

REFLECTIONS ON THE BROWN GREEN GROUP

January 2009

LARRY BARBER

My first question for the Brown-Green Group was “Why ‘brown’?” I understand green, but brown? The answer came in my mailbox at the Sangha House – a pretty, handmade greeting card with real leaves pasted on – brown and green. I got it. Cycle of life. Interestingly, no one in the BG Group put it in my box. Who did remains a mystery.

The BG Group has been a satisfying way for me to participate in the community here, and feel I’m advancing the goals of ZCLA, for ourselves and Los Angeles, and ultimately, our world.

Raising awareness and making practical changes to the campus is the most immediate pleasure. The sustainability workshops have given me practical ideas for saving energy and making sure I’m eating and drinking as cleanly as I can. I’ve enjoyed participating in the Wildlife Habitat certification and hanging wildlife pictures with Mukei in the dining room to share with the sangha. The nature hike last month was a chance to share the outdoors with sangha friends and, by startling coincidence, encounter a long-lost friend. It’s satisfying for me to be coordinating (with Heather and Nely) the solar energy contractors for our proposal to the Executive Council – our idea is to make the Sangha House and Nilotpala energy self-sufficient. This is the most exciting thing for me because it involves high technology interacting with the natural world; this idea appeals to my longtime interest in science fiction.

So – Brown-Green says it all. Cycles of life and death, nature revolving and turning, interpenetration, and our desire to interact with our precious world with loving kindness.

NELY CARTOLIN

The Brown-Green group is giving me the opportunity to reach other sangha members concerned like me with environmental issues. The group is a place where we share freely our frustrations, pains, ideas, and also a place where we have learned to work harmoniously and get things done. Since the formation of the group there were ups and downs, because of our particularities, but we learned from them. The good thing though is that we are more mature as a group maybe because of our readings or maybe because we learned how to integrate the Buddhist teaching in our lives.

FAITH-SPRING CHAPMAN

The question of where to focus our energy has been the koan the Brown Green Group has wrestled with, argued over, and learned from over the years. It’s been the see saw we’ve veered back and forth on. Do we focus on contemplation and study? On exploring how our practice as Zen Buddhists informs our ecological work? On actions and activities? Different people gravitate toward opposite ends of the spectrum. We are constantly relearning that Not-Knowing, Bearing Witness, Healing Action, and Letting Go are equally vital parts of the process.

We’ve developed a number of ways to maintain balance. We divide our meetings into two parts – discussion and business. We rotate who facilitates the meeting each month. We hold council to gain clarity about our personal intentions for being in the group and to chart our course.

We’ve always served as a support group for one other. There’s a depth of sadness that we share around this particular grief for the Earth. We’ve found a way to take refuge in our practice and in the Dharma. We’ve learned how to sustain ourselves and to move forward.

Suddenly the time is ripe and sangha members are clamoring for action and direction. We have, amazingly, had four new members join our group in the past year. Suddenly we're infused with fresh ideas and insights. We are working in a new way this year – with each member choosing a project(s) that personally motivates us. We will each spearhead our project and carry the responsibility for seeing it through. Everyone has a finite amount of time and energy and the best fuel for carrying out a project is the passion and excitement that a person brings to it.

I remember someone saying at one of those early meetings that they knew with conviction that the most powerful actions they could take for the environment were those in their own day-to-day life. I didn't see at the time how that could be. Over the years, it's been a compelling question for me. Recently I've been brought to my knees in confronting my own resistance to changing my habits and actions. I'm experiencing on a visceral level that my power to evoke change lies in the extent to which I can be awake and to act in ways that affirm life.

MUKEI HORNER

The aspect of the Brown-Green Group that I appreciate the most is its on-going presence as a place for exploring environmental concerns in the context of our practice. The phrase "environmental concerns" doesn't quite encompass what I mean, though, despite the fact that "environmental" now includes or is connected to such a wide range of issues. Our discussions have at times extended to the kinds of things we buy or how we wash our dishes (or our hair), even to aspects of our relationships with co-workers and employers, family, and friends. That doesn't convey it either, the kinds of discussions we have. But the things that come up are not unrelated. It's all amazingly connected.

This wide view of things has been stimulated by the readings we've chosen for the study and discussion part of our meetings, books like *Dharma Gaia - A Harvest of Essays on Buddhism and Ecology*, *Hooked! - Buddhist Writings on Greed, Desire, and the Urge to Consume*, and *Dharma Rain - Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*. And once, over the course of a year, we reflected on each of the precepts in turn, considering how it applies to our relationship with the natural world.

There simply is no other place in which I get to discuss these things in quite this way.

I also love the meditative walks we take with other sangha members, once or twice a year, in places like Griffith Park or the Santa Monica Mountains. These are silent walks, on a hiking trail or up a hillside, slowly enough to let us savor what's there, noticing details and experiencing fragrances we might miss otherwise. We typically begin and end with a short reading or a blessing. And the turn-around points are chosen at places where we can sit zazen for a while and then talk for a bit before continuing back.

I've really appreciated some of the changes seen at the Center since the group first formed. Two of the group's founding members, April and Karen, were responsible for installing the first composter here.

A landscape plan was created that, among other things, incorporated a new driveway, created, not from concrete, or toxic asphalt, but from permeable bricks that allow rainwater to soak through to the ground beneath.

Many incandescent bulbs around the Center have been replaced with compact fluorescents, mostly in common areas needing all-night lighting, which actually had a noticeable effect on our power use.

As part of the Center's revisioning effort in 2007, the Core Values statement was revised to include the "practice of environmental responsibility," and the intention to "develop policies and practices that promote environmental stewardship," and to "care for and nurture the natural world."

And the healing of the earth from the many injuries we have inflicted on it is now included in our liturgy.

It feels like a very noticeable shift in environmental awareness has taken place here in recent years. It's been encouraged and supported by Roshi, and by others not in the Brown-Green group but who have often expressed their appreciation for how our group is practicing. It gives me the sense that, though the group has always been small, its presence has had an effect on the rest of the Sangha and is contributing something important to our collective awakening.