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Held by the Earth: *Coming Home to Myself through Nature*

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Abstract

This narrative shares a collection of stories drawing on my explorations in clinical psychology, Buddhist wisdom, and immersive experiences in nature. The embrace of the natural world, which welcomes us back into the web of life unconditionally, has been my greatest teacher in authentic self-compassion. Years of meditation training have helped foster a greater receptivity within me to the rhythms and cycles of nature, which embody an intrinsic sense of belonging and equanimity with all of life. My relationship with nature has helped heal my relationship with my own mind. These stories represent pivotal guideposts along a journey toward feeling more at home in myself and in the world. Key Words: Buddhism—Clinical psychology—Nature connection—Contemplative practice—Self-compassion

Introduction

September 2021; Muir Beach, California: On my first day as a resident at a Zen Buddhist monastery, I stood in the kitchen with two monks as we prepared to start morning chores. A short ceremony called “Bowling In” marked the official start of work. We lit incense, bowed toward a small altar, and read a few passages from *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, a book by the center’s founder Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. I flipped open to a dog-eared page and my eyes landed on a quote I knew well—it had mystified me

for years. It was a quote by Dogen, a Japanese Buddhist poet and founder of the Soto school of Zen: “To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.” (Suzuki, 2020).

What did it mean to “forget” myself, and what were these “myriad things” that could lead to self-actualization?

One of the monks noticed my confusion. “Zen is like this. You go in, and you just get cooked,” he said, “the practice works on you.” These instructions struck me as mysteriously *passive*. I had always seen meditation and spiritual inquiry as paths of active engagement. The seeker challenges the status quo to pursue answers to life’s big questions; the meditator works against millions of years of evolution and cultural norms to cultivate a mind that is more loving and free, less reactive and self-absorbed.

The Big Questions

September 2016; New York City: The path that led me to the monastery began with those “big questions.” The questions that seem so important and omnipresent, but are so often avoided: the questions we all ask, in our own way, but rarely out loud. Some of mine were: *Why am I here? What is life really about? What am I meant to be doing with my precious fleeting days?*

On a lunch break at work, I wandered into a Tibetan Buddhist center next door to my office in downtown Manhattan. Over the next few weeks, I joined meditation sats and *dharma* talks (Buddhist philosophical teachings) and picked up a few books. I was hooked. It felt like a homecoming. I found teachers who put words to the ideas and feelings I had been trying to make peace with for as long as I could remember—the preciousness of life, the fleeting nature of every experience, the imminence of death, the overwhelming compassion I felt for all the suffering I saw, and finding some meaning in it all. The *dharma* was about exploring life’s mysteries, training the mind to cultivate greater capacities for insight and compassion, and finding ways to help ourselves and others live with more authenticity and joy.

All questions were welcome, especially the questions that had no easy answers. Instead of answers, we were offered recipes for exploring our inner experience through meditation practices.

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Meditation swiftly opened my heart. I felt like a child seeing the world with fresh eyes. I was quicker to smile, quicker to laugh, quicker to let go. My baseline daily orientation was just grateful to be alive. Months passed and I continued to practice. As my heart opened to more joy, it opened in equal amounts to the pain around and within me. I felt more sensitive and tender hearted. The streets of New York City provided endless fodder for heartbreak and compassion, from homelessness and poverty to the low-level numbness and restlessness that pervaded city culture. I met the first of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering.

What arises from here is a central aspiration of the Buddhist path: the wish to end all suffering for all living beings. My mind reeled as I struggled to relate to such an insurmountable goal. All I wanted to do was help or serve or alleviate some of the suffering I saw all around me; at the same time, it was hard to know what to do, how, or whether what I did could even make a dent in the world's persisting pain. Nothing I did ever felt like enough. The overwhelm created a nasty cocktail of urgency and inertia. More suffering.

In my daily practice, I saw a growing gap between my conceptual understanding of the *dharma* and my embodied experience of anxiety, overwhelm, and confusion during meditation. I sat with an inner pressure cooker of critique and self-doubt—around my failure at making peace with these feelings and the meta-emotions of guilt and shame. The more time I spent in contemplation, study, and meditation, the less clear the path became.

The Head and the Heart

September 2018; New York City: I was determined to embark on a path of direct service and to explore the links between psychological and spiritual growth. I left my job in health care technology when I heard about a unique new graduate program at Columbia University—clinical psychology with a concentration in spirituality.

I dove into those big questions through the lens of academia. A few months in, I was immersed in literature, clinical studies, and seminars about healing and spiritual experience. I was learning which parts of the brain were implicated in transcendent experiences, how mood and stress levels were impacted by meditation practice, and how researchers crafted formalized definitions of the word “spirituality” itself. It was as fascinating as it was cerebral. It was an exploration through the head without much of the heart—only half-satisfying. I was seeking a more embodied understanding of what my professors, books, and Buddhist *dharma* teachers were pointing toward.

On a professor's recommendation, I picked up the book *Braiding Sweetgrass* by ecologist, botanist, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer. It was one of the most profound spiritual texts I have ever read, without a single lofty esoteric claim. Her stories

invoked tangible, practical reminders of the Earth's magic, and of our intrinsic belonging to that magic as humans in the natural world. Throughout the book, her plea is clear: we are of nature and when we forget that, we suffer and our world suffers. She argues that much of our suffering is a symptom of living out of touch with our larger home, with our nonhuman family, and with the rhythms and cycles of nature.

Kimmerer spoke of different ways of knowing—beyond the mind, beyond the human perspective, beyond the lens of modern Western culture. Her teachings brought me clarification that spirituality was not about grand moments of transcendence and ecstatic bliss. Nor was it about the hero's journey in saving a broken world. It was not about endless self-improvement, or even self-actualization. It was not about the self at all. It had more to do with what she called “everyday acts of practical reverence” (Kimmerer, 2013).

Every afternoon for months, I would walk to the Hudson River Park by my apartment to sit and watch the sunset. Doing nothing, alone, in nature was an act of gratitude for my day and for this small oasis in a big city; it was also an act of rebellion against the fast-paced productivity-oriented culture that surrounded me.

I often sat under the same tree—a large oak by the water. Here, my intellectualizing of spiritual practice started to soften. Esoteric concepts became more tangible for me in this little daily pilgrimage. I would sit and wonder whether the oaks ever questioned the nature of their own existence or their role in the larger web of reality—or whether they just embodied it. When fall came, the leaves did not seem to put up a fight as they changed hue and floated off their life-sustaining branches: rhythms and cycles unfolding without struggle.

The stillness of the trees would softly invite me to go inward to see where I might find a corresponding quality of stillness in myself. The poet David Whyte often writes about what he calls an “invitational identity,” embodying a quality so fully that it invites others to meet you there. It was the invitational identity of the Earth that brought me into real equanimity. As I watched the busy park from under the trees, my heart found respite. My empathic overwhelm gave way to a more balanced warm concern for others. I could tune into a way of being that did not really answer my burning questions, but somehow made them burn more softly.

The Green Temple

July 2019; Kalmar, Sweden: The next summer, I left New York City to live on a farm. I spent my days gardening, tending the land, preparing meals from freshly harvested vegetables, and wandering around the countryside. I moved through my days with a sense of ease I had not known since childhood.

My meditation practice at the farm felt effortless. Through the invitation of my surroundings, it was easy to drop into a relaxed and

clear awareness. A few afternoons, I was asked to lead guided meditations for the community. I could swear the land felt quiet and contemplative too. When we all gathered for practice together, the wind settled and the air felt still and soft. It was a mutual healing embrace, where the land worked on us and we worked on it, where we drew each other into deeper presence and flourishing. A friend at the farm introduced me to the work of Joanna Macy, the brilliant Buddhist activist and ecologist. Her work elegantly describes the connections that I was starting to notice between nature's teachings, the Buddhist *dharma*, and what I felt on the farm.

General Systems Theory in life sciences draws its core insights from nature: the boundaries between a single element and its environment are fluid, codependent, and constantly changing through reciprocal interaction (Schneider, 1993). No element in nature can be separated from its environment. Who I am in this moment is borne of the water and food I have ingested, the air I have breathed, the people I have interacted with, and an endless confluence of biological and environmental variables. If any element shifts, then who I am shifts too. If I am always shifting, then who am I really? After weeks of living more intimately in relationship with my environment than I ever had before, the shifts were palpable.

My relationship with nature seeped into my relationship with myself; I could see my own mind with the same patience and curiosity I had for my surroundings. On daily walks through the forest surrounding the farm, I could zoom out of whatever thought-trap held me in rapture; I felt more space within myself, mirrored by the vastness of my surroundings. As my stories and worries softened, my *urgency* to solve the problems of my life and the world softened too. In that ease, I found the clarity to actually discern what impact I could have and to take real steps forward.

The qualities of mind I had been chasing on the meditation cushion and in my books seemed a bit more tangible and accessible here. I was invited into a rhythm and routine that settled my nervous system and gave something within me the space for something else to take over. The only way I could describe it was that I was being worked on, by nature, by daily meditation practice, by something larger and more ineffable than my mind could grasp.

It was around that time I met a Buddhist teacher named Mark Coleman. He was the first teacher I had come across who integrated dharma practice with nature. We also shared a background in clinical psychology training. The healing I experienced in nature, he suggested, perhaps came from a softening of my inner critic that I felt in the Earth's loving embrace. Everything in nature is accepted and embraced just as it is.

Nature of Mind

Muir (1998) said, "In every walk with nature, one receives far more than he seeks. For going out... is really going in."

When I returned to my graduate studies that fall, I found ways to weave the head and the heart together. I wanted to know more about the mechanisms behind these mysterious qualities of healing and awakening I found in nature.

Research in the field of environmental psychology echoed my experience. According to the literature, confirming what many of us know from personal experience, time in nature reliably boosts positive emotions and feelings of "elevation," which researchers define as a sense of awe, inspiration, and transcendence (Passmore & Holder, 2016). One particular study with the compelling title "Awe, the small self, and prosocial behavior" explores the effects that awe-inducing experiences in nature can have beyond elevating our moods; awe can increase prosocial behaviors and emotions, making us more likely to experience feelings of empathy and generosity as well as act on behalf of others (Piff, Dietze, Feinberg, Stancato, & Keltner, 2015).

Environmental psychologists have also explored how spending time in nature can decrease self-oriented rumination (Lopes, Lima, & Silva, 2020). One study even linked spending time in nature with reduced neural activity in parts of the brain linked to depressive rumination and self-referential negative thinking (Bratman, Hamilton, Hahn, Daily, & Gross, 2015). There was the proof—nature could aid in healing the inner critic. Somehow, we become less self-absorbed in nature, and thereby maybe even less self-critical. Without even realizing, we can forget ourselves in the presence of beauty, vastness, and natural rhythms.

Right there were Dogen's instructions to "forget the self," pointing back to this mysterious quality of surrender. *I* am not the one doing much, besides getting myself outdoors with an open and attentive mind. I do not "connect" with nature as much as let the Earth draw me back into a relationship I am never really separate from.

Indoor Buddhism

September 2019; San Francisco, California: I sat on the floor of the *zendo* (meditation hall) at the San Francisco Zen Center, listening to the hum of indoor appliances and the subtle shifting of bodies around me. My thoughts swirled. It was the first time I had meditated indoors in months. Absent were the sensations of wind, sun, or bugs landing on my skin; the sounds of rustling leaves or whistling wind; the smells of fresh grass or trees. The space around me and the space within me felt static and lifeless.

As I walked out of the *zendo*, I noticed a poster of a beautiful Japanese-style building engulfed by a forest of redwoods and clear blue sky. *Come visit us at Green Gulch Zen Center and Farm!* Two years later, to the month, Green Gulch would be my first stop on a pilgrimage to find some kind of union of Buddhist wisdom and Earth wisdom.

Bowing In

September 2021; Muir Beach, California: On a foggy Saturday morning, I drove up the windy road to Muir Beach. I had lost cell service miles ago and could barely see past where my headlights illuminated the few feet in front of me. I finally stumbled upon a signpost peeking out of the fog: *Green Dragon Temple*. I made a sharp turn into the driveway and onto the downward sloping path. I rolled down my windows. An engulfing silence permeated the air as I drove further onto the property and away from the road. A promenade of eucalyptus trees guided me down the hill. The air was dense with their scent, cool and heavy after fresh rain.

Day 1 was an orientation in ritual, which might also be described as an orientation in Zen. I was guided in countless demonstrations of the rituals, routines, and ceremonies that permeate daily life at the monastery—how to place our hands while walking in the temple, which foot to step into the *zendo* with first, how to hold the book of chants during service, when and how we were expected to bow. I felt overwhelmed. How was I expected to memorize all of this? And what was the point? Why did it matter how I held my hands or stepped into a room? Why did we have to bow so much, and what were we even bowing to?

I watched the inner critic shift into high gear. Every moment felt like a performance and an opportunity for critique. I had the feeling of being closely observed. I was not often corrected by the monks, and when I was, the corrections were explained patiently and delivered with warmth and compassion. Still, the container of quiet ritual held up a clear, unavoidable mirror that showed me exactly how hard I was on myself. I saw how desperately I was trying to do everything perfectly and find meaning in it all—the same patterns I walk through life with.

I asked one of the monks what these rituals were all about. She answered simply, “The rituals held a specific purpose, at one point. But I can’t remember. When we perform them today, they just help us know what we’re doing with our body. Where are your hands? Where are your feet? Are you moving with mindfulness?”

I struggled to wrap my head around it. Remembering to pay attention to which foot was closest to the door at 5 am felt like a gargantuan task. Bowing so often felt cumbersome—bowing to the room, bowing to my cushion before I sat down, bowing to the altar, bowing to the room, and to the cushion again—all in the few moments between entering the *zendo* and taking my seat for meditation. I would get dizzy.

I stood with *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* in my hands once again for the “Bow In” ceremony before morning chores. I flipped open and started reading. It was a dialogue between Suzuki Roshi and his new

student. The student shared my skepticism and asked the same question of the Roshi: “What is this bowing?” Without answering, the Roshi stood up and bowed. Again and again. He bowed more times than the student could count. The passage ended with the student’s final insight from his teacher, “I have been aware of every bow I have done since then, always with the same question: *What is this bow?*” (Suzuki, 2020).

I tried to see whether my next series of bows could be a chance to let go of the resistant, judgmental thoughts. I focused on awareness of my body and curiosity for the practice.

What is this bow?

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes, “Ceremonies large and small have the power to focus attention to a way of living awake in the world.” How might each bow be helping me wake up? (Kimmerer, 2013).

So I bowed each time I entered or left the *zendo*. I bowed to my cushion before I sat down, and after I got up. As I invited the question with more curiosity and less judgment, bowing slowly morphed into more than a frustrating ritual. It felt like both greeting and gratitude. The ritual seemed to send the message to my nervous system: *This is what you’re doing right now. You’re exactly where you’re supposed to be.* With each bow, I felt I was surrendering to something outside of myself and acknowledging what I was receiving. *Bowing in* became an intentional pause to sink into appreciation: for the beautiful *zendo* that was safe and warm and filled with the smells of incense; for the cushion—this treasure of comfort and support; for the community of fellow seekers and teachers waking up at 5 am to practice together in pursuit of easing the world’s suffering.

One morning as I was leaving my bedroom before morning meditation, I paused. I looked at my room, spacious and quiet in the early hours. My bed sat neatly made after a good night’s sleep. I felt a surge of gratitude for this safe, warm space that held me each night. My natural response in that moment was to put my hands together in prayer and gently bow to the room.

On a quiet afternoon, I closed my notebook after journaling and gazed down at the front cover. It was a birthday gift from a close friend. She designed the cover with painted lavender flowers and my name printed on the top next to the inscription *Vida Deliciosa*. The flowers, my name, and the inscription reminded me of the beauty in my stories—that life could be *delicious*. That same surge of gratitude arose—for my friend, for the quiet moment to write, and for the little book that allowed me to do so. I brought my hands together and bowed softly to the notebook.

One cool, foggy morning on my walk to breakfast, a vibrant plant caught my eye. I paused. Long, thin, bright purple stalks extended out

from the modest leaves of a Jerusalem Sage. I brought my face in close and inhaled deeply. Its fragrance entered and eased my body. I touched the gleaming purple flowers and felt their animal-like softness. I stood in awe—of this plant and its simple existence, which felt like a gift to my senses. It did not feel right to walk away without a little bow.

What is this bow?

From the perspective of *classical conditioning*, my brain now associated the physical motion of bowing with an embodied sensory experience of gratitude and reverence.

Bowing became a way to humble myself to the magic and mystery of what could happen on the cushion, in the *zendo*, in a notebook, in a garden. It was an act of surrender that could open the gateway for any transmission or transformation that may be gifted to me at any moment, by anything in my experience. A bow felt like *the only thing* that made sense to do when I was repeatedly overcome with this kind of gratitude.

The perception of receiving miracles and gifts in every moment raises the impossible question of how to respond to the generosity of the world.

“To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.” I forgot myself in gratitude. Myriad things deserved my reverence.

Clarity in the Dust

A few weeks in, my morning task was to sweep the *zendo* floor. I had been sweeping for hours and my back ached. I was making my way to the final corner of the room, nearly done. My pace was slower, my eyes drooped, my hands held the broom loosely, and my mind was already preparing for a break. I noticed a large ball of dust in the corner underneath a small table, just far enough away that it would require a moment of diligent stooping to reach. I stared directly down at the speck of dust for what felt like an eternity, with a dull expression and eyes at half mast.

This one ball of dust slowly grew in symbolic meaning until it represented the whole of my character: was I the type of person who stoops down to do the right thing, or was I someone who takes shortcuts when nobody is looking? My exhaustion and frustration made the decision for me. I slowly turned away to finish what sweeping was doable with the least amount of effort before retiring my broom. At that exact moment, I heard what sounded like a harsh accusatory call, “Kayla!”

My body jumped and my mind swirled. *Someone saw what I just did. They saw me stare at that big speck of dust and ignore it and leave their precious zendo dirty! Of course someone would notice. How*

could I be so stupid? I should have known someone would be watching. The next thoughts from my inner critic turned toward a full-blown character assassination. *Now they know the “real” me—the lazy, sneaky, corner-cutting, careless, entitled me. The people-pleaser, do-gooder in public, rule-breaker in private.* The stories broadened. *I don’t belong at a monastery surrounded by people who are so much more mindful, patient, and compassionate than me. I’ve been found out. How am I going to get out of this?* Running on pure adrenaline, I knelt down and swept up the prophetic dust ball before turning around to face my captor.

“Would you like some tea before we put it away?” The voice was warm but hurried, coming from one of the monks on the opposite end of the room, far out of eyesight of my tragic sin. Here was another person living her own life, in her own world, perhaps even in the midst of her own eagerness to finish morning chores, wholly unconcerned with my sweeping skills, my indiscretion, or any of the current onslaught of my inner world.

It struck me first as a bit funny—the craziness of the mind. In the mental clarity that had begun to arise from hours of daily meditation, this whole inner process felt slowed down and clear. I saw what my mind was doing to itself, so naturally and quickly. Awareness gave way to pain. I felt the full weight of it all—the condemning, comparing, judging mind; the constant doubting and questioning; the insatiable striving and impatience with myself. This invisible vapor of pressure and critique, so often in the background of my mind, was highlighted by living in community, and by the monastic container holding up this clear mirror.

Held by the Earth

With the rest of the afternoon free, I retreated into nature—my most reliable healer. Just a 15-min walk from the monastery, the forest dissolves into coastline and the land opens up to reveal the glistening Pacific Ocean.

I found a shady spot at the edge of the beach under a small tree and laid down on the sand. Still tender from the morning’s inner confrontation, I felt the spacious, inviting quality of my surroundings, and the floodgates opened. Underneath the open sky and warm sun, everything felt welcome—the tears, the inner critic, the judgment, and the fear.

After some time, the waves settled. As the outside world re-entered my awareness, I felt the warmth of this sunny day and the shady protection of the tree above me. I breathed in the fresh air with scents of the ocean mingling with the forest. I heard the crackling and crashing of the ocean’s waves as a rhythmic pulse. I sensed the wind gently roll across my body.

A thought arose that felt fundamentally true: the Earth can hold all of me. I felt held, loved, accepted fully. I did not *do* anything to earn this—the warm sun, the fresh air, the protective tree, the rhythmic ocean. I noticed my mind start to travel down the familiar route of self-doubt: Was I worthy of these gifts—the gifts of the Earth, the gifts of life? Even if I did not want to pick up that dust ball? Even if my meditation practice and work ethic felt dull and undisciplined? Even if I was not a very good Buddhist? Even if I was never doing enough for others or the Earth? Even if my pursuit for answers only led to more questions?

My mind may never be able to fully grasp the answer that my heart was given that afternoon at the beach. An unequivocal yes. *Of course. You're here, aren't you? Your heart is beating, isn't it?*

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer writes: “A gift comes to you through no action of your own, free, having moved toward you without your beckoning. It is not a reward; you cannot earn it, or call it to you, or even deserve it. And yet it appears. Your only role is to be open-eyed and present.” (Kimmerer, 2013).

To be loved because I am alive. To be deserving because I am aware. To be nurtured by a hospitable Earth, because I have a beating heart. Abiding in that kind of knowing, even just for a few moments lying there on the Earth, felt like freedom. It felt like what I could only describe as *unconditional love*.

My wordless answer to the big questions: I felt whole within myself and somehow also free of myself.

When I finally got up, my heart swelled as I took in the shady spot under the tree, the warm sand beneath me, and the open sky above me. I bowed more times than I could count.

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