

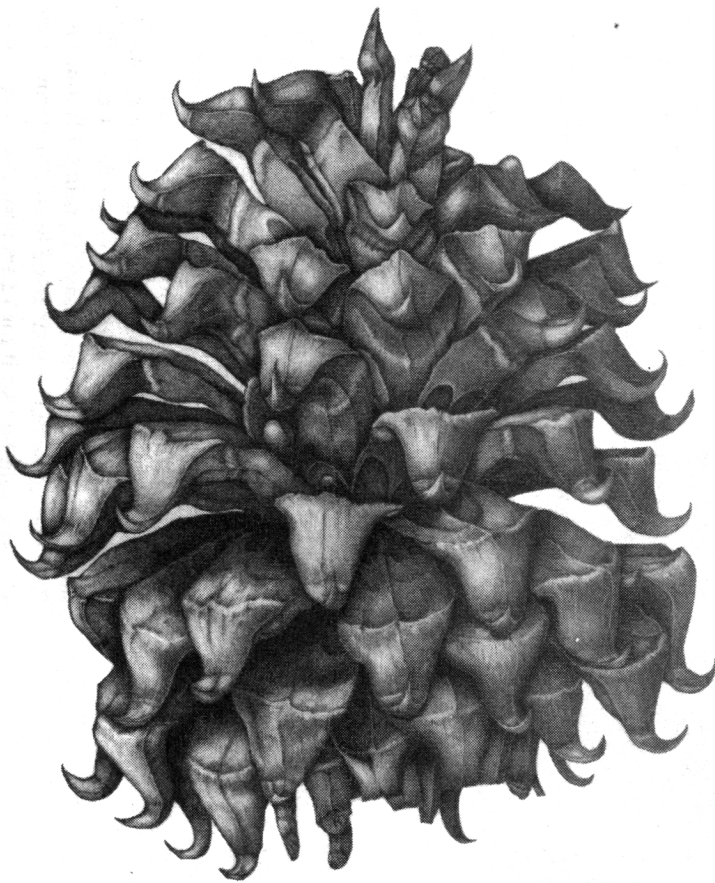


# WILD·DUCK REVIEW

*Literature & Letters of Northern California*

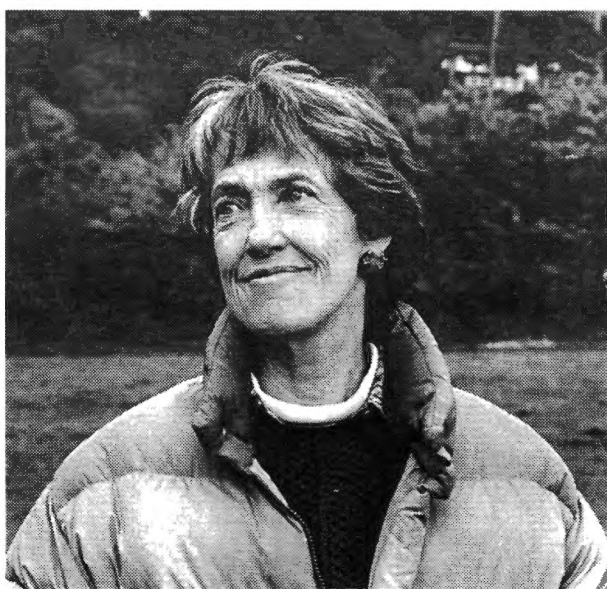
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**INSIDE:** JERRY MANDER ■ TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS  
JOANNA MACY ■ ELIZABETH HERRON ■ GEORGE SESSIONS



**JOANNA MACY** is an eco-philosopher who was raised in Manhattan and obtained her undergraduate degree from Wellesley College. Twenty years later, after living overseas and deeply experiencing Buddhism, she obtained her doctorate at Syracuse University. She is the author of: *DESPAIR AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE NUCLEAR AGE; DHARMA AND DEVELOPMENT; THINKING LIKE A MOUNTAIN* (co-edited with John Seed, Pat Fleming, and Arne Naess); *MUTUAL CAUSALITY IN BUDDHISM AND GENERAL SYSTEMS THEORY*; and *WORLD AS LOVER, WORLD AS SELF*.

The mother of three, Joanna and her husband live in Berkeley, California, where she teaches at the California Institute for Integral Studies. She loves downhill skiing.

The following conversation between Joanna Macy and Karla Arens took place in Berkeley on July 15, 1995, the hottest day in the Bay Area in 105 years.

**Karla Arens:** *In the past you did a lot of work dealing with despair in the nuclear age. Do we experience that same type of desperation over the ecological crisis?*

**Joanna Macy:** When I was engaged in developing despair work, it was not just about the nuclear crisis but also the environmental crisis. Much of what I wrote in 1978 and 1979 had to do with the pollution of the seas, deforestation, the collapse of our natural support systems. It's not at all surprising that this despair continues. We are living cells in the living body of Earth. Our collective body is in trauma and we are experiencing that. Even though we try to suppress it or drown it out or cut a nerve so we don't feel it, the collective plight exists at some level of our consciousness.

*Do you think that there is a concerted effort on the part of government or mega-corporations to assuage our concerns with misinformation and/or semi-truths?*

Look at Easterbrook's book, *A Moment on the Earth*, and others like it. There's an enormous amount of corporate money attempting to refute any data that indicates we need to change our behaviors.

*Because the change is about economics and consumption?*

In Buddhist terms, it's about greed and aversion. It's both about what we need to keep consuming and about what we need to keep defending ourselves. These are huge mistakes we make once we posit ourselves as being separate from the web of life. That's why Buddhist teachings are really very relevant here. It just so happens that those who are making megaprofits from hooking us on consumption and hooking us on defense systems have lots of money to spend in convincing us that we don't need to change. Politicians want to drown out and negate any suggestion that we can't continue as we are, that is, poisoning and consuming the earth. They would have us believe that

everything's hunky-dory and that environmentalists are doomsayers.

*What would our lives look like if we came to the point of wanting to live consciously, compassionately?*

That question would be putting the cart before the horse. We need to be present to our world first. It's like saying, "Which pill should I take?" One of the things I like about *Wild Duck Review* is that through its respect for literature and poetry, and because that's what literature does, it is asking us to be present. Let's arrive here. Let's even know that we're talking about the same world before we ask, "How should we live?"

For starters, we need open our eyes to see that we are so hooked into the present system that we keep running on this treadmill. Today is a Saturday, but I can still hear the roar of traffic. It is a roar of an exhausted, exhausting system driving itself into the ground. I'd like to say with Pablo Neruda, "Let's take one moment when nobody says anything. I'll count to 12." You know that poem? It's a beautiful poem about what it would be like if for 12 seconds the world were quiet, if there were a moment in which we could come to our senses.

*As in a meditation practice?*

I'm not saying we need to go sit on the zafu and meditate. Rather, we need to listen to ourselves as if we were listening to a message from the universe. We should think, "Oh, what's going on now?" before we grab for solutions. It doesn't mean getting into any altered state. I could say to you, "What's it like for you when you wake up in the morning? What's it like for you when you think of your children and their future? What is it like for you to be a human being, a woman on planet Earth at this time?"

These questions do not require an answer out of a deep meditative state, but rather an immediate response to what is happening for us now.

*Do you think we overemphasize the culpability of technology for suffering? In the sixth century B.C., the Buddha pointed out that the first noble truth was the truth of suffering: birth, death, old age and disease. These conditions always exist.*

The point is that suffering is brought about by greed, hatred and delusion. What technology does is speed up the karma. It amplifies the karma, that is, the consequences of our actions. It amplifies and accelerates them enormously. What we could tolerate before and make adjustments for we can't any longer. Until recently, we could tolerate quite a high level of greed, hatred and delusion — delusion in the sense of imagining that we could live separately from each other and aloof from our impact on each other. Maybe our children's children would pay the karmic debt, but it was pretty spongy, pretty elastic, in terms of the feedback loop from our actions. It took awhile. But with technology, the feedback loop is shorter, the response more immediate.

*You mean specifically in regards to our impact on the Earth?*

Yes, and on each other. Once you cut social programs, educational budgets, school lunches, HeadStart and so forth, you raise a generation without any of these social-educational supports and there's enormous karmic retribution coming through people who are furious, deprived and uneducated.

Technology is dangerous not because it is inherently

evil, but because it amplifies our actions and accelerates the consequences. For example, we dump pesticides overseas that are too dangerous for our own people, and we think we can get away with it. We cannot however, because we've made the third world countries grow export crops for us so that within a year we're drinking those same pesticides in our orange juice and coffee.

*Would you discuss the relationship between self and the environment?*

The key realization — and it's inherent in systems thinking and in all major spiritual traditions and pretty explicit in the Buddha Dharma — is that there is no private salvation. The bodhisattva knows this, and that's why she or he says, "I cannot be enlightened and walk through the gates of Nirvana until every blade of grass is enlightened." The bodhisattva understands that we are all in the same lifeboat.

*Does this mean that we view the world as non-different from ourselves? Is this how we define compassion?*

I'm a little nervous about the term 'non-different.' That's because we are intrinsically related, and relationship is a function of difference. We get into a metaphysical trap when we posit our essential sameness. As members of one body, we are interdependent, but not identical. As jewels in the net of Indra, we reflect each other, but we are not the same. I wouldn't want to use the term 'non-different.'

*Are you saying there is an individual self?*

I'm only saying there is difference. That hardly means we have separate, permanent selves, which is what the Buddha rejected. We are distinctive from each other and very connected-interconnected and constantly changing, like flowing streams in a broad river bed. That's what the Buddha called us, bhava-sota and vinnana-sota, streams of being, streams of consciousness. Everything we've done contributes to the unique character of our streaming, and lets us make unique contributions to our collective endeavor.

Living organisms cannot interweave and evolve if they are the same. Sameness is entropy. It withers the possibilities for relationship. Relations spring from differences, and generates them in turn. Only through difference comes rhythm and encounter, the very dance of life.

*Why does Buddhism express a doctrine that denies an eternal self yet at the same time concerns itself with karma and reincarnation?*

This very question was frequently asked of the Buddha in the early Pali sutras. "If there is no continuous self, then who was the I of previous incarnations that generated karmic consequences?" And the Buddha replied, "Don't worry about that. Don't go running after what happened to you before this lifetime or what will happen after it." Though he didn't deny rebirth, which was a cultural given of the world he lived in, he did not base his teaching upon it.

The point upon which the Buddha insisted was that there is no experiencer separate from the experiencing, no doer aloof from the doing, no independently existing self around which to gather greeds and paranoias. The meditation he taught, known as *satipatthana or vipassana*, is designed to reveal that you are an ever-fresh streaming of coherent psycho-physical events,



with no static "I" standing aloof on the sidelines. You are essentially verb, not noun—and the actions you do, or are, carry their own consequences. We are very different from who we were at 15 years old and yet there is a sequence of karmic consequences passed on by the energy of the action itself.

*Since each action leads to another action is there an opportunity for choice, free will?*

This question has fascinated me. What directs the stream of being? What creates our karma? What makes us who we are? The Buddha said it is our intention, our choice-making. He was very emphatic about this. It seems that choosing itself creates the who that is choosing. It is a function of a certain multi-level complexity of mind that in the modern West is called self-reflexive consciousness. The early Buddhists called it the capacity to "change your karma," and saw it as the great privilege of the human realm. This ancient Buddhist perspective coincides with the modern systems view of self-reflexive consciousness: that it arises from decision-making and consists of decision-making

*Isn't the choice itself the product of whatever action came before?*

Only partly. Our past decisions have narrowed as well as opened the path for us so that there are things we can't choose to do anymore. But still there's choice. You chose to come here to Berkeley. There are a lot of things that you can't choose to do in Nevada City this afternoon. You closed that out by climbing in the car. You can't decide that it's not a very hot, polluted day in the Bay Area, or that I am not a little tired and cranky, or that the tape recorder isn't making this awful noise. But you can decide how you're going to relate with me in this moment. And the way you choose allows you to draw upon all the strengths that stem from previous experience. The Buddha emphasized this because there were people teaching in his time, particularly the Jains, who were extremely deterministic. They said that everything is predestined and he took issue with this right down the line. I think he's pretty clever in arguing it, but for now, I can just say he did argue it, whether I'm able to persuade you of it or not. The Buddha said there are a lot of things that happen to you that you can't trace back in a linear fashion to what you did last week. You cannot reduce everything that happens to you to the effects of your past actions.

*Then there is a randomness?*

No, it's not just random. The Buddha would also say, "Watch out for polarized thinking." We tend to think, if it's not A, then it must be B. But it's a middle path between causality or randomness and determinism. There is a scope for choice. He taught the Middle Way of dependent co-arising which recognizes both the consequences of previous actions and ever-fresh opportunities for choice. Both are necessary if we're going to understand ourselves as real and responsible actors on the scene. There is an extent to which we definitely do influence what's going to happen and that influence has to do a lot with our intention.

*How does our intention, our awareness of Deep Ecology, prompt us to act on behalf of the environment?*

Deep Ecology, in moving us beyond anthropocentric assumptions — beyond seeing Earth as a commodity for human profit and comfort — has been very important and liberating for me. But, at the same time, I'm sick of theorists who make categories of political correctness around Deep Ecology. I'm so grateful for any



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one who wants to plant a tree or clean a stream.

Given the severity of our environmental crisis, just wanting to see a tree planted or a stream cleaned is sufficient intention in my book. While I am very thankful for the larger context, the long-term perspective and the tough thinking that Deep Ecology provides, I'm not going to fault other people for not being Deep Ecologists.

How do you relate Deep Ecology to Buddhism?

'Deep Ecology' is a secular and easier way of saying 'dependent co-arising', the Buddha's central teaching. It's about the profoundly reciprocal nature of the universe, the interdependent, self-organizing structure of reality. Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has coined the term *interbeing*. This is our true nature, to be part of one another. Deep Ecology, to me, is a term that conveys that interdependent structure to reality.

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*You've stated that there are four probable views by which one could view the world: as a battlefield; as a trap; as a lover; and as a self. Could you speak to the ideas of world as lover and world as self?*

Interestingly enough, each of these four ways is present in every major religious tradition. But when it comes to world as lover, I've been most struck by devotional Hinduism, where you sing yearningly to Krishna as his lover, Radha, and clothe him in attributes of earth and sky.

*It's quite wonderful, isn't it? Krishna and the gopis (cowherd girls) bedecked in jewels and feathers, dancing in the sensual, moonlit forest of India?*

Exactly. It's great because it's highly enjoyable. It uses the enormous power of Eros instead of slapping down local mythology as did mainstream Judaism and Christianity when moving into nature-worshipping cultures. Look at Yahweh coming into the land of Canaan or the Church of Rome coming into pre-Christian Britain. "Get them out of their oak groves. Cut 'em down." I think it's very relevant now, because I am convinced that we're not going to be able to save our world unless we fall in love with it. That erotic, passionate drive is very close to our instinct for self-preservation.

*I'm almost surprised to hear a Buddhist teacher speak in terms lover and beloved.*

Well, there's not quite so much of that in Buddhism.

Buddhism is a little anemic around the erotic. Part of my agenda is to get it in there again.

*And the world as self?*

That too is present among the mystics of all traditions. And to expand metaphors of self and self-interest to include the living body of Earth — which in a real sense is our larger body — is very much the project of Deep Ecology. Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher who first articulated Deep Ecology, made this very explicit. He saw our capacity to identify with Earth and all beings as a natural maturing into greater wisdom that taps deeper energies than moral altruism. With a joyous sense of relief and home-coming, when we discover our larger "ecological self!"

*What led you to translating Rilke's work?*

All of the above. For over thirty years I've loved and carried with me THE BOOK OF HOURS, which Rilke wrote as a young poet almost a century ago. I've been fed by the brave, luminous simplicity of its poems, which are, essentially, conversations with God. It's an amazingly tender and interdependent relationship in which each turns to the other and redefines self and other in terms of their respective yearning and vulnerability — and yes, also the dying of our world. I wanted for so long to share these poems in English, and now with my co-translator, Anita Barrows, it's finally happened. Both of us have been profoundly moved by the extent to which the young Rilke articulates the despair and revelation of our own present moment, in which, facing huge loss, we discover the depth and beauty of our mutual belonging.



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# Translations from Rilke's *Book of Hours*

## *Ich habe viele Brüder in Sutanen*

I have many brothers in the South,  
who move, handsome in their vestments,  
through cloister gardens.  
The Madonnas they make are so human,  
and I dream often of their Titians,  
where God becomes an ardent flame.

But when I lean over the chasm of myself  
it seems  
my God is dark  
and like a web: a hundred roots  
silently drinking.

This is the ferment I grow out of.

More I don't know, because my branches  
rest in deep silence, stirred only by the wind.

1,3

## *Wer seines Lebens viele Widersinne*

She who reconciles the ill-matched threads  
of her life, and weaves them gratefully  
into a single cloth --  
it's she who drives the loudmouths from the hall  
and clears it for a different celebration

where the one guest is you.  
In the softness of evening  
it's you she receives.

You are the partner of her loneliness,  
the unspeaking center of her monologues.  
With each disclosure you encompass more  
and she stretches beyond what limits her,  
to hold you.

1,17

## *Ich liebe dich, du sanftestes Gesetz*

I love you, gentlest of Ways,  
who ripened us as we wrestled with you.  
You, the great homesickness we could never shake off,  
You, the forest that always surrounded us.

You, the song we sang in every silence: you dark net  
threading through us.

On the day you made us you created yourself.

And we have grown so sturdy in your sunlight,  
so broadly rooted, that now  
in all that lives  
you come into your fullness.

Let your hand rest on the rim of Heaven  
and mutely bear the darkness we bring over you.

1,25

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