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The Cicadas interrupt the Dharma Talk

Reflections on Forest Meditation Centre, near Lismore, NSW, Australia

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JAN 7



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Published in November 2022, *Living and Working Together* tracks the 50-year-old history of the Dharmananda Community in The Channon, near Lismore, NSW Australia.

Around 40 people, including present and past community members, contributed to the book (A4 format), which also includes around 100 photographs, colour and black and white, spread over the 50 years.

Jen Ireland of the Community, who compiled and edited the publication, invited me to write a reflection of teaching in the forest centre.

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I first visited Dharmananda in 1976, not long after I made the transition from monkhood to layperson. Dharmananda and nearby Bodhi Farm community agreed together to build the Forest Meditation Centre in the forest at the top of the hill between the two communities. Retreats got underway, both group and personal retreats, were held for 46 years.

I taught in the forest on my annual trips to Australia and every other year from the mid-1970s to 1990s. We shared the space with goannas, possums, snakes, spiders, cicadas and the songs of birds. A former Bodhi Farm member, Radha taught with me for some years in the forest. She now lives in another forest, close to the coast.

The Community had to permanently close the Meditation Centre in May 2022 due to risks for retreatants. Climate continues to have a strong impact in the area. The area experiences major rainstorms/winds with the risk of heavy branches or trees falling, day and night, as well as potential for fast moving forest fires in very hot temperatures. The centre was no longer safe for anyone.

Dharmananda received many emails of understanding and respect for the decision but felt sadness at the closure. Retreatants have shared their experiences/ stories of the amazing challenges and realizations during the retreats in the forest.

In his final words, the Buddha pointed out: *Everything constructed decays. Stay awake.* Translation of Patrick Kearney of Brisbane. Final words in publication announcing closure of the Forest Centre.

Photo from 2017 shows teaching to fly to the Island (The Reality of Liberation - cessation of problematic life). Photo also shows metal artwork of John Seed and four small paintings of the four postures. Anna from Germany did the paintings. Both works of art were in the hall for more than 40 years.



Reflections of Time in the Forest Meditation Centre (Page 75)

The track snakes its way through to the Forest Meditation Centre in the midst of new trees with regular parent and grandparent trees still rooted. Every evening, the orchestra of the cicadas engaged in a collective symphony of sound through expanding and contracting the sound boxes in their abdomens. Countless numbers of these remarkable creatures spend time in the trees around the meditation hall.

As we breathed in and out in the Dharma Hall in the evening, a cicada would ‘breathe.’ Then another. Then another. Then hundreds. It regularly happened that I said a few words for the start of the evening Dharma talk. It perhaps sparked the cicadas into life.

I stopped talking. Nobody could hear me. I couldn’t hear myself. The cicadas gave us the unmistakable reminder that the Sangha of Cicadas were here in the forest long before us.

Cicadas remind us that we, the Westerners, were the new kids on the block in the vastness of nature.

Jen of Dharmananda, a long-standing organizer of retreats in the Forest Meditation Centre, always acknowledged the long history of human and creature relationship with the forest. At the start of every retreat, she told us:

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which we live and work and pay our respect to Elders past, present and future.

Photo shows Jen and a dude from a small town called Totnes with an old tree on the pathway on the Dharmananda property.



Our manager at the Yarrahapinni Centre, NSW, offered a similar acknowledgement. Precious reminders of the evolutionary past,

I regarded the time in the forest as the highlight of my many visits to Australia over a period of 45 years. I feel a deep connection with trees, which reveals itself in several ways.

My primary teacher (the Buddha) realized the core truths of life under a tree. I spent extended periods of time as a monk in the forest of Wat Suanmoke (The Monastery of the Garden of Liberation) near Chai Ya, Thailand, as well as nine months in a cave. My family surname is Wood (Titmuss is the surname of my stepfather). My grandson, Kye, 21, has the surname Allwood.

My Dharma friends, monks and nuns share a deep love of forests. Bodhi Farm, Dharmananda and others gave years to campaigns to protect forests. The late John Revington of Bodhi Farm edited the Rainforest Information Centre for years. His intimacy with the forest gave him much inspiration.

Time in the Forest

Aged nine, Kye, my grandson, spent a month with me in Australia in the forest. Radha and I were teaching together at Yarrahapinni, NSW. The forest transformed his life, when guys, such as John Seed from Bodhi Farm and men from Dharmananda took him out at dawn hunting for kangaroos, possums, goannas and more. The boy experienced a 'wow' world like never before.

Forest Meditation Centre runs deep in our being – the sangha of trees, the sheer intentional austerity of retreat daily life, the delicious meals (thank you Tea Cosy and the elders before), the gong, the call of the birds and the mindful steps to protect creatures, near our feet.

We all surely have a surplus of memories. The depths of experiences, the intimacy with the trees, the earth, wind, air and huddle around the campfire. Creatures can offer their own eccentric behavior while humans can match it.

A fair share of eccentrics from Northern Rivers and further afield attended the retreats. I listened to accounts of remarkable experiences from childhood to adulthood of the meditators and observed much.

Northern Rivers, Lismore, The Channon and the variety of communities offer a way of life of exploration, challenge and a radical alternative to consumerism.

I regard it as a privilege to be in the company of the free-spirited.

One Creature Story of Many

One creature story from two decades ago or more entered into legend. Around 60 people sat close together in the Dharma Hall for the afternoon meditation on a balmy day.

During the sitting, a voice in the middle of the hall quietly spoke:

“I’m scared.”

I opened my eyes. A metre long snake sat on a meditator’s lap with its head stretching upward. Eye to Eye.

Mac from Bodh Farm sat at the front of the hall. “Is it poisonous?” I quietly asked him.

“It’s a night tiger (brown tree snake). It’s not poisonous.”

Then, he whispered. “Well, just a little bit.”

The snake brought the hall to a respectful silence and stillness. After minutes, the snake slowly and majestically weaved its way across the laps of the meditators and out through the exit. There are no doors in the Dharma Hall – made of planks of wood from fallen trees.

The snake had fallen off the hot wooden beam above waking up the snake from its daytime sleep. It landed straight on the city dweller's lap.

Later the meditator said to me: "I am from Brisbane. I came to the retreat to look at my control issues. I had no control over the situation in the hall. I realized afterward how little control I can have over my life. I am practicing letting go.

Years later, the man came back to attend another retreat with us in the forest.

The snake had given him a teaching probably lasting much longer than the Dharma teachings offered at the front of the hall.

MAY ALL BEING LIVE IN PEACE
MAY ALL BEINGS LIVE IN HARMONY
MAY ALL BEINGS LIVE IN PEACE AND HARMONY

ISBN 978-0-6456616-0-6 Paperback

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