemplative practice assists in becoming more skilled as an environmentalist. This section examined the flipside: how environmentalism supports contemplative practice, examining how turning outward toward environmental issues provides metaphors and direct experience with many of the categories that inform contemplative life. Working on behalf of environmental protection activates and exercises inner capacities. It opens new compartments of the heart, expands the dimensions of compassion, exposes one to greater diversity of suffering, softens attachment to ego, and offers insight into impermanence. To be sure, environmental effort provides only partial entryway into these domains; it does, however, represent an opportune route that deserves attention and, critically, practice.

Conclusion: Beyond Duality

Up until now, we have been discussing contemplative practice and environmental engagement as two separate endeavors, and have explored
the interface between them. As we have suggested, each provides fodder for enhancing the other. The essay would be incomplete, however, if we left things at this point. A further observation is that contemplation and environmental activism are not always two separate enterprises, but can—and preferably should—be one and the same. Ironically, this is the ideal of both practices.

While environmentalism aims to change the external world, it handicaps itself when activists engage in unmindful, pseudo-heroic efforts. Everyone possesses psychological, philosophical, and other subjective viewpoints of which they are unaware. These color our experience and, to some extent, predetermine the way we treat each other and engage in the world. Contemplative practices help us notice these implicit attitudes and thus provide degrees of freedom in how we act. Thus, they may enhance the effectiveness of environmental efforts by ensuring that one is not merely “acting out” personal drama on the political scene or blindly acting with little reflection. Instead, they enable one to bring mindful effort to one’s activism. Moreover, contemplative practices also provide a way for activists to personalize and embody environmentalism’s ideals by noticing how their internal impulses and desires contribute to environmental harm and, more generally, by inviting activists to align their internal understandings and everyday behaviors with their external, public efforts. Environmentalism is something that happens not only in the outer world but also in the inner one; enhancing our internal ecology is integral to environmental engagement.

Similarly, while contemplation focuses internally and concerns itself with building concentration and awareness, it compromises itself when it ignores the socio-historical context within which it operates. We often assume that contemplative practices are completely free from the social world; meditation, yoga, textual study, and prayer are frequently presented as trans-social and trans-historical. Yet some of the very techniques we use to “go inside”—particular forms of meditation, movement, and so forth—were themselves constructed for people who lived in specific cultures at specific moments in history. As culture and historical contexts change, so do our minds, and so should the practices we use to develop our minds. This is because contemplative practice is not simply about cultivating an internal sensation, but also includes developing a meaningful, integrative, and useful life. It involves developing wisdom for navigating and engaging the world. In this sense, contemplation implicitly possesses an externally directed element, and linking this to environmental concern has contemplative benefit. Such
merging of the internal with the external—or what some call the spiritual with the ordinary—underlines the importance of not relegating one’s spiritual life to the meditation cushion or retreat center but integrating teachings, insights, and practices into everyday life.

Taking these points together, it should be clear that environmental engagement and contemplative practice, while analytically distinct, can become one and the same. In fact, melding them may represent the highest form of contemplative environmentalism.

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**Notes**

4. See generally the writings of Chögyam Trungpa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Ram Dass, Bhante Gunaratana, Jack Kornfield, Pema Chödrön, and Sakyong Mipham.
6. James Rowe has perceptively pointed out that in some situations “us vs. them” thinking is not necessarily antithetical to a compassionate outlook and can greatly assist activist efforts. See Rowe, “Why Buddhists Can Stop Worrying and Learn to Love ‘Us vs Them Thinking,’” The Arrow: A Journal of Wakeful, Society, Culture and Politics (September 2015).


The Buddhist practice of sending and taking, or tonglen, is a foundational way to engage the suffering of others. It offers a sense of connection when distance may be present; a possibility of reprieve when struggle overwhelms; and an opportunity for generosity when difficulty may limit our ability to offer. Perhaps most of all, it can reinvent our notion of agency when we feel powerless; tonglen can transcend miles to enable us to offer a bit of peace in a faraway conflict zone, or it can be practiced while sitting at the bedside of a loved one.

The simplest instruction for tonglen is to send wishes for freedom from suffering and happiness to someone we hold dear. Bringing that individual to mind, we send warmth, light or peace; we imagine that person healthy and radiant, offering whatever we can to help along the way. In so doing, we generate bodhicitta, the feeling of a soft and open awakened heart—which Pema Chödrön has described as easier to understand than to translate. This wish can then be extended beyond those we love to others not as close to us, and later on, to people with whom we struggle. This is an essential part of the practice; as Pema Chödrön reminds us, “There are two aspects of working with bodhicitta, both of equal importance: One is connecting with the flow of bodhicitta we already feel, and the other is being awake to where that flow is blocked.”¹

As a professor at a small liberal arts college, I work with many students who feel that their passion to engage with the world is somehow blocked. I teach courses focused on relationships between humans and nature, and in this field there is much to be studied that is cause for concern. Given how pressing many environmental concerns are,
students often struggle with a heightened sense of urgency about how to cope with and work to address problems such as climate change and declining biodiversity. Many of them study environmental issues and express significant concern over the future of our planet—and fear that they are helpless to assist. For my students, this often results in feelings of disempowerment, which can manifest as frustration, stress, and anxiety. A struggle emerges around how to act in such troubling environmental times, and practices such as tonglen can help provide ways to cope and to see possibilities for change more clearly. Significant scholarly and spiritual work has begun to investigate the ways in which environmentalism and contemplative practice intersect.¹ The integration of such practices into the study (and experience) of human-nature relationships, however, has yet to become mainstream, even though there is enormous potential for contemplative practices to help cultivate a deeper understanding of interconnectedness within environmental teaching and scholarship.

In this vein, I have recently begun to teach my students more frequently not just about subject matter, but also about the intentions behind my pedagogical approach. In many ways, this approach reflects a commitment to expanding the notion of who or what is deserving of our attention so that we can question the assumptions we make about how the world does and doesn’t work. That means working more explicitly with discomfort and uncertainty, relaxing our grasp on what we already agree with or enjoy and confronting that with which we struggle. For example, in our senior seminar, my co-instructor and I begin the term with a piece that summarizes pedagogical research called, “Confuse Students to Help Them Learn,” which highlights the importance of working through what we do not already understand in order to arrive at a stronger synthesis on the other side.² Examining more closely that which makes us uncomfortable or uncertain can both lead us to a deeper comprehension of it, and reduce our aversion to dealing with difficulties of many kinds. What makes tonglen especially powerful in an educational context is that it offers us both a chance to deepen the feelings of connection we already have, as well as a means to challenge the sharp edges that make us uncomfortable. This can help us to see a way forward in places where we might otherwise consider ourselves to be stuck, offering one way to overcome the disempowerment that looming problems—for example, those of our environment—seem to foment.
How can we engage bodhicitta as a way to both acknowledge and see clearly what is happening around us, and connect to it without becoming overwhelmed and disempowered? In this time of environmental degradation, we could begin to engage the notion of sending and taking beyond its traditional applications focused on humans, thereby widening the circle to include animals, plants, and even ecosystems. This article explores the possibility of bringing a practice of bodhicitta to the study of environmental issues, not just as a way to cope with the heavy reality of degradation, but also as a way to proactively engage that reality and reframe our thinking about it.

As the Dalai Lama articulates it, “According to Buddhist teaching, there is a very close interdependence between the natural environment and the sentient beings living in it.” Drawing on the notion of interdependence can create a much broader space in which to send peace and take away suffering. A larger view can remind us, as David Abram does so eloquently, that it is only a recent shift in (modern) human thinking that considers our surrounding landscape and its myriad inhabitants “inanimate.” How can a non-dualistic perspective enhance our ecological and cultural understandings? How does that understanding shape the questions we ask, the methods we use, and the observations we make in our research? In what ways can furthering our observa-
tional and contemplative skills in the classroom lead to more sustainable actions and interactions? These questions create opportunities to integrate contemplative practices into both classroom and experiential learning opportunities with our students and in our communities. With these questions in mind, the following sections explore the possibility of using an in-depth visualization practice of tonglen as the ground for expanding compassion to our natural surroundings.

A Buddhist Environmentalist View?

The idea that a Buddhist perspective on nature has a great deal to offer society as a whole is gaining ground. Buddhist teachers in the West, such as Thich Nhat Hanh and Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, write about the need for Buddhists to be socially engaged and act to address the current myriad of social, economic, and environmental problems. In India, the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa is increasingly vocal about the need for conservation to be “the essence of our spiritual practice.” These articulations reflect the possibility that a new sacred ecology is emerging within Buddhism—an ecology based on a Buddhist worldview steeped in centuries of practice, but expressed in the current environmental moment. This is a powerful moment to bring together studies of sustainability with contemplative practices while seeking a deeper understanding of how Buddhism in the West addresses human relationships with nature.

At the same time, relatively little is written about Buddhism’s environmental values. There are two small clusters of literature devoted to this intersection. On the one hand, some work focuses more on the classical texts of Buddhism to extract and assess historical commentary on nature and natural surroundings. This often includes, for example, references to the Jātakas, a series of parables about the previous lives of the Buddha that feature animals prominently and include stories in which their moral characters emerge. In one, the Buddha is a content pigeon; in another, a Brahmin is taught a lesson by a compassionate goat. On the other hand, contemporary academics and Buddhist teachers seek to articulate new interpretations of Buddhist principles in current Western and American debates about environmentalism that highlight Buddhism’s “natural” tendency to promote care for the environment. While it is beyond the scope of this article to excavate the nature of these two views, to acknowledge them here is to situate the experiential approach I will explore below within a much
larger, deeply rooted conversation. Contemplative approaches, honed over thousands of years of practice, offer direct ways to teach skills for meaningful engagement, observation, and understanding complexity. Exposure to these disciplines can help students, researchers, and field practitioners to address challenges and questions in new ways and can provide individuals with greater internal resources in the face of the difficulties they may experience or observe. These approaches can also nurture epistemic communities of practitioners who can support and challenge each other while engaging more deeply with the complexities and needs of the places in which they live and work.

Reflective of the increasingly clearly articulated environmental values of Buddhist teachers, there is also a growing body of reflective writing and practices available for those who wish to contemplate the natural world and the human place in it. In *The World We Have*, Thich Nhat Hanh offers a series of simple, brief exercises for everyday life that help raise awareness of the natural world around us, including water consumption and the act of breathing. He has also written about mindful eating in a way that emphasizes not just the food itself, but its origins and production in the earth. Joanna Macy has been prolific in this vein; in particular, her recent book *Active Hope* with Chris Johnstone focused on the intersection of the realities of environmental crisis and our personal struggles with seeing it, offering a way forward that reminds us of possibility and action:

Many of our planet’s problems, such as climate change, mass starvation, and habitat loss, are so much bigger than we are that it is easy to believe we are wasting our time trying to solve them. If we depend on seeing the positive result of our individual steps, we’ll avoid challenges that seem beyond what we can visibly influence. Yet our actions take effect through such multiplicities of synergy that we can’t trace their causal chain. Everything we do has ripples of influence extending far beyond what we can see.

The spirit of the exercise I discuss below is very much in this vein: It is an attempt to help students consider their own positionality in the world, seeing clearly the circumstances in which they live and opening up space for engaging them more constructively.
The Ground of Sending and Taking

Some years ago, I learned a variation on the practice of sending and taking called “exchanging self for others” in a workshop taught by a Canadian monk who had trained in Vajrayāna Buddhism in India before landing in Chicago. After a few jokes about how we might explain our weekend to work colleagues by saying something like, “I was contemplating the nature of my reality,” he led us through an extensive visualization practice in four stages. First, he asked us to begin by playing an average day in our head. Get up, head out to school or work, meet people, run errands, try to accomplish something, head home, spend time with family or friends, clean—all of the usual pieces of normal daily life. But he asked us to envision going about it all with the assumption that, in each interaction with another person, we were trying to get something that we wanted. He reminded us that our moment-to-moment motivation is generally to achieve something for ourselves, to meet a need or a desire, to gain some pleasure or assuage some unpleasantness. This, he suggested, would have an impact on how we treated each person we encountered.

And it did. Even just in the mind, this exercise of imagining a day while being fueled by what Sak Yong Mipham Rinpoche calls “the me plan” can get pretty tiring pretty quickly. It exposes to us the ways in which our tendency to be self-centered filters into each moment, from a flare-up argument with a spouse about who will pick up the kids to an impatient snap at the grocery store clerk.

Having taken this tour of a day with ego as our constant companion, the second stage of the visualization invited us to imagine the same day with a different filter. Instead, the monk instructed us to move through the same interactions while reminding ourselves that while we are out there meeting our own needs, others are meeting their needs, too. In each conversation, each exchange, we remind ourselves to level the ground between us and those we encounter. While we are seeking something, the person in front of us is, too. Pema Chödrön calls a similar exercise a “just like me” practice—seeing that in our daily life, each person we meet has struggles and wants and needs just as we do, bringing to light shared ground that might otherwise go unseen.

This, as we might imagine, feels different—a bit more fair, like a reasonable trade. But we have still only scratched the surface of the ego that drives so much of our behavior. In step three, he asked us to step back again—to take the opportunity in each interaction to put the
needs and wants of the other person first. We have not, in this round, forgotten what we each are chasing, but we have agreed to delay it for a few minutes or days. This can offer a bit of space, some fresh air, the feeling of relaxing our grasp on the process of always aspiring to reach the next thing. It's refreshing. And letting it play out moment-by-moment in the context of an ordinary day makes it seem possible.

In the fourth and final stage of the visualization, we are asked to practice removing ourselves entirely from the needs-and-wants equation. What would that same day look like if we went around with the sole intention of serving others, without thought to ourselves? Most of us quickly realize that such consistent bodhisattva activity may be beyond our abilities on an average day, but nonetheless the aspiring possibility can open up that space even further. We see that we might be able do this at least some of the time. And how we look at each day can change profoundly as we exchange self for others, even if it's just in our minds at the moment.

This exercise was profound for me, and it has stayed with me for the more than ten years since I experienced it. Since then, I've encountered tonglen in many other forms and explored it both in the abstract and in practice. It is a marvelously adaptive practice that can be engaged at some length—as described above—or employed in the moment, “on the spot,” as Pema Chödrön instructs. To remind ourselves in an instant that the person in front of us is also seeking, struggling, can be a powerful reminder to slow down and act with greater kindness.

These explorations led me into curiosity about ways in which the practice could be adapted to help expand awareness not just of our own behavior and choices, but of the contexts in which they are enacted. In particular, I wanted to consider ways to bring an environmentally conscious energy to class discussions that encouraged individual contemplation within a broader sense of place. At the same time, a contemplative process of my own emerged as I considered how to bring this energy into class, which I describe below in order to illustrate key considerations in the development of the following practice of tonglen for nature.

Exchanging Self for Nature

In sifting through possible practices that I could offer my students, I slowly began to clarify what it was that I wanted them to gain from contemplating in class. I wanted to offer a remedy for anxiety, yes, but
in a specific way. I wanted my students to be encouraged to consider their own behavior and choices, but not in a way that felt judgmental or overwhelming. I wanted them to have a sense of connection to the world around them, to be able to situate their understanding of the impacts they might have in a more inclusive way. And I hoped that they might begin to feel a sense of empowerment to counteract the sometimes overwhelming nature of environmental conditions by making space for the positive as well as the negative.

This seemed like a tall order. In one of my introductory courses, however, a student offered me a flash of insight into the importance of trying it out. As part of an observation exercise, I asked my students to close their eyes and listen intently. I played a five-minute recording of bird songs—a soundscape reconstructed from naturalist Aldo Leopold’s notes by a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. When the sweet notes faded, I asked my students to open their eyes and talk about what they heard. I expected them to jump right to talking about birds—the different calls, how many, their comings and goings. Instead, I was told, “That was really peaceful.”

The ensuing discussion reflected not only how stressful daily campus life could be, but also how a few moments of listening to birds could help students get out of their own heads even just for a bit. I realized how the discussion of disembodied environmental problems could so easily contribute to a sense of helplessness. Even though I found myself at times frustrated with how “personally” students seemed to take these problems, I felt I should consider other approaches to help meet them where they actually are in their experience rather than continuing to wish that they would simply see things differently.

To this end, I have begun to adapt the previously shared four-stage practice of exchanging self for others into a broader environmental context. There is no single way to do this; it can be used both as a whole and in parts, as a prolonged exercise but also in pieces over a period of days or even weeks. It can also be used with a focus on a single issue—climate change, for example—by focusing on the daily activities in which we all engage (mindfully or otherwise) that might contribute to a global rise in temperature. This kind of focus, however, works well with a follow-up that encourages students to look beyond their own practices to systemic inequalities. Otherwise, the assignment of responsibility solely to the individual level can have a disempowering effect rather than situating action within a broader political and economic context.
I have sketched out this exercise below as if I were speaking directly to my students, with each of the four stages framed as before: self at center, balancing self with other, privileging other, and dissolving self. In environmentally themed courses, the connections to resource use and personal habits generally arise quite quickly and easily even with the simple sample questions below. The specifics of each stage can vary, but framing the exercise is important in order to situate our practices within a sense of place. The version below may feel a bit lengthy in written form, but I invite the reader to briefly practice this as a contemplation while reading it, as a way to experience what it might be like when offered to students. In class, I briefly explain that we are going to engage in a contemplation that will help us to think deeply about the ways in which human behavior impacts the natural environment, as well as to ponder ways in which we might make shifts in these behaviors. I then ask students to take a comfortable but active posture—relaxed, but awake—and close their eyes to begin.

Stage One: Self at Center

Let’s consider an average day in your life here at school. I want you to take the time to play a day through your head just as it is, no need to change it, full of the things that you do every day. You wake up—what wakes you up? A sound? Where does the sound come from—another living breathing being, or a device? Once you are awake, what’s the first thing you do? And what do you need to be able to do it? Do you take a shower? Get dressed? Where do your water and clothing come from? How do they arrive to you? What is your clothing made of? How is it made? Before long you will need to eat, maybe have a cup of coffee. Where does your food come from? How does it land on your plate? If you go to class today, you’ll need to go outside. What do your feet land on as you step out the door? How does the air smell today? Is it raining? Is it always raining? Consider slowly what it feels like to move around campus during the day. What do you see? Who or what sees you?

Now let’s consider for a moment or two why you make the choices that you do. Why eat? Why go to class? Why walk outside in the rain? Why study? Why buy books or clothing? Why go out for a beer? We’re all essentially doing the same thing—we are trying to make ourselves happy. We are seeking something at each moment—a friend, delicious food, a new idea. We think the things we find will help us, make us feel better. And we tend to make choices at each moment that push us to satisfy that seeking. This isn’t good or bad, it just is. And it shapes what we do, this searching, but we can use
it to cultivate a clearer sense of where we are and what is shared here, rather than focusing so much on what each of us wants at any given moment.

As you consider how you move about in this place, notice how your choices make you feel. What arises as you look more closely at the choices you make? Where in your body do you feel a reaction arise? Whatever it is, good, bad, comfortable, uncomfortable, focus on acknowledging rather than judging it. Just see it the way it is. Breathe into it a little if you can. Let it dissipate.

Stage Two: Balancing Self with Other

Now, let’s play the same day in your head again, but as you do so, ask yourself: How might your day be different if you remembered that at each step, you might have an impact on your surroundings? That everything you use connects you to the world outside—the chair you sit on, the orange juice you drink, the paper on which you print out your essay, the new laptop you ordered from Amazon, the buildings that shelter you from the rain, the squishy grass you cut across when you’re late for class. How would your day be different if you remembered that everything you need also comes from a bigger system that has needs—or at least, perhaps, had them before being transformed into something else? What might you choose to do differently? Would your food taste differently to you? Could you wait a little longer to upgrade your cell phone? Would you take your dog on a slightly longer walk? Or a second walk?

Again, let’s come back to noticing how the process of this day makes you feel. What arises in your mind? In your body? Does this feel different from the first observations you made? How?

Stage Three: Privileging Other

Let’s try this a third time—same day, same place, right here where we are now. But let’s change our big question and this time, let’s wonder: How would your day be different if taking care of your surroundings were more important than getting what you want? Would it slow down your choice to buy a new item of clothing? Would you hesitate to drive your car when you could walk or take the bus? How might you feel different if you put someone or something else ahead of yourself?

This reimagining of your day invites you to look for opportunities to put someone or something else ahead of you in the choices you make. Consider when moments present themselves each day in which you could be helpful—not just to another person, but to this place we share, to the natural
systems that sustain and feed us. And notice: When those moments arise, how does it feel to choose differently?

Stage Four: Dissolving Self

In this last reimagining of your day, I want you to consider what it would be like if you could let go of all of your own needs and wants, and move around during your average day focused primarily on bettering your surroundings. This is asking you to stretch your awareness quite a bit, perhaps—I’m not asking or suggesting that you run right out and do this, but I’m asking you to consider what it would feel like, and what would be different. What would your day look like if your motivation at each step was to be of benefit to this place we live in? What would you study? What would you read? How would you spend your free time? What would you buy or not buy? What kinds of questions would you ask yourself? What might you want to do differently than what you do now? This isn’t a judgment on how we all move around campus, but it’s an opportunity to imagine what we could do at any moment that might allow us to engage with this place differently.

And, one last time, notice how you feel at this moment, having considered this last possibility. What words would you use to describe your feeling? How has it changed over the course of these reimagined scenarios? Take a moment to acknowledge, without judgment, what may have shifted for you.

…

Especially if done as a whole, processing is an important part of the exercise. Students could first write on their own about what the experience was like, or they could share with one other person for a few minutes before opening up for a broader conversation. A key consideration in facilitating the discussion is to help students bring out opportunities for choice—to help them see how many moments can arise in which making an affirming, empowering choice is more simple and available than they may otherwise often think. Whatever the specific examples used, the language of acknowledgment and non-judgment is especially crucial; without it, students can begin to pile up self-criticism of their own choices rather than take the opportunity to situate those choices in context and to look for more constructive ways forward.
Practicing with Nature

As Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, “When we offer peaceful energy to others, we’re nourished by the peaceful energy they reflect back. The collective energy strengthens and nourishes us, helping us to continue on our path of awareness.”14 This may be even more true in an environmental context than in a human one; what we offer to nature is always returned to us, often in ways we fail to notice. In talking about the importance of contemplative practice in my courses, I emphasize the ways in which it can hone our ability to see more clearly. My students are in large part motivated by a desire to help the world. This is noble, but requires discernment. Encouraging them to observe and reflect—not only on their own inner lives but also on the places in which they engage—can assist them in thinking more carefully about how to match their good intentions with the skills and energy needed to make offerings to this place in which we live and breathe.

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Notes


Teaching and Learning in Nearby Nature

by AMY E. RYKEN

Conceptual Framework: Learning in Nearby Nature

PARKS AND PUBLIC green spaces can support exploration, restoration, and meaningful action. Kaplan, Kaplan, and Ryan define nearby nature as:

The settings we emphasize are not the wild and awesome, distant and dramatic, lush and splendid. Rather, the emphasis is on the everyday, often unspectacular, natural environment that is, or ideally would be, nearby. Nearby nature includes parks and open spaces, street trees, vacant lots, and backyard gardens, as well as fields and forests. Included are places that range from tiny to quite large, from visible through the window to more distant, from carefully managed to relatively neglected.¹

Nearby nature sites can foster engagement and exploration by balancing coherence (having a sense of pathway and/or order) with complexity (having depth and richness), and balancing legibility (having memorable features that help with orientation) with mystery (or the sense that there is more to explore).² Nearby nature helps humans recover from mental fatigue and information overload. Restorative environments create a sense of being away, as well as a sense of immersion in a whole different world.³ Finally, nearby nature sites can help visitors engage in meaningful actions ranging from observing, wondering, and exploring to voting and stewardship.⁴

Living mindfully and developing the skill of observant quiet requires engaging in daily practices to disengage from our contemporary
consumer economy and the stress of urban life.\textsuperscript{5} We can each make choices to intentionally develop awareness of nearby nature and to honor and appreciate the complex interconnections within ecosystems. As Haupt observes, “Attending to the world more closely, we are inspired to act instead from a sense of love, interconnection, and a recognition of mutual strength and fragility.”\textsuperscript{6} We can reorient our focus to our relationship with soil, air, water, and all living beings.

Experiential education opportunities in nearby nature can help students live mindfully and reflect on academic learning, civic engagement, and personal growth. The Environmental Policy and Decision Making program at the University of Puget Sound has intentionally designed courses to connect students to local environmental resources and stakeholders. I developed and taught a .25-unit weekend mini-course, “Learning in Nearby Nature,” to encourage students to interact with former industrial sites that were redesigned as earthworks, parks, or public walkways.

Re-envisioned industrial sites are contexts for environmental education because they are sites that invite consideration of the processes of social and environmental transformation.\textsuperscript{7} These sites are environments that provide a context for critical inquiry into what Plumwood calls “the unique interwoven pattern of nature and culture which makes up the story of place.”\textsuperscript{8} While human activity and natural history have jointly shaped the land, terms like “nature,” “landscape,” “environment,” and “wilderness” can evoke thinking about ecologies as separate from, rather than intersected with, human activity. In contrast, terms like “urban,” “constructed,” “pollution,” and “waste” can draw attention to how we define (and redefine) what is nature and what is culture, as we work to “challenge and undermine traditional ways of conceiving the ‘natural.’”\textsuperscript{9} Engaging re-envisioned industrial sites supports us in asking, “What is it that we, the human inhabitants, require of our bit of land?” and “What does the land, and the region, need from us?”\textsuperscript{10}

Purposeful Selection of Nearby Nature Sites

I purposefully selected five nearby nature sites to encourage students to consider how they view and define nature and culture, and how both human actions and natural forces shape landscapes. In order to foster depth of exploration and reflection, I selected sites that make visible contrasting approaches to restoration of degraded landscapes. As Spirn writes,
All landscapes are constructed. Garden, forest, city, and wilderness are shaped by rivers and rains, plants and animals, human hands and minds. They are phenomena of nature and products of culture. There is always a tension in the landscape between reality and autonomy of the nonhuman and its cultural construction, between the human impulse to wonder at the wild and the compulsion to use, manage, and control. Landscapes of city and wilderness represent poles of a continuum in the history and intensity of human intervention.¹¹

Earthworks Explored

The class spent one day exploring two earthworks located in Kent, Washington: the Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks and the Robert Morris Earthwork. These sites are important examples of how land art can create awareness about human land use; one is a park and storm water runoff control system and the other is a former gravel pit redesigned into a four-acre earthwork sculpture.

Waterway Parks Explored

The class spent a second day exploring three nearby nature sites in Tacoma, Washington constructed in response to severe environmental degradation. In 1983 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated 12 square miles of Tacoma water, shoreline, and land as the Commencement Bay/Nearshore Tideflats Superfund Site. The Superfund site includes multiple environmentally degraded sites, including the former Asarco smelter site (Ruston, Washington) and the Thea Foss Waterway (Tacoma, Washington). Thea’s Park, Dickman Mill Park, and the Waterwalk at Point Ruston are three sites that demonstrate a range of responses to rehabilitating land and waterways impacted by human use and development. We explored these three parks along the seven-mile “Dome to Defiance” initiative. The City of Tacoma plans to create continuous public waterway access from downtown to Pt. Defiance, the city’s largest park. Thea’s Park contrasts views of the Port of Tacoma industrial businesses with vistas of the Puget Sound and Mt. Rainier. Dickman Mill Park contrasts the concrete remains of a former lumber mill with a human-designed wetland. The Waterwalk contrasts a residential and commercial development and a public pathway, both built on the former site of a copper smelter, with vistas of Puget Sound. In Figure 1 I describe the nearby nature sites visited.
Figure 1: Nearby Nature Sites

Earthworks Explored

Robert Morris Earthwork
Kent, Washington

Former gravel and sand pit redesigned as a four-acre public art earthwork with a series of descending concentric terraces planted with rye grass.

Photograph by Holly A. Senn

Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks
Kent, Washington

Former park with erosion problem redesigned as a storm water runoff system and park. The design includes a concrete dam, conical landforms, a double ring pond, Mill Creek, and a sedimentation basin for excess runoff.

Photograph by Holly A. Senn
Waterway Parks Explored

Thea’s Park
Tacoma, Washington

Former Superfund site redesigned as a park at the entrance of the Foss Waterway. The public esplanade and moorage float face views of the port’s industrial businesses, Puget Sound, and Mt. Rainier.

Photograph by Holly A. Senn

Dickman Mill Park
Tacoma, Washington

Former lumber mill site redesigned as a park with a human designed wetland.

Photograph by Holly A. Senn

Waterwalk
Tacoma & Ruston, Washington

Former copper smelter site redesigned as a .75-mile public walkway and residential and commercial development.

Photograph by Holly A. Senn
Fostering a Culture of Reflection

In this section I make my teaching practices public by documenting how I intentionally fostered a culture of reflection and contemplation. When reflection is integrated purposefully and continuously, students are encouraged to question their fundamental assumptions about the world, to weigh alternative points of view, and to use conflict and surprises to engage complexity and develop reflective judgment skills.\textsuperscript{12}

I framed course questions in relation to conceptual models about learning in nearby nature. The class explored purposefully selected sites with these framing questions in mind:

- How does the nearby nature setting promote exploration and understanding, a sense of restoration, and/or meaningful action?
- How do I make connections to my life experiences as I engage in a nearby nature setting?
- What is the match or mismatch between a site’s educational and architectural design intentions and visitor perceptions and experiences?

I also designed consistent participation routines to encourage students to connect previous and new experiences, to meaningfully debrief, and to consider how their perspectives had changed.\textsuperscript{13} Below I describe intentionally aligned learning experiences\textsuperscript{14} such as community member speakers, readings, a reflection journal, discussion formats, and a reflective essay assignment.

Experiential education is most impactful when students engage real-world challenges, develop the skills of reflective observation, consider the intersections between theory and practice, and discuss ethical dilemmas in a range of social contexts and relationships.\textsuperscript{15}

Engagement with Community Members

Each class day, one speaker from the local community (Day 1: a director for a local art non-profit and Day 2: a supervisor for the local park district) shared background information about the sites, described preservation efforts, and discussed the tensions of serving as stewards for public space. These hour-long sessions provided a framing focus for the day and introduced students to people who work every day to preserve and restore nearby nature sites.
Reading Landscapes and Reading Texts

Before exploring nearby nature sites, students discussed multiple pairs of contrasting photographs of landscapes. Discussing different perspectives about the landscapes gave students an opportunity to make visible their assumptions about what they perceive as a nature and to apply course frameworks to the images by sharing how different landscapes create a sense of wonder or restoration. This discussion prepared students to be observant and thoughtful during site explorations. I made purposeful decisions about readings, working to balance academic and experiential engagement. I selected texts that provided conceptual frameworks about nearby nature, framed the tension between “nature” and “culture,” and/or served as models of a reflective essay. A copy of the course calendar with assigned readings is included in Appendix A.

Reflection Journal

To create one location for students to record drawings, thoughts, questions, and insights, I made journals of folded letter-sized paper. The three framing course questions were reproduced on the journal’s cover. To support student reflection when exploring alone or when sharing in small groups, I included additional reflection questions inside the journal. During our first class session, to make initial assumptions about nearby nature visible, students wrote in their journals about why they were taking the class and described a nearby nature site that held meaning for them. Throughout the day, as we explored nearby nature sites (e.g., after a speaker, after visiting a park, before and/or after discussion groups), students recorded key insights and questions.

In course evaluations students noted that the journals were a useful learning tool and that they appreciated them as their own private space for recording developing thoughts.

Using a Range of Exploration and Talk Formats

Throughout the course, I used a range of exploration and talk formats. For example, at the nearby nature sites I asked students to draw or write about initial impressions, engage in individual or pair exploration, count off (myself included) into discussion groups of 4 to 8 people, or gather as a full class for discussion. This created different
participation structures for reflection (writing vs. talking, and individual vs. small group vs. larger group). Organizing time in this way also deepened exploration by helping individuals and the group as whole slow down, observe, discuss, revisit, and reflect.

Reflective Essay

The final assignment for the class was a reflective essay in which students selected one nearby nature site to consider in depth by describing the site, making connections to course readings, and sharing personal reflections. Students brought drafts of their essays to the final class session for peer feedback. Revised essays were posted to an internal campus blog; each student read one colleague’s reflection and posted a commentary on it, facilitating ongoing reflection within community.

In course evaluations students highlighted important learning opportunities for engaging multiple perspectives and for developing reflective judgment, including: the intentionally chosen contrasting nearby nature sites, hearing community members’ reflections, writing in journals, and reflective discussions in pairs, small groups, and whole class.

Tensions in Student Reflections

In this section I reflect on the patterns I noticed in the students’ reflective essays. I situate excerpts of their reflections in relation to the questions and insights that their reflections sparked in my own thinking. My goal here is to make visible how the act of reflection deepened student and teacher learning.

Consistent with other studies of informal learning environments, each of the 19 students in the Learning in Nearby Nature course had different and highly personalized reactions to the sites visited. As Cronon highlights, “What each of us finds here, in other words, is not One Universal Nature but the many different natures that our cultures and histories have taught us to look for and find.” Although individual students made different connections to, and had different reactions about, nearby nature sites, two important themes in student reflections emerged. First, students found a new appreciation for nearby urban parks and green spaces, often rethinking the idea that one must visit “wilderness” in order to experience a connection to nature. Second, students considered how humans both love and abuse nature
and debated whether restoration efforts should focus on restoring sites or leaving visible evidence of past environmental degradation.

Newfound Appreciation for Nearby Nature

Below are two representative student reflections about finding new appreciation for nearby nature. Even as both students express appreciation for the restorative power of nearby nature, they grapple with defining nature. Both use quotation marks to signal the contested definitions of terms like “wild” and “nature preference.” They view wild spaces as being “far off,” having “physical separation from,” or being “isolated.” They compare nearby nature sites to their previous experiences in other generalized settings such as “vast forested lands” or “undeveloped shorelines,” or to specific places such as Napa Valley or the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range.

These kinds of reflections affirm my decision to focus class exploration on nearby nature sites to help students engage the concepts of nature, urban, and wilderness. Reading the following reflections critically, I’m considering additional ways I can support students in defining and interrogating terms like “wild,” “urban,” “park,” “undeveloped.” I’d like to use Spirn’s framing of city and wilderness as “poles of a continuum in the history and intensity of human intervention” more intentionally.18

The first reflection expresses how nearby nature spaces can create a sense of community connection and restoration, even as the student states a continued preference for wild nature:

Historically, I have sought restoration through connectedness with nature in far off mountain trails, vast forested lands, and undeveloped shorelines. I felt, and to some extent do still feel, like a physical separation from the place, city, or people who constantly demand my directed attention and a sojourn into the “wild” is necessary for my personal restoration. Throughout the course of this class however, I realized that nearby nature settings can provide that restored feeling and activate an effortless attention to the natural realm for me and others alike by promoting exploration, place-based understandings, artistic appreciation and community connectedness. The degree, type and extent of this restoration may vary from place to place and park to park but the impact nearby nature settings have on their visitors are overall restorative nonetheless. (Excerpt from Reflective Essay written by Rita McCreesh)
A. Ryken  

Reading this reflection with generosity, I note that the student reflects on her personal preferences for restorative environments, validates the restorative impact of nearby nature sites, makes connections to concepts in course reading about directed versus effortless attention, and highlights the uniqueness of different places and parks. Reading this reflection with skepticism, I wonder how she conceptualizes similarities and differences between far off trails, forests, and shoreline versus parks and other nearby nature sites.

The second reflection expresses a sense of surprise as this student reevaluates his perspective on wild nature versus a park. The student values and personally connects with the restorative nature and rich history of an urban park:

Prior to the course, I swore by my own “nature preference” of isolated wilderness, typically miles away from city life. Originally, I was skeptical that I could feel anything close to awe, adventure, and easement that I feel when exploring in the Napa Valley or the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, at the parks we would visit in Kent and Tacoma. My experience on the “Dome to Defiance” walk caused me to reevaluate my stance on nature places. Through a combination of the walk’s restorative aesthetic, points of exploration, rich history and personal connection I felt I understood and connected with the urban park much more than before. Honestly, this came as somewhat of a surprise to me because of my passion for more “wild” areas. (Excerpt from Reflective Essay written by Cameron Wallenbrock)

Reading this reflection with generosity, I note that the student, to his own surprise, experienced a deeper connection to an urban park, and as he reflects he contrasts the “Dome to Defiance” parks with specific landscapes he and his family have explored. Reading this reflection with skepticism, I wonder if he has engaged other possible meanings of wilderness than “isolated” and “miles away from city life.”

It is common for Americans to idealize isolated nature settings. Cronon highlights how Americans often idealize pristine wilderness and devalue nearby nature in urban settings:

American ways of thinking about wilderness encourage us to adopt too high a standard for what counts as “natural.” If it isn’t hundreds of square miles big, if it doesn’t give us God’s-eye views or grand vistas, if it doesn’t permit us the illusion that we are alone on the planet, then it really isn’t
natural. It’s too small, too plain, or too crowded to be authentically wild.\textsuperscript{19}

These reflections from students suggest that this “wilderness” conception of nature is permeable and that appreciation of nature embedded within local urban communities can also provide a sense of awe, authentic personal connection, and restoration.

\textbf{Move On or Remember}

Exploring nearby nature sites that demonstrate a range of responses to rehabilitating land and waterways impacted by human use and development gave students the opportunity consider the tension between using and abusing landscapes and debate whether restoration efforts should focus on moving on (by restoring sites to some biological ideal), or remembering (by leaving evidence of past environmental degradation). Students learned how different communities can take purposeful actions to restore and maintain nearby nature sites and how different approaches to restoration make visible different values.

Below I highlight three different ways that students described moving on or remembering: (1) by being conscious of inflictions and maintaining appreciation for degraded sites, (2) by valuing natural forces and human actions, and (3) by asking moral questions.

\textbf{Being Conscious of Inflictions and Maintaining Appreciation}

The student reflection below illustrates how students engaged the tension of restoration and remembering. Her questions highlight humans’ contradictory relationships with nature. She wonders how to balance the values of improved park functionality with making visible human abuse of nature:

When we consider areas such as Mill Creek Canyon or the parks along Ruston Way, these places offer us both benefits for functionality and our wellbeing. As humans we take advantage of these spaces because they offer resources and we seek out these parks because they are simply aesthetically pleasing. These spaces provide opportunity for exploration, restoration and meaning. However, do we cover up our abuse and neglect of nature by implementing elements of comfort and functionality? Is it insensitive of us to make these areas so nice? Should we refocus our attention away from park benches and shed more light on the underlying ugliness of nature? I fear that if we entirely refocused our attention to
the unattractive portions of parks we would decrease our appreciation for these areas and inevitably disregard them altogether. This means we must strive for a balance of being informative and conscious of our inflictions, while maintaining a sense of appreciation. My observations, readings and reflections during this class have given me insights into this deeply complex and contractive dynamic we have with nature. In all honesty it has caused me some uncomfortable cognitive dissidence; how is it that I can concurrently love and abuse nature? (Excerpt from Reflective Essay written by Karine McCulloch)

I appreciate how this student engages a cycle of questioning to explore her own (and humankind’s) contradictory relationship to nature, reflected in her use of the terms “deeply complex” and “uncomfortable cognitive dissidence.” Her questions suggest active engagement with vexing questions about using versus abusing nature and finding appreciation for landscapes impacted by human abuse and neglect.

Valuing Natural Forces and Human Actions

The two student reflections below illustrate different stances toward restoration. Both students consider whether and how nature can be renewed, or “come back” and note their awareness of different value systems.

In considering the Robert Morris Earthwork, the first reflection questions the goals of land restoration. The student notes how the City of Kent and the artist Robert Morris prioritized historical connectedness over ecosystem functioning:

This piece felt reverent to me, as if the wound of industry left on the earth’s crust here was still healing, maybe even destined to never fully healing at all… I asked myself, how could this art piece be an act of land restoration when it does not aim to revert the landscape back to a state in which it is beginning to come back into balanced natural ecosystem function? Granted, I know that my own environmental and scientifically based ideologies regarding the natural world exist at the root of this question. But, as Cath Brunner presented to our group here, she was not referring to restoration of this industrially ravaged landscape in any ways that I could liken to the environmental mitigation and natural systems thinking that I practice in my primary studies. Instead, Brunner spoke of a conjunctive place-making effort happening here to turn an abandoned gravel quarry into an
artistic place that elicits restorative responses, like those discussed by Kaplan and Kaplan, in its visitors. By hiring Morris to come here and transform this land into public art, the city of Kent, Washington exhibited a deeply-rooted value for historical connectedness, contemplation and place-making that too often goes unrecognized in public policy. (Excerpt from Reflective Essay written by Rita McCreesh)

I appreciate how this student considers her own frames of reference, as a science major and environmental policy and decision-making minor, shape the question she poses about the earthwork. She deeply considers the comments of the class speaker (the art director charged with managing the earthworks) to reconsider how public policy might privilege scientific and ecological perspectives over artistic and historical perspectives.

In considering Dickman Mill Park, the second reflection highlights how the contrast of a human designed wetland, with a concrete ruin of a lumber mill, provides a sense of reclamation and hope. The student engages different perspectives by considering his views in relation to those of environmental activist groups. He highlights the long timeline needed to assess whether or not reclamation projects are successful:

The contrast of the apparent natural state of Puget Sound alongside a ruin of industry created an incredibly powerful experience for me. On one hand, it demonstrated that human presence is only temporary. This is something that I found strangely reassuring. It was comforting to see how nature was able to begin to reclaim something that it once lost. No matter how much we as human beings want to suppress and utilize nature for our own purposes, complete eradication is impossible. It seems to me that nature will always find a way to reclaim an environment. I know that my opinion can be very controversial for many activist groups who feel that the natural environment is in imminent danger. After an enlightening experience, I would argue that the ruins of Dickman Mill argue the opposite. There are effects of heavy industry that do have a lasting impact; the point of this paper is not to dispute that fact. The argument I am making is simply that in the end nature will always reclaim what once was its... Restoration and reclamation projects in the Tacoma area, and elsewhere around the world, cannot be feasibly expected to yield results within one life time... We might never see a completely restored wetland environment
within the park, but we can do our best to set up the area for success. The park inspired me to dig a little deeper into my own past and assess how I have treated nature. The story of the location of Dickman Mill Park at first appeared to be one of tragedy. But as I began to feel the park’s presence around me, I discovered within myself that it was actually a story of hope. Nature is going to retake its hold on the location eventually. All we need to do is give it the foothold it needs to start. (Excerpt from Reflective Essay written by Jacob Kwasman)

This student considers temporary human presence, and the lasting impact of heavy industry, in relation to a hopeful story of restoration. His reflection engages questions of time and ethical action in the face of the lasting impacts of pollution, which he later names an “epic struggle” between natural forces and human actions. This reflection is reminiscent of Schneiderman’s call to be mindful of the eternal present and to awaken human beings to violence that is difficult to see in the overlapping and continuous scales of time—historical time, geologic time, timelessness, and the present time; she writes, “all over the Earth we have the repetition to infinity of the same phenomenon: creation—destruction—new creation. Events, moments, movements.”

Engaging Moral Questions

In considering the Robert Morris Earthwork, the following reflection highlights how nearby nature sites can encourage us to consider moral questions about our relationships to land. The student’s reflections highlight that all reclamation projects involve decisions about whether and how the past will be remembered:

[Morris’s] understanding that as an artist, he was making not only aesthetic choices but also moral choices especially touched me. It is clear in his writing that he understood that as an artist he had a tremendous responsibility in deciding how he would design this space that was abused by man for a very long time. Just as we had to do when we visited the space, Morris was constantly asking himself moral questions. He had an incredibly important role as the artist because he decided how the past would be remembered. Morris wanted to create an artwork that would relive the tension of industrial changes entering nature. He is showing the abuse of the land and making all of us ask very moral questions. Land that once served a technological purpose (extract and export
gravel) now is used to serve a social purpose. It has become a place where people go to ask moral questions about what used to be and what is now. Looking over a very residential area, the hole in the ground is proof of a space changed over time. There is proof of both how human has manipulated nature and how human has designed nature. I think that there is always a tension between what we do to our places and how we might reclaim them. (Excerpt from Reflective Essay written by Angelica Spearwoman)

This student focuses her reflection on the importance of asking “moral questions.” She evaluates the Robert Morris Earthwork for the ways in which it demonstrates the contrast between how human actions both abuse and reclaim landscapes. Her reflection engages a deep sense of history and purpose as communities decide how the past should be remembered.

Reading the students’ reflections skeptically, I reflect on additional ways I can support them in critically examining different values perspectives and the long-term, often invisible, impacts of human actions. Future coursework might introduce the concept of “slow violence” in conversation with the idea that nature can be renewed. Slow violence refers to violent acts, like releasing toxins into the environment, that are difficult for humans to perceive, “either because they are geographically remote, too vast or too minute in scale, or are played out across a time span that exceeds the instance of observation or even psychological life of the human observer.” In addition, future course questions could go beyond theories of learning in informal learning environments to explicitly examine environmental degradation and renewal.

Discussion

Former industrial sites, redesigned as public spaces, are powerful contexts for investigating social and environmental transformation and for forging connections between human activity and natural forces. In students’ written essays I saw that students viewed nearby nature sites in relation to their conceptions of nature and wilderness. This is not surprising, given that throughout time humans have told varied narratives about nature. For example, idealizing sublime wilderness and pastoral countryside over cities and industrial sites or framing human actions as resulting in paradise lost or paradise regained. Cronon advocates against these kinds of dualisms:
Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home. Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about using nature as about not using it. The wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as ab-use, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship.

Future iterations of the course could integrate Spirn’s concept of a continuum of human actions as one framework for reflection to disrupt the dualisms of nature/culture, paradise lost/paradise gained, and wilderness/nearby nature. Mindfulness in nearby nature creates a sense of connection and relationship to the world around us and reduces mental fatigue and overload. Students described the benefits of reflective practice in daily life by noting their connection to place, reevaluating their perspectives, and appreciating nearby nature: “I began to feel the parks presence around me”; “human presence is only temporary. This is something that I found strangely reassuring”; “caused me to reevaluate my stance on nature places”; and “exhibited a deeply-rooted value for historical connectedness, contemplation and place-making that too often goes unrecognized in public policy.”

As illustrated in these reflections, course learning experiences supported students in appreciating nearby nature sites, even as they grappled with contrasts between their conceptions of wilderness and nearby nature. Students shared “a mature optimism, one that recognizes fully the daunting ecological outlook for the earth, while maintaining our human obligation to live with awareness, and respect, and joy.”

Through reflective practice, students engaged humanity’s conflicting relationships to nature by considering the tensions of use and abuse, moving on and remembering, and appreciation and neglect. As a result of the class, students identified hopeful actions they could take, ranging from asking moral questions, to reconsidering their beliefs about nature and actions of abuse and remediation, to self-assessing how they engage with, and treat, nature.
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Notes

6. Haupt, The Urban Bestiary, 305.


Appendix A: Learning in Nearby Nature Course

Calendar

**Initial Class Meeting**
Friday, 5:00 – 7:00 PM

*Discussion: Learning in Nearby Nature*


**Field Experience: Intentional Study of Nearby Nature**
Saturday, 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM
Bring your own lunch

*Exploration: Learning in Nearby Nature*
Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks, Kent, WA
Robert Morris Earthwork, Kent, WA


Baird, C. Timothy. (March 2013). After 20-plus years how is Herbert Bayer’s renowned Mill Creek Canyon Earthworks holding up? *Landscape Architecture*, 93, 68-75.


**Field Experience: Intentional Study of Nearby Nature**
Sunday, 10:00 AM – 4:00 PM
Bring your own lunch

*Exploration: Learning in Nearby Nature*
Ruston Way Waterfront, Tacoma, WA
Thea’s Park, Dickman Mill Park, Point Ruston

Ryken, Amy Elizabeth. (2015). Environment and Learning blog. Read one of the blog posts noted below.
Contamination and cleanup continues: http://www.environment-learning.com/2015/02/22/contamination-and-cleanup-continues/

Legacy of lumber mills:

Contamination and eternal time:
http://www.environment-learning.com/2015/03/01/contamination-and-eternal-time/

Land Rights and landmarks:
http://www.environment-learning.com/2015/02/15/land-rights-landmarks/


**Final Class Meeting**
Friday (following week), 5:00 – 7:00 pm

*Discussion of Themes: Reflections on Learning in Nearby Nature*
Sharing drafts of reflective essays. Final reflection due to Moodle reflection forum by Friday (one week later).
Read reflective essay of your assigned partner. Post commentary to Moodle forum by Friday (two weeks later).