The Tao of Nature: Buddhists Against the Possums

A saga of a New Zealand Buddhist community's struggles with the local wildlife.

by Jerry Flexer

Rainbow Valley Ecovillage, New Zealand, November 1999

{mosgoogle}It sounded like a gunshot! From inside the house. From the room just outside my bedroom door. I opened the door slowly and peered into the living room. There was Udaya, kneeling on the couch, holding a shotgun pointing out through the open window.

“What are you shooting at?”
“Possums. They climb into the trees when it gets dark and eat my fruit.”
“Did you hit any?”
“No, but I think I scared them off.”
“You going to do any more shooting tonight?”
“No, that should keep them away for now.”
“OK. I’m going back to sleep.”

Late the next morning, I asked Udaya to show me how to get to the giant kauri tree. He took me to the end of the valley on the back of his quad bike. He warned me that the trail had not been maintained for some time, and guessed it would take me about two hours to get to the tree. I set out with my day pack on my back, two liters of water and food inside. It was a warm spring day, sunny, and dry. I walked along the trail at an easy pace for some time. Then there was no trail any more. Just then I spotted the thickening of dry vine forest that Udaya mentioned would signal the spot where I needed to take a sharp right. I could tell I was near the edge of the plateau; there was more sunlight seeping in from above, and a soft breeze picked up ahead of me.

And then there it was. On the very edge of the plateau it stood, a true elder, spared only by its location. There would have been no way to cut it down, and no way to salvage it. It was hugging the 150-meter high cliff. One side of its two-and-a-half-meter diameter base was on level land on the plateau, the other side out in thin air. I couldn’t tell how tall it was, but I could believe it had been alive 1200 years, as Udaya said. I stood there in awe. This was not a tree you could hug. All I could hear was the wind. Sitting down, with my back to the tree, I drank water and devoured my sandwich and apple.

The Coromandel Peninsula was covered in kauri forest when the European colonizers first arrived. One of the largest kauri is the Father of the Forests in Mercury Bay, with a reported girth of twenty meters. Fire destroyed the Father of the Forests. Such is the fate of many fine trees in New Zealand, many fires intentionally set. Most of the kauri forests of the Coromandel were logged and burnt, but fortunately they have been regenerating, and some kauri stands were left untouched.

Udaya had once been a prominent member of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. He left Auckland to establish an ecovillage in this natural 800-acre subtropical paradise. And there he was shooting at possum. Not a very Buddhist thing to do, I suppose. Not that I was surprised by his animosity towards these fruit-loving forest marsupials. Staying at a hostel once, I met a local man who made his living trapping and selling dead possum to the possum fur industry. And hitchhiking to Thames one day, I had a ride with a Maori man who made his living advising the Department of Conservation on the best methods of trapping possum. In New Zealand, the possum is a pest. Still, even now, the memory of Udaya blasting the possums from his living room couch is a vivid image of the absurd.

So there I was, far away from civilization, alone with my new friend. Kauri had been logged here for over a thousand years, and this loner was still very much alive. I stretched out on the ground next to the trunk, closed my eyes and took a deep breath of fresh forest air. I must have dozed off for an hour, or two – I couldn’t tell. Waking up to reality, I peered through the branches to see the sun in the sky. My guess was two hours of daylight left. Collecting my pack, I started hurriedly walking back the way I came. Within a few minutes, though, it was clear to me that I had no idea how to connect with the trail. The look of the dense vine forest, with its giant trees and ferns, is so different coming from the opposite direction; and of course, there is much less light when the sun is low in the sky.

I was lost. And I panicked. Thoughts came quickly. If I could not get out of the forest before sunset, I would have to spend the night here. I wondered if Udaya would come looking for me. Would I be safe in the forest at night? Then I stopped thinking. Sitting down on a mossy, fallen tree, I took a swig of water. And then, slowly, my equilibrium returned. I looked over in the direction I expected to see the beginning of a trail, thinking maybe I could spot a landmark, recognize a broken branch, or vines wrapped around a familiar tree. Astonishingly, almost right away, looking out in front of me

about five meters away, there was a clump of forest I had seen before. It looked like the spot where I turned to the right, heading for the kauri. I got up and took a few steps. Then I was sure of it. What a relief! There was the trail straight ahead.

By the time Udaya’s house appeared up ahead, the sun had set and it was almost dark. A feeling both eerie and comforting came over me. Had there been some mysterious energy, some power or force, out in the forest, guiding me to the trail when I was lost?

Tararu Valley, New Zealand, December 1999

I met Sarah, from Victoria, at the Tararu Valley Sanctuary and Land Trust. Just eighteen, curious, full of life, and intelligent, Sarah was taking a year off school to be an environment volunteer. Her job was to look after the stoat traps. Stoats are slender-bodied carnivores, part of the mustelids – the weasel family. They were introduced to New Zealand in the late 19th century to control the rabbit population, itself introduced to New Zealand earlier that century. Rabbits were brought for sportsmen to hunt, for food, and to remind the British colonizers of home.

Stoats eat the kiwi bird eggs and kill the kiwi chicks. Only five percent of kiwi birds that hatch survive, and half the kiwi population is lost each decade. I am not sure why the New Zealanders work so hard to prefer the kiwi over the stoats, but there must be good reasons for this, other than the fact New Zealanders are known around the world as kiwis.

Sarah walked the trails each day, checking the traps. Most days she would take a few golf balls with her. As far as a stoat was concerned, a golf ball was a kiwi egg. Sarah would make sure the trap was well situated to entice a stoat, and had a golf ball inside. There were dozens of these wooden boxes spread throughout the property’s winding trails. Sarah said the worst part of her job was removing the dead stoat, as the smell of a decomposing stoat was beyond tolerance. And she was not totally comfortable being involved in killing animals just out for an easy meal. But, she did say with some nonchalance, any time she would find a dead stoat in the trap, she would simply fling it as far as she could into the dense brush – that was the extent of stoat disposal.

I liked Sarah. One day, we were talking about philosophy and books. I mentioned my love of Zen and Taoism, and she said she was travelling with a copy of the Tao Te Ching, a gift from her mother. That impressed me! Now I liked her mother too. Sarah lent me her copy – the Vintage Books edition, translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. Here is a section I like:

Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?
I don’t think it can be done.
In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
In the pursuit of the Tao, every day something is dropped.
Less and less is done
Until non-action is achieved.
When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering.

I stayed with the land trust for a month, and then moved two kilometers down the valley road to volunteer with the Buddhist retreat center. Sudarshanaloka, or Land of Beautiful Vision, was a sprawling property, its holding stretching from the river valley in the West, to the mountaintop clearing where the Stupa sat. Buildings on the property were the main house, a row of huts for residents and long-term visitors, a meditation hut, and five retreat cabins spread out in the forest. Members of the order would come from all over the world for silent solitary retreats, lasting anywhere from one month to as long as three years. The small resident community on the property looked after all the needs of the retreatants, delivering food and supplies every Friday.

In January, the river flooded, filling with water from the mountains after three days of non-stop heavy rainfall. The overflowing river made getting out of the center impossible, because the ford on the road was a meter below the water level, and the river ran much too fast and powerful. After waiting anxiously for two days, hoping the water level would drop, Pierrick and Buddhadasa hired a helicopter to airlift them into town so they could catch their flight to Australia for a conference.

That afternoon, while inside the house, I heard loud intermittent banging sounds that sounded like the Gods were playing billiards with boulders. It was still pouring rain. I grabbed an umbrella and walked gingerly down the muddy hill to the river to see for myself. The water was brown. It was carrying whole trees, large branches, boulders, and other debris down to the sea. I stood there stunned, umbrella in hand, sweatpants rolled up to the knee, in a T-shirt, and beach shoes on my feet, standing on a rock by the river. The sound of boulders colliding as they floated past me was something I had never heard before.

A few weeks later, the community decided the possum population on the property was becoming too much of a

nuisance. Earlier one evening, we heard a loud “Hey!” from Punyasri in the library, and we went in to find a possum sitting inside the trash can, staring at us, an apple core in its mouth and the look of a child caught with a hand in the cookie jar. It must have crawled in through the open window. We turned out the light and Buddhadasa shood it back out the window. At the community meeting, after much discussion – they normally adhere to the ideal of ahimsa (non-harming) – the decision was taken to scatter anti-possum poison pellets.

About a week later, as I was rising one morning, I was accosted by a stench as awful as I had ever known. When I mentioned this to Guhyaratna, my neighbour, he said it must be a dead possum that had eaten the poison and died in the crawl space under our huts. “It’s going to be a big job finding it and getting it out of there”, he said unhappily, knowing full well it was going to be his job to do. I could not help but have a little silent private chuckle, observing this little war between the humans and these innocents of the forest.

A few days later, walking down for dinner one evening, I spotted Buddhadasa on a ladder, tying two big black plastic bags full of garbage to the joists just outside the rear entrance to the house. Seeing my puzzled expression, he explained: “Garbage pickup isn’t until Wednesday; need to keep this away from the possums.” ‘Good idea’, I thought.

The next morning, after my yoga in the meditation hut, I was eager for some breakfast. On my way into the house, I saw what normally would be good reason for expletives and frustration. But I could barely keep myself from laughing out loud. There was garbage strewn all over the floor. Still attached to the joists above were the torn remnants of two black plastic garbage bags, with packaging material and other waste peaking through big wide open holes. We cleaned it up in just a few minutes. Buddhadasa did not say a word. I thought of an ancient Chinese poem:

Sitting quietly,
Doing nothing
Spring comes.
And the grass grows by itself.

In 1999, while living in Vancouver, British Columbia, Jerry Flexer gave up his job, sold the car, the house, and the furniture, and went on a round-the-world trip visiting ecovillages, intentional communities, and retreat centres. The aim was to find a place to live in harmony with nature. After visiting over fifty of these alternative communities, and living temporarily in Australia and New Zealand, Jerry found his way back to Canada’s west coast. Now settled for a time in Victoria, he is living in that in-between place where the forest meets the trees.