

# Transforming Gardens, Transforming Self

*Valerie Brown*

I've always lived in places where there was concrete under my feet. There is comfortable reassurance in solid cement and knowing that the corner store is within walking distance. And yet, the year I spent renting a 200-year-old stone farmhouse on sixty acres proved to lay the foundation for my opening to nature.

The old house came to me as part of the deal I made with my then Zen teachers, tenants for more than eighteen years. I would move into the old home and continue their work in building a Buddhist community, while they left for greener pastures down south. After a year of chasing mice and bats from the house, burning two cords of hardwood and learning the difference between winter wheat and rye grass, I moved back to the comfort of my one thousand square foot house on a small river town in central New Jersey. The town, Lambertville, was a place of bustling mills, where bobby pins, European-style lace, and salted oyster crackers were made. It was once described by Lady Bird Johnson as the worst slum she'd ever seen. Today, it is a dandy place, a genteel place of fine antiques and interior decorators. The art supply shop and Acme Supermarket have given way to Reinbold Interiors and Pasha Turkish Designs.

Off the main street and sandwiched between Grant's Alley and the highway, and across from a small creek that curves around a small wooden house, sits my 132-year-old house with its postage size garden hidden from street view. The garden made sensitive by the use of biodynamic preparations is particularly alluring on cold, moonlit, near-spring nights.

The moonlight falls like broken glass, casting white-purplish shadows through the tree branches onto the old brick courtyard. Bouncing light off the rhododendron set to bud, cherry laurel, limestone fountain, and teak table and chairs; all is well. A garden is like a heartfelt poem or prayer. The textures and sounds linger long on my senses, even after I walk back into the study to take my place at the old oak desk with turned legs. Everything is in place, waiting only for sustained spring, then summer and fall to venture back out into the garden to enjoy long sunsets in this tiny-sized sanctuary, hidden from view behind the tall cedar fencing, well back of my home. To savor a winter/early spring garden is to fill your senses with anticipation, to whet your appetite with hope for what is to come.

It is said that a garden is never finished. It just keeps evolving and changing, becoming transformed as we transform ourselves. With each new discovery of some part of

ourselves, our garden grows. We learn patience and suddenly we yearn to plant from seeds and not ready-made store-bought plants. We learn contentment and know instinctively how to thin plants, to let go of that which is not useful to the plant's well-being. We learn acceptance and tolerance and simultaneously understand how to till the earth with strength and light hands so as not to damage young plants. We learn gratitude and want to share our garden space with beneficial bugs, birds and butterflies, making a home that welcomes them all.

## The Interrelationship of Gardens

My teacher, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh says that as we touch the earth, as we walk gently on the earth, it is capable of absorbing all our joy and sorrow. It can support and comfort us. It is not arrogant or vain, humble or prideful. To walk gently on the earth, to support the earth, to garden, is to live fully, for in each blade of grass, each leaf, the whole cosmos is present. When you look deeply at a flower, you see not just a flower, but also a cloud, the rain, the sun, and the earth. Without these, the flower would not be possible. So too when you look deeply at a flower, especially for organic gardeners, you see garbage – orange rind and lemon peel, left-over cabbage ends – for without these, there would be no compost that enriches the soil, that grows the beautiful flowers. And for the biodynamic gardener, we recognize the relationship of the vitality of the soil with the health of the crops. We acknowledge the planetary influences, like the waxing and waning of the moon, on plant life. The gardener knows that the act of gardening is embracing interconnectedness, the whole fertility of life.

Four years before his Christmas sermon in 1967, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was in jail in Birmingham, Alabama. He wrote, "It really boils down to this; that all life is interrelated. We are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality." This mutuality is woven in the fabric of our lives made rich by connection to the earth.

The gardener stands as a symbol of culture in a world gone dull and deadened by reality TV and tabloid news. As Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst described, a garden is a symbol of obstacles, hardship and ignorance, which we must overcome in order to attain a higher, divine level of conscious awareness. In Buddhist terms, this cultivation of



consciousness and awareness is the first step in development of a mind that is concentrated, has clarity, insight and wisdom. Without awareness, insight is not possible.

### Elements of a Garden – Plants, Trees and Shrubs

The process of transformation in the garden and self-transformation is symbolized by the healing introduction of plants, shrubs, potted fragrant herbs and flowers, and particularly trees in the garden. Many cultures believe that trees (and all living objects of nature) bear spirit and intelligence. Native Americans especially encourage us to listen, listen to our brother trees and sister moon. Trees symbolize in other religions knowledge (of good and evil), growth and re-birth. And the Buddha is said to have given his last instruction under the branches of the *sal* tree. He said, “Be a light unto yourself.” It is here, in nature, among the rocks, air, earth, that we return to that which is most elemental in us. We reconnect to our true nature – kindness, generosity, openness.

### Water

The use of water in the garden in the form of a small fountain, pond or stream serves an important healing and trans-

forming role. Water symbolizes purity and renewal. It reminds us of the source of life, fertility and birth. Through the water element we are reminded of our feminine energy. It quenches our thirst. The stillness of water reflects one’s natural contemplative moods. It transforms the stuck places in our soul, enlivening it with fluidity and movement.

### The Entrance

Perhaps it is the garden entrance, the place where we pass from the mundane to the profane, from *chronos* to *Kairos* time, that most exemplifies transformation. The garden entrance speaks of a safe haven, a threshold one crosses from the outside world to the sanctuary of the garden. As we enter the garden, we become receptive and curious. We feel welcomed and cared for. Most importantly, the garden entrance gives us a chance to pause and to reflect, to fully present – with body and mind – to the garden space created for our own comfort, ease and peace.

### Sitting Places

Places to sit, are places to surrender to the call of the garden, to give one’s self over to light and leisure, to put down the heavy bags. Here, sitting, we fall in love with nature and

## TRANSFORMING GARDENS, TRANSFORMING SELF

find soulful pleasures in the garden. Whether our place for sitting is accented by temple chimes, sunset views, water fountain, outdoor lighting, or garden sculptures, sitting and resting are the true rewards of every gardener. Whether our garden is a postage-size plot, like mine, or vast acreage with woodlands and ponds, or perched on a hillside or a city rooftop garden, we need a place to sit and to do nothing. Whether the seating area is a place of deep contemplation or a place to share conversation with friends and family, the garden seat is limited only by our creativity and ingenuity.

### The Healing Elements of Gardeners

Often the most enduring quality of the garden is its ability to heal, to touch us not just at the branches, but deep down at the roots. Too often there is little time to notice a butterfly, to feel the sun's warmth on an early spring day, to *really* see a flower. In this context, the need for sanctuary space takes on deeper meaning. We never outgrow the need to shelter our heart from business cares and worries. Gardens are a part of creating this much-needed balance. They are a place to restore child-like wonder. It does not matter so much whether the garden space is a few well-cared for plants on a city fire escape, thoughtfully considered flower boxes brimming with color and texture, a garden

made vitally alive through the use of biodynamic preparations, or the formal garden of your dreams. What is important is finding peace that is available in gardens, learning the lesson of gardening, and sharing that with others.

Valerie Brown is a certified Kundalini yoga and meditation teacher, an attorney, court-trained mediator and a lobbyist. She holds a two-year graduate certification in holistic spirituality from Chestnut Hill College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, focusing on healing through body movement and inter-faith dialogue. She has led yoga and meditation retreats throughout the Northeast, and was ordained by Buddhist Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh.

Valerie's travel to India, Africa, the Middle East, Indonesia, South and North America, the Caribbean, and Europe, have greatly influenced her life. As a certified biodynamic gardener, Valerie worked at a wind- and solar-powered organic farm in the high desert country of New Mexico. She also volunteers at Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve in New Hope, Pennsylvania and is a member of the Lotus Garden in Manhattan.

She is a founding member of Old Path Sangha where she practices Buddhist meditation and mindfulness. She is a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), has been a long-time member of the Princeton Ethical Humanist Fellowship, and serves on the Board of Trustees at Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center.



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