



Special Focus: Buddhism in the Anthropocene

## Shown by the Marron's Claw: Ecological Receptivity as Mindful Praxis

Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko 

University of Copenhagen

On the wooded hillside of the Origins Centre, a small retreat centre in Western Australia with a strong ethos of active care, the appearance of native animals, especially those that are scarce or sporadic, is interpreted as indicative of spiritual and ecological health. Conversing with human-animal relationships within other Buddhist traditions, this article explores the resonances between the presence of animals and ideas of successful labour, both physical and contemplative, amongst Australian Buddhists in a time of ecological crises. In conversation with notions of ecological health and renewal, native animals are often seen as companions, tutelary beings, and as being indicative of successful practice. At a centre where regenerative work to re-establish disrupted ecologies is considered collaboration, receptivity to the movements, moods, and activities of animals, and of ecosystems more broadly, is cultivated to support the flourishing of life, and is coupled with a culture of dedicated work.

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After stopping by the side of a small highway in southwestern Australia with some friends in the summer of 2021, I set off to see an artwork that an old friend Elaine Clocherty had made on a brook in Margaret River, as it ran through part of a local permaculture farm. The artwork was difficult to get to. We clambered over fallen trees and ducked under spider's webs and low hanging branches as we walked up the dry bed of the creek. As we crunched over the sharp leaf litter of the Jarrah forests we were provided with patchy shade, offered by taller trees, protecting us imperfectly from the piercing light of the West Australian sun. Awash in the smell of eucalypts, the charcoals and subdued browns of the Jarrah and Marri trees were disrupted by the striking greens of the shrubs and grass trees that form the underbrush. Following ten minutes of scrabbling along the rock-strewn creek bed we encountered the artwork. It was made from rocks, sticks, gum nuts, and leaves, all collected on site. Centred amidst the contours of the dry creek bed, Elaine's piece interjected within, but followed the course of the creek. The sticks that she had gathered angled upwards diagonally towards the direction that would characterise the creek in full flow. It seemed to request a renewal of the movements of the creek, as if waiting, or calling, to be flooded with the nourishment of much-needed water. Far out of sight from the viewing public, the artwork was not visible to passing people, nor was it created with human appreciation in mind. Instead it was inspired by a conversation near the site of the artwork about the importance of fresh water with charismatic Aboriginal elder Wardandi Matriarch Viviane Brockman, who was also Elaine's housemate at the time. Elaine was particularly moved by Viviane's reflection that "without fresh water, we have nothing." In response, the artwork was intended to assist in the removal of energetic blockages that were thought to be affecting the land. Many Australians believe that after centuries of colonial mismanagement and the oppression of Aboriginal peoples and disregard of their knowledge, that local ecologies need active help to flourish and, for some, this includes both mundane and supramundane aspects of regeneration.



Scottish-born Elaine is a former Catholic who has been practising Buddhism for the last twenty years. I met Elaine when I was around 16 in the late 1990s when she visited a live-in forest protest where I was living. We were blocking logging roads to some of the remaining stands of old-growth forest in the Southwest that were being threatened by clear-felling forestry practices and Elaine became involved in the movement. Dealing with the despair of deforestation and global warming in the late 1990s we both became interested in Buddhism. In the early 2000s we spent time together studying Buddhism at the Origins Centre in the small town of Balingup. Since then, Elaine has become an accomplished environmental artist whose artworks are often made in collaboration with local Aboriginal communities and partly informed by her daily Theravāda, Vajrayāna and Dzogchen inspired Buddhist practice.

When we arrived at the artwork Elaine pointed to a particular spot. She explained that when she was clearing the site to make the artwork, a marron's claw (a kind of freshwater crayfish) kept popping up from beneath the sandy soil. Without flowing freshwater marrons can live dormant in dry river beds waiting for the rain and this particular marron was present with Elaine as she was preparing her artwork. In spite of her best efforts to cover the marron back in the sand, on each day that she returned the marron's "wee claw," as she put it, kept reasserting itself, protruding upwards as if to direct how she should make her artwork (she later learned that this is a way that marrons keep themselves cool). It was in conversation with the marron, she explained, that she made the work. Following its direction and the particularities of the site, she shaped one end of the work to represent the marron's claw. The ephemeral artwork called for its own destruction through immersion: asking for the return of plentiful flowing freshwater which has been restricted by decades of deforestation, problematic agricultural practices, and global warming.

Looking at Australian Buddhist-influenced approaches to ecology, this article explores the dynamic interrelationships that some Australian Buddhists have with native animals. Engaging human-animal interactions within contemporary Buddhist traditions around the world, it investigates the distinctive ways of communicating with native animals within an Australian Buddhist context. Just as Elaine was receptive to the movements of the marron as a tutelary figure, the Australian Buddhists who are the focus of this article see certain interactions with animals as positive indicators of spiritual and mundane success. Animals can signal the success of both contemplative practices and physical labour to regenerate denuded ecosystems. Listening and being attentive to the more-than-human animals that inhabit local ecologies is an important part of what is known in Australia as "regen" (work to regenerate native habitats). The presence of native animals signals flourishing ecologies, and their return can be interpreted by some Australians, Buddhists or not, to represent unspecified supra-mundane healing and replenishment. In this context, certain Buddhist practices attempt to develop respect and awareness of other creatures, key to which is being receptive to communication.

### **A Buddhist Centre in Australia's Southwest**

Founded in 1983 in the small town of Balingup, about two and a half hours south of Western Australia's capital city Perth, the Origins Centre hosts a range of Buddhist and non-Buddhist retreats as well as short-term and long-term stays. Balingup has an interesting recent history. In the 1970s the small, predominantly agricultural community became one of the region's hotspots for alternative lifestyles. It housed the new religious movement called the Brotherhood, which was a permaculture focused, Christian-inspired, new religious movement with an interest in visitations by extraterrestrials. As Balingup was seeing its first wave of hippie migration, other towns nearby in the Southwest attracted urbanites who wanted to create alternative lifestyles, including the followers of Osho. His notorious secretary Ma Anand Sheela tried unsuccessfully to set up a new base for the Rajneeshies in the nearby town of Pemberton in the mid 1980s



Figure 1: Artwork created by Elaine Clocherty along the Ellen Brook in South West Western Australia. Photos taken by Elaine Clocherty. (Used with permission.)

when their centre Rajneeshpuram in Oregon was imploding.<sup>1</sup> The group became influential within alternative communities in Fremantle, a small town to the south of Perth within the city's conurbation. When I was a university student in the late 1990s Balingup was notorious for one thing: its plentiful supply of non-native magic mushrooms that grow in the region's pine forest plantations. The cat and mouse games between police and mushroom pickers was documented in the award winning 1995 independent documentary the "Fungimentary." Confounding mycologists as to their origins, the magic mushrooms were potentially spread by some of the eclectic people who had visited and lived in the region in the preceding decades, attracting in turn a wide range of psychedelics users to the town.

Following the founding of the Brotherhood and pre-dating the influx of psychedelics users in the 1990s, the Origins Centre began in the early 1980s as a complement to the activities of students associated with Canadian Buddhist teacher Namgyal Rinpoche (né Leslie Dawson 1931–2003). Arriving as part of a later diffusion of Buddhist teachings, preceded by the earlier Chinese Buddhist migrants who had lived and practised in New Zealand from as early as 1863, Namgyal Rinpoche came to New Zealand in the 1970s (see Spuler 2002). Namgyal Rinpoche's style of Buddhism was heavily influenced by western psychoanalysis most notably through the works of Carl Jung, his contact with the Theosophical Society, as well as his extensive training in Theravāda lineages in Myanmar in the 1950s, and Vajrayāna lineages in Sikkim and northern India in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Chatting to some of Namgyal Rinpoche's students over the last twenty-five years, their early interactions with Buddhism were certainly novel, ranging from naïve, to thoroughly studious, to more risky experimentations. For those who could afford to, the students travelled extensively on cargo ships around the world to places such as Papua New Guinea, South Africa, and India (see also Tiddy 2022). For some of the

<sup>1</sup> It was in relation to their exploration of the town of Pemberton that Sheela famously said on Australian prime time television show *60 Minutes*: "tough titties."

students the study of Buddhism was consistent and engaged, for others the mixture of mental health issues, drug use, and meditation practices were harder to incorporate into their lives. The loose affiliation of students and interested people were from a range of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds and nationalities, but were predominantly white, a mixture of men and women, and were Canadian, Australian and/or New Zealand citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Records of Buddhism in Australia date back as far as the 1840s, when migrants from China and Sri Lanka came to work in Australia during the Gold Rush (Halafoff, Fitzpatrick, and Lam 2012; Halafoff et al. 2022). In the Australian census of 2016 Buddhists represented around 2.4% of the population (Lam 2019) having increased from an estimated 1.1% in 1996 (Spuler 2002). The growth of Buddhism in Australia is due both to migration from Asian nations and the adoption of Buddhism by those from non-Buddhist backgrounds (Barker and Rocha 2011). Buddhism at the Origins Centre follows some of the characteristics noted by Barker and Rocha of Buddhism in Australia, specifically, a relative lack of hierarchy, an emphasis on lay practice, and an engaged approach to Buddhist practice (2011: 11). Whilst adapting to local conditions and concerns, the centre acknowledges the multiple lineages that inform its current practices and maintains a strong connection to the countries and traditions that these came from (see Spuler 2002). At the Origins Centre it is common to hear reference made to key figures from engaged Buddhist movements, in particular the revolutionary Indian reformer Ambedkar and Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nat Hanh (Gleig 2021).

The founding teacher of the Origins Centre, Canadian-born Chime Shore first became interested in Buddhism through his engagements with sculpture and modern art. Born in a farming family in rural Canada, in the mid 1960s he first heard about Buddhism whilst working as an apprentice for Canadian sculptor Ted Bieler. As Chime explained, one day when he was working on a sculpture the sculptor told him that he had “just met a really interesting person” who “has just returned from the East.” When Chime first attended his teachings, Leslie Dawson had recently taken monastic vows and the name of Anandabodhi in Myanmar, training with Sayadaw U Thila Wunta whom he had met through his engagements with the London branch of the Theosophical Society. Chime went along to his teachings and decided to leave Canada to travel with this eclectic group of students interested in the spiritual teachings coming out of Asia. In the late 1960s, Anandabodhi, Chime and other North American, antipodean, and European travellers visited Rumtek in Sikkim, the seat of the Karma Kagyu lineage, at that time headed by the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa. Here they met with and received teachings and tantric initiations from the 16<sup>th</sup> Karmapa and Kalu Rinpoche, amongst others.

Before settling in Australia, Chime helped to start the Wangapeka Study and Retreat Centre in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1974 and then headed to Perth with around thirty students from Canada, Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand (see Tiddy 2022 for a discussion of the group’s early activities in Aotearoa New Zealand). They chose Perth due to its closer proximity to India, where they intended to regularly travel to connect with the growing community of Tibetan refugees and Buddhist teachers in northern India. After establishing a teaching centre in Perth, volunteers began building a new centre in the town of Balingup. Built from salvaged and donated materials on land bequeathed by one of the more prosperous students, it was initially started as a Buddhist retreat centre in the largely agricultural, but fast becoming hippie-inflected town of Balingup.

When I came across the centre in the late 1990s it was on the verge of a radical transition. At the time the Origins Centre was connected to the town’s water and sewerage system and charged a nightly fee. When many of the students (like myself) and unemployed attendees couldn’t afford the accommodation fees, they were allowed to work at the centre in order to stay for free. Within a few years of my initial contact with the centre,

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<sup>2</sup> Whilst the relationship between Asian migrant and first generation Buddhists in Australia is outside the scope of this paper, significant work has been carried out on this topic. See Halafoff, Fitzpatrick, and Lam (2012), Halafoff, Garrod, and Gobey (2018), Halafoff et al. (2022), Lam (2019), Phillips and Aarons (2005).

receiving feedback from the young attendees, mostly ferals<sup>3</sup> and hippies of the late 1990s and early 2000s (who never had any money and tended to be spending their time studying, doing activism, religious practice, travelling, or making art) the centre became donation based. As its support base changed it began to transition to more sustainable infrastructure and to take an active approach to land care. Rain water tanks were installed and composting toilets were built. New buildings were constructed and the management, rather than being housed in the city, moved its meetings to the centre. Physical labour, seen as a key part of practice and often integrated into people's long-term residencies and longer meditation retreats, began to be carried out to regenerate the hillside on which the Origin Centre was built by replanting native tree species and ridding the land of aggressive introduced species, such as blackberry, which dominated the nearby creek.

This article is based on long-term relationships at the Origins Centre and within the surrounding regions of southwest Western Australia. Due to travel restrictions during the pandemic, my planned field trip to Mongolia was no longer possible. I was lucky to be able to leave Europe and visit my home state of Western Australia and to carry out research on Australian Buddhism in early 2021. At the time, daily life in Western Australia was continuing largely unchanged. Strict border restrictions and the relative remoteness of Western Australia meant that the state maintained no community-transmitted cases of COVID-19 until late 2021. After spending two weeks in hotel quarantine, I was able to carry out ethnographic research and formal interviews with friends and acquaintances in 2021. In 2022 and 2023 I returned to carry out further fieldwork. Whilst much of the article is based on recollections and experiences over the last twenty-five years of visiting the Origins Centre, all formal interviews referenced in this article were conducted in 2021 (for further details see acknowledgements).

### **Receptivity to Animals**

Buddhism is frequently extolled in popular culture as being a religion that is uniquely sensitive to caring for animals and this is how most people who visit the Origins Centre interpret the Buddhist teachings. Yet, some Buddhist doctrines and practices can cause friction with, as well as harm to, the more-than-human world (see Elverskog 2020). Some Buddhist organisations provide services to render money made from causing ecological damage spiritually clean (High 2018), and ritual specialists can be involved in placating spirits so that activities such as mining and building in sensitive areas can be conducted without the instigators experiencing negative repercussions (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019a; High 2017). Within Buddhist doctrine the animal realm is classified as one of the lower realms, a rebirth to be avoided as it is believed to be characterised by ignorance, suffering, and the violence that comes from being rendered either predator or prey (Ohnuma 2017). Ohnuma (2017) argues that in the early Buddhist Jātaka tales whilst discussions of animals can be seen as allegories for human experience, specific animals are also viewed as having unique characteristics. In many Buddhist societies animals are viewed ambivalently. They can take on supramundane powers, whilst still being considered to exist in the subhuman realm (Ambros 2014). In Buddhist stories, animals frequently share kinship with human beings, whilst at the same time they can be seen as passive recipients of the suffering borne from other animals, especially from the cruelty of human beings (Ohnuma 2017).

In some contemporary Buddhist societies people try to avoid the unnecessary killing of animals in order to avoid the accrual of negative karma. Often carried out as a way of accumulating merit to avoid negative rebirths, animal capture and release can traumatise and injure the animals involved (Shiu and Stokes 2008) and damage ecosystems (Smyer Yü 2023). As Geoffrey Barstow (2019) has written, in many Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions animals tend to be accorded significant moral consideration, but the situation is complicated. Often the prosperity of humans outweighs, or is weighed against, the lives of animals (Barstow 2019). On the Tibetan

<sup>3</sup> The feral movement was a subcultural movement based in Australia in the 1990s which had strong connections to the punk and hippie counter-cultural movements and a heavy emphasis on radical environmental ethics and anarchist politics.

plateau, Gaerrang (2019) has described that along with economic considerations, Buddhist herders calculate how many animals will die from their herding practices when deciding which kind of animal to herd. He explains that, as herding sheep requires the sale and subsequent slaughter of more animals, and therefore the accrual of more negative karma, many Buddhist herders decide to herd yaks instead, in spite of the fact that they are less profitable. In Kham province on the Tibetan plateau, Gillian Tan (2016) has discussed the practice of ritualistically designating particular herding animals as not being available for meat consumption and how this action constitutes an offering to deities and assists with the accrual of good fortune, the collective wellbeing of households, and the health and wellbeing of the herd. In some areas of the Tibetan plateau the excessive presence of animals, such as pikas, can lead them to be recharacterized as hungry ghosts that are attracted to areas which have been already depleted of fecundity by foraging for caterpillar fungus and other activities (Yeh and Gaerrang 2021). When pika numbers reach plague proportions Tibetan monastics make offerings to feed the hungry ghosts, carry out rituals to appease the local deities, and place treasure vases in particular locations in an attempt to reinvigorate the fertility of the earth (Yeh and Gaerrang 2021). Writing of contemporary Sino-Tibetan religious relationships, Dan Smyer Yü (2023: 7–8) has noted that due to anthropocentric approaches to freeing animals (*fangsheng*), that the practice can introduce aggressive species (such as farmed carp and Brazilian red-eared turtles) into areas where they overwhelm habitats and disrupt water ecologies. Likewise freeing yaks from slaughterhouses and releasing them near human settlements can cause significant land degradation (Smyer Yü 2023: 8–9).

In ethnographic research on Buddhism in Mongolia's capital city Ulaanbaatar, I found that whilst most Buddhist temples and centres instruct the laity to respect their interconnectedness with their surroundings and to value life in all of its forms, in the largely pastoralist nation there are very few injunctions on meat eating (excepting special religious holidays). Like the Tibetan plateau, Mongolia is primarily a pastoralist region where one of the main economic activities in the country is herding animals for meat, to be shorn, and for producing dairy. Most Buddhist centres that I went to in Ulaanbaatar, however, taught that it was the killing of animals, rather than eating them, which caused negative karma (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019a). Yet, whilst this attitude was common among urban lay Buddhists that I spoke to, killing animals, which was a core part of rural economies and a necessity for survival, was often not negatively viewed at all. Indeed, in the eastern region of Mongolia, Hedwig Waters (2022) has explored how the illegal hunting and killing of wild animals is framed as generating good karma (*buyan khiikh*) as it generates much needed income for the severely economically depressed community with whom she lived. The merit generated by economic prosperity, if shared with the community, was celebrated, even though the money was generated from killing (Waters 2022).

When Sherwood (Sherwood 2001) carried out extensive surveys on Buddhism in Australia in 2000, she found that 11% of the groups in her research were involved in animal welfare projects. Amidst the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna groups that extended their outreach to include the preservation of life in the more-than-human world, many groups were involved in the practice of freeing animals who were destined for vivisection or eating (Sherwood 2001: 71). Perhaps in response to strict laws regarding invasive species, in Australia some Buddhists request permission from local governments and are careful to utilise local species when carrying out animal freeing practices so as not to disrupt fragile local ecosystems (as was the case with the Vajrayana Institute discussed in Shiu and Stokes 2008). Amongst the Vajrayāna groups that Sherwood (2001) studied, ideas of karma for both the animal freed and the person who was freeing them played a strong role. Distinct from the examples above, discussions of karma tend to be a peripheral concern at the Origins Centre. Indeed, much like Jeff Wilson's (2019) discussions of Zenwest (a Zen centre) in Canada, the idea of merit was not commonly discussed at the Origins Centre nor utilised for the encouragement of donations.<sup>4</sup> At the Origins

Centre human-animal relations, rather than being tied to ideas about karma, tend to be connected to notions of hard work, mutual support and receptivity.

The (re)appearance or thriving of native animals is interpreted as a sign that mundane and supra-mundane work has been correctly carried out. Whilst the presence of rabbits and cats are discussed with dismay, specific native animals are considered to have their own agendas and perspectives. This view resonates with perspectives from other contexts. In Sikkim, Kalzang Dorjee Bhutia and Amy Holmes-Tagchundarpa (2022) have written that within Buddhist and indigenous perspectives people are thought to share the land with other more-than-human animals and beings and that part of this view expects a certain amount of reciprocal care. In this context the loss of particular animals from their habitats and their appearance in places where they should not be, such as being too close to human settlements, is seen as evidence of ecological disruption and disharmony that has come with the development of roads and other infrastructure in the region (Bhutia and Holmes-Tagchungdarpa 2022; see also Bhutia 2018). In certain Buddhist traditions, long periods spent meditating outside of urban contexts has generated sensitivities to other species. In Sri Lanka the silence and practice within the forest monastic tradition encourages the awareness of sharing the forest with other creatures (Sirisena, this volume). Practising the generation of loving kindness (*metta*) has been utilised in some contexts to protect meditating monks from the aggression of wild animals (Ohnuma 2017: 161) such as wild elephants, which are still a real danger for forest monks in Sri Lanka (Sirisena, this volume).

Just as work on the hill at the Origins Centre aims to encourage the presence of native animals, so too, stories of contact with animals are positively attributed and are seen to be correlated with consistent Buddhist practice. The approach of animals towards meditators is seen as signalling the depth of meditation. A person's ability to tame animals that are usually wild or unyielding demonstrates the capacity and depth of their spiritual practice. Speaking of one of the lineage's teachers Sayadaw U Thila Wunta, Chime explained that he had the ability to tame tom cats. As he explained:

He was a tom cat specialist. It was quite extraordinary actually. Big wild, bad mannered tom cats. And he could tame them and teach them to meditate... they would come when he called, but it was really against their will... he would go like this [gesturing as if to a cat] and they would stalk over and stand there like this [gestures a grumpy cat] and he would grab them and they wouldn't bite him or scratch him and he would just turn them upside down on his knees, and make their hands go like this [demonstrates paws splayed outwards]... And then he would tap their nose and they would drop their eyes and just be quiet. "Ānāpāna ānāpāna" and then when they were all quiet, joop. I'm not pretending to understand. He was a character.

In Australia, the inclination that animals have to approach a stationary meditator is sometimes reported, jokingly, as a problem in stories where meditators are approached by poisonous snakes, such as a tiger snake nestling under the blanket of a particularly advanced meditator. More frequently, the appearance of native animals such as kangaroos, emus (who at dawn or dusk can easily be mistaken for people wandering in off the famous hiking track that skirts the property), or smaller rarer marsupials such as quendas, cause visitors to the centre to listen and take notice.

The appearance of black cockatoos, in particular, causes classes to pause and people to stand silently until they leave. Black cockatoos appear in groups and tend to be quite rambunctious when they circle and feed on nearby trees. It is common to find their feathers, which are occasionally dropped whilst flying, on Buddhist shrines. I noticed red-tailed black cockatoo feathers amongst statues, ritual items, and a thangka of Yeshe

<sup>4</sup> However, unlike Zenwest in Canada when the Origins Centre switched to a *dāna* model for receiving an income, rather than a set rate for stay at the centre the Origins Centre did better than it had done before instituting the model (see also Abrahms-Kavunenko 2015 for distinctions between merit making and *dāna* in postsocialist Mongolia).

Tsogyal on Elaine's shrine at home. The presence of a male and a female black cockatoo feather is a permanent fixture on the shrine of the Buddhist centre Tig-Le House in Margaret River. Finding a feather of a black cockatoo, particularly a red tail feather, is frequently interpreted as a good omen, broadly conceived. When walking around the Origins Centre's main practice room with the resident teacher Chime, my husband asked him about the black cockatoo feathers hanging from the ceiling. To which he replied:

Those were dropped. These are red [tailed black] cockatoo feathers and an eagle feather. And one day when we were giving, doing a Wong Kur [tantric initiation] in here called Orange Tara, a bunch of red [tailed black] cockatoos, this is true, came down and flew several times around the rotunda. And then outside we found that. And, of course, people like that.

The placement of these feathers on shrines indicates the high level of respect that many people in Western Australia have towards these birds. When given as gifts, red-tailed black cockatoo feathers found on the hillside are thought to carry with them the blessings of the Centre, grounded and connected to the land on which it resides. For over two decades, the Origins Centre has been supporting the running of a nunnery in Rumtek, Sikkim, in northeast India. In late 2022, after the strict border measures of Western Australia's pandemic response were loosened, a visitor associated with the centre went to visit the nunnery. Upon arrival, she gifted the nunnery a box from the Centre containing, amongst other things, a male and female red-tailed black cockatoo feather. Characteristically different, the male cockatoo has a striking section of red on his tail and the female in the species has an irregularly striped black and red/orange ochre tail. The union of these two feathers represents the balance of male and female energies, the harmonising of which has resonance within Vajrayāna Buddhist teachings. Added to, or independent of, these metaphorical overlays, the infrequency of finding a red tail feather on the ground imbues these feathers with a special sense of meaning for the person who finds or receives them.

This emphasis on listening and being receptive to local ecologies, including animals and unspecified supra-mundane components, was one of ways that Elaine described her art practice to me in an interview in 2021. As she described it, she utilises her Buddhist practice in order to be receptive to the land while she is making her artworks.

When I am doing those works out in the land I try to keep myself as clear as I can. So that's where all the [Buddhist] practice allows me to clear space enough to... have a real dialogue with that place and knowing that we need to be connecting up. So that's definitely why I do what I do... Whenever I start something, I always do some of the prayers from Namkhai Norbu as a way of really trying to sing to that place.

As a land-based artist, Elaine's meditative practices help her to be attentive to the place where she is making art. Being responsive and listening was also emphasised at Tig-Le House in Margaret River, a Buddhist centre with a focus on ecological care, run by one of the Origin Centre's former students, Ian Hackett. Enabling receptivity, as he described to me in 2021, is a core part of the Mindfulness and Nature retreats that he regularly runs at the permaculture farm where Elaine made her artwork. As Ian explained, during these five-day retreats, he encourages people to become aware of their already existing connections to other people, animals, and plants in a "modern world" which to him was characterised by people reporting feelings of "disconnection." As he continued, one of the foci of the retreats was:

To get people to realise that actually what is going on within them and all their experiences, is the nature of life and reality and the natural world... And from there, people kind of go like, I'm right here now and what do I do? How do I learn to relate here? And, that is what we then work on. So we might use poetry, creative writing, simple art with the elements. To help people integrate in

some way. And we go out in the bush and we do contemplative meditation in the forest. Which is great. We get people to imagine a biodiversity survey, but through contemplative meditation. And they record stuff. Anything that comes through that space.

For Ian, the practice of paying quiet attention to the movements of insects, plants, animals and the weather helps to enliven the experience of being a person living within a “web of life.” Ian traces his teaching lineages to engaged Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh and Deep Ecologist Joanna Macy, along with more traditional Vajrayāna Buddhist teachers in the Kagyu lineage. He encourages his students to be receptive to what is going on outside of what would normally be considered the boundaries of a person. In this way, the immersion that comes from observing one’s surroundings visually and through other faculties, facilitates building an active respect and engagement with the surrounding life that supports them.

Perhaps because, somewhat infamously, some animals in the Australian context are potentially dangerous, both imaginings of animals and the recognition of the reality of their own will are active at the centre. During a meditation retreat in spring 2022, when outlining the practice of *metta* Chime reminded the group, many of whom were urbanites who had travelled down from Perth, that springtime was a time when dugites (a poisonous but non-aggressive snake) and other snakes may be sunning themselves on the centre’s paths after the cold winter months. “Don’t approach them,” he advised the group, “unless you really know what you are doing.” He went on to tell a story about a very large dugite that was sitting on the path the previous spring, digesting one of the centre’s prosperous king skinks. The large skink, he told the group, was halfway out of the dugite’s mouth and she was unsettled by people walking past. Two people who were staying at the centre at the time told him, “don’t worry, we have a psychic bond with snakes.” To which, in his retelling, Chime became irate. “I mean for goodness sakes, the snake is afraid! There was no *metta* present, no feeling for the snake as it is, not wanting to have too many pairs of eyes looking at it whilst it was ingesting food. They were only concerned with their own psychic bond, not with the snake as it is.” Eventually the couple left the snake alone and one of the local animal carers, a former caretaker of the centre, waited until it had finished eating and moved it on to a less frequented location.<sup>5</sup> Care requires attentiveness.

### Cultivation and Work

Agricultural metaphors for the spread of Buddhism and for the mechanisms of karma are common within Buddhist teachings and rituals, even in predominantly non-agricultural settings (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019a, 2019b). Schlieter (2013: 9) argues that within early Indian Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) textual sources describing karma one of the four predominant metaphors in use were botanical-agricultural which described the “ripening” (P./Skt. *vipāka*) of “seeds” (P./Skt. *bīja*), which will bear “fruit” (P./Skt. *phala*). As he points out, as well as planting the right seeds, which are key to what kind of karma will ripen, agricultural metaphors demonstrate that these ideas of karma allow for some possible interventions, as the fruit of a tree, for instance, needs good soil and weather conditions to ripen (Schlieter 2013). Elverskog (2020) argues that Buddhist agricultural metaphors, rather than supporting robust ecosystems and care, can be linked historically to wide scale ecological destruction throughout Asia. He contends that in order to support the needs of a generally sedentary monastic community,<sup>6</sup> Buddhist organisations needed a lay population that consistently produced an agricultural surplus. In order to meet this surplus, Buddhist states pushed for agriculture expansion and conquest along the “commodity” frontier, degrading and transforming Asia’s environment (Elverskog 2020: 80–90).

<sup>5</sup> See also Bhutia and Holmes-Tagchungdarpa (2022) for discussions of snake encounters in Sikkim.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Buddhist monastic communities were not always sedentary in Asia (see Abrahms-Kavunenko 2022; Tsultemin 2020). Yet, even within nomadic communities, agricultural symbolism associated with seeds and growth can be incorporated in rituals (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2019b).

In contrast to some Euro-American conservation traditions which embrace the idea of leaving things alone, the Buddhists in Western Australia see their relationships with the ecologies of the Southwest as marked by continuous interactions and ongoing work. This approach reflects attitudes towards Buddhism, which focus on ongoing “inner work” and “practice.” Like Buddhist approaches to calming the mind and the bodily formations, disturbed habitats are not left entirely to themselves, nor does such an approach make sense in a place where colonial mismanagement has led to voracious weeds choking rivers and invasive species outcompeting native marsupials. Conscious work is carried out to help re-establish ecosystems that once flourished under the care and custodianship of Aboriginal people. These attitudes contribute to challenging the popular assumption that conservation movements are about “letting nature takes its course” (see also Bocci 2017; Milton 2000), an idea which is saturated in colonial notions of the “state-of-nature,” or, in the case of Australia, in the enduring myth that Australia was a terra-nullius (an unowned, unpeopled land) before European settlement.<sup>7</sup>

In this context, the appearance of native animals at the Origins Centre is frequently interpreted as a positive sign of broader ecological health and spiritual robustness. Native birds and mammals are often interpreted as tutelary beings who appear when physical work or Buddhist practice is being carried out in the correct way. Most Australians are used to seeing denuded ecologies - erosion and salinity in dry, deforested paddocks run into the ground by cattle. Native flora provides habitat, yet, due to the differing adaptive strategies of species that were aggressive opportunists of disturbed ground in the wake of glacial recession in northern Eurasia and north America and those of native flora in Western Australia - micro adapted to poor nutrient conditions and broadly interdependent - rehabilitation requires continuous intervention. When native habitats are restored (or plants which fit a similar niche are established), the fauna that co-evolved with Australian plant species return. In this way, when people at the Origins Centre see native animals and birds visiting the Centre, it demonstrates that the regeneration of the hillside is working.

As Hadleigh Tiddy (2022) has written, the metaphor of “seeding” was a term used by many of the people he interviewed about their experiences of being present at a retreat run by Namgyal Rinpoche in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1973. As he writes, seeding can be a clarifying metaphor to explain the spread of Buddhism whilst not necessarily implying a clear intention for spreading (as seeds can be sown unintentionally) and it can account for the cross-pollination that can create new hybrid species (Tiddy 2022: 140–41). Metaphors of cultivation are central to how Buddhist contemplative practices are discussed at the Origins Centre. Distinct from agricultural metaphors, the work of doing meditation, and of caring for one another, is frequently compared to the labour on the hillside, and vice versa in an ongoing dynamic interplay. In order for native plants to survive, people need to work to get rid of blackberries, and discourage invasive plants and animals from taking up residence. Fire season brings with it its own frightening realities as each year the Origins Centre is threatened by the increasing risks that come with a changing climate. To help prevent damage and loss of life and habitat, fire breaks must be maintained and the underbrush must be managed, a task that, due to the loss of native animals and the bioturbation that they provide, must be carried out by people.

Work itself is idealised at the centre, which itself was built through the physical labour of Namgyal Rinpoche and Chime’s students, many of whom came from a working class background. Whilst some of the attendees and long-term students at the Origins Centre are comfortably or more than comfortably middle class, a significant portion of people that come to the centre, both new and old students (young and old) are from low socio-economic backgrounds. Whilst some of the older generation who came from working class backgrounds have been able to secure housing and save money due to favourable economic conditions in the past, others

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<sup>7</sup> There have been cases of conflict between Buddhist practices which are believed to generate care and local individuals within local Aboriginal communities. See McAra (2007) for a discussion about the building of a stupa and conflict in Australia.

are on welfare and continue to struggle to find affordable housing. For the younger generation, the pressures of high living costs, especially for rent, cause many to consistently experience housing insecurity. Some people arrive at the centre in part due to these factors, as becoming a caretaker or helping out at the centre can provide steady housing and a small income.

Hard work and respite are two of the core values built into the materiality of the centre. As I was walking around the central practice room known as the “rotunda” at the Origins Centre with Chime, discussing the ritual and secular items inside, he explained that the foundation pillars for the octagonal shaped building came from a mental health hospital in Perth. All of the older buildings at the Origins Centre were built with salvaged materials and erected with work from skilled and unskilled labourers who were students at the centre. The working class roots of many of the students at the Centre is of note as the commodification of spiritual practices has spread in Australia and it is often quite expensive to attend retreats. Attending the Origins Centre, in contrast, is by donation and, if students are unable to afford to pay for accommodation, arrangements will be made to support their stay. In this way, the Centre stands out as a relatively accessible place to practise, that is if a person is able to take the time off from the ongoing need to work and earn that characterises the dominating economic necessity of many people's ordinary lives.

Chime is very aware of the working class backgrounds of many of his students (as well as his own) and is also proud of the working class roots which have influenced their Buddhist lineage. In 2001 the Origins Centre constructed a “world peace pagoda” in the style of the Theravāda lineage that Sayadaw U Thilla Wunta was a part of. Two senior monks from the lineage came and directed the building of the pagoda which now stands next to the main rotunda where many of the centre's classes are held.

The people who built the pagoda, you must remember, are generally at the bottom of the social ladder... the Mon [an ethnic minority in present day Myanmar] are generally poor... if you go to be a monk with Sayadaw U Thilla Wunta, he won't even begin if you don't have a trade or if you are not studying for one... He says, what are you going to do for a living if you change your mind?... So all of his monks are brickies. And he is a good brickie, he is not just an idle brickie he can build sculptures with brick... he is a real tradie. And when they do the mortar that they put the pagoda on. It's very bad, for them, something really serious, if they do a sloppy job... It's to do with your integrity that is putting power into it.

As it was built with monks of the Mon ethnicity, the centre has become a site of pilgrimage for some of the community who immigrated to live in Perth. When I chatted to a member of the Mon community, Chan Lunn, at the Saigon Patisserie that he runs in Perth, he told me that the community in Australia is quite small, numbering only around 60 people in Perth. As Chan explained to me, people from the Mon ethnicity attended the Buddha's teachings during the lifetime of Shakyamuni Buddha and it was there that they learned to build their particular style of pagoda. This style, he told me, is the basis for the main pagoda at the Shwedagon pagoda. As both Chan, and Anne – the long-time manager of the Origins Centre, told me, the Mon community are welcome to visit at any time and to stay. He lamented that, unfortunately, due to the demands of running his business, he doesn't get many opportunities to visit. For Chan, visiting the pagoda at the Origins Centre is like visiting the Buddha. Just as Christians need a church, he explained, their community needs a pagoda. A pagoda built from hard work, solid foundations, and good intentions.

### **Unceasing Work in Crisis**

Over the last twenty years, as the global ecological crisis has become exponentially more worrying, the Origins Centre has increasingly transitioned towards integrating Buddhism as a support for sustaining environmental activism (see also Gleig 2021 for trends elsewhere). The centre regularly hosts Buddhism and



Figure 2: The stupa at the Origins Centre, photograph by Saskia Abrahms-Kavunenko.

Ecology workshops which focus on humans and their interrelationships with the more-than-human world. At a workshop I attended there in early 2021, the discussions about this topic frequently touched on the topic of how to continue working for positive outcomes given the growing despair about climate change. The question of how to manage these problems is an open one with no easy answers, which Buddhist practice is believed to help with, but ultimately not provide a solution for (touching on the broader difficulties inherent within the Bodhisattva path). When I asked Chime if he thought that concerns about global warming were influencing Buddhist practice at the centre he responded:

Certainly it's influencing us all because it adds a sense of urgency and it provides a focus which we can share. It provides an outcome that we can research so we can know what is going to happen if I don't do practice. I wish you could say to somebody look you better practice or you are in for an emotional nightmare life... maybe climate change is affecting the way that people approach their own psychology? I don't know. I only receive feedback in the sense that [people say to me] it is making me afraid, and we have to protect the children, and what are we going to do with my fear?

Practice, in Chime's view, must be ongoing and is seen as a means for supporting engagement, which he stresses consistently during retreats and mindfulness classes. At the end of mindfulness practice he encourages participants to make an offering to a cause greater than themselves, often for world peace, or for something that they specifically care about. Ending each session with the gesture of offering, hands palms upwards above one's head, can be seen as supporting the teaching and the broader intention of practice, or likened to the spreading branches of a tree.

Implied in the repetition of the verb “to practise” as relating to Buddhist contemplative techniques is the idea of sustained and consistent work. Much like the work carried out on the hillside, dealing with the travails of life and the climate crisis is about sustained engagement and consistency. Chime often uses the description of someone learning a musical instrument to talk about the practice of meditation. In order to play an instrument well, you must practise the scales. Being psychologically resilient is likewise about training the mind to be less reactive to external stimuli and bodily formations. The Origin Centre which has a long history (and present) of being accessible to working class students makes the very proximate link between the value of contemplative work and cultivation and of doing other kinds of work to help others (including people, native plants and animals, and local ecologies).

After the initial period of radical esoteric explorations, the approach at the Origins Centre has come to see physical labour as key to grounding some of the more esoteric tendencies within Buddhism. Meditation practice and hard work provides stability and care for oneself and others. When I asked Elaine about how the environmental crises influences her work she replied:

I don't even know how people survive without doing meditation and practice. I worry for them, because it is definitely the foundation that gives me a better life... so yes, lots of practice.... I've chosen to focus on climate because I feel that everyone is quite saturated, everyone is worried... they all know... I've tried to make things that make them feel, ahhhhh, a sense of connection, rather than, ah there we are stuffing up again.... It's a lot of stress just knowing that that is what we are doing... So I have definitely in my works always chosen to just be a place of connection... People want it, but we are all disconnected... the practice itself, outdoors making art in the landscape is just one of the most wonderful things you could do. Everybody loves it, they say ahhhh I feel so peaceful... yep, this is it, we're on one of the most incredible places in the universe that we could be living and it's like, our greatest friend kind of thing. We're not treating it too well, but yep. Understatement [laughs].

The continuity between the work of Buddhist practice and of her artwork is similar to that at the Origins Centre. Meditation practice, like making art and being involved in activism, is continuous and consistent. Her meditation practice, as well as enabling her to connect to where she is, helps her to maintain stability in a chaotic world.

### **Conclusion**

Buddhist practice at the Origins Centre and nearby Tig-Le house is responsive to the needs of native animals. The return, approach, or taming of animals, is seen as signalling ecological and spiritual flourishing. The taming of a tom cat in Myanmar demonstrates the depth of Buddhist practice. The slither of a snake under the blanket of a meditator, their concentration. The receptivity of an artist or an activist to where they are enables them to communicate with other humans and the ecological systems which support them. The raucous calls and fallen feathers of the charismatic black cockatoos instantiate, and are invoked to heighten, the power of environmental and spiritual work.

Caring for ecologies and one's mental wellbeing is ideally approached with consistency and steadfast involvement. Work carried out on the hillside where the centre is, requires consistent maintenance to ensure the health of local ecosystems. Environmental activism, likewise, rather than involving one-off policy interventions to regulate use patterns, necessitates ongoing adaptive activity that sees more failures than successes. Many people at the centre, connected Buddhists, and former students, like Elaine, see Buddhism not necessarily predominantly as a means to soteriological goals, but rather a way of helping to support the regeneration of ecological and spiritual health. In this context the presence of native animals indicates

health, acceptance and continued support from the remarkably more than human world which people living in Australia today still inhabit.

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