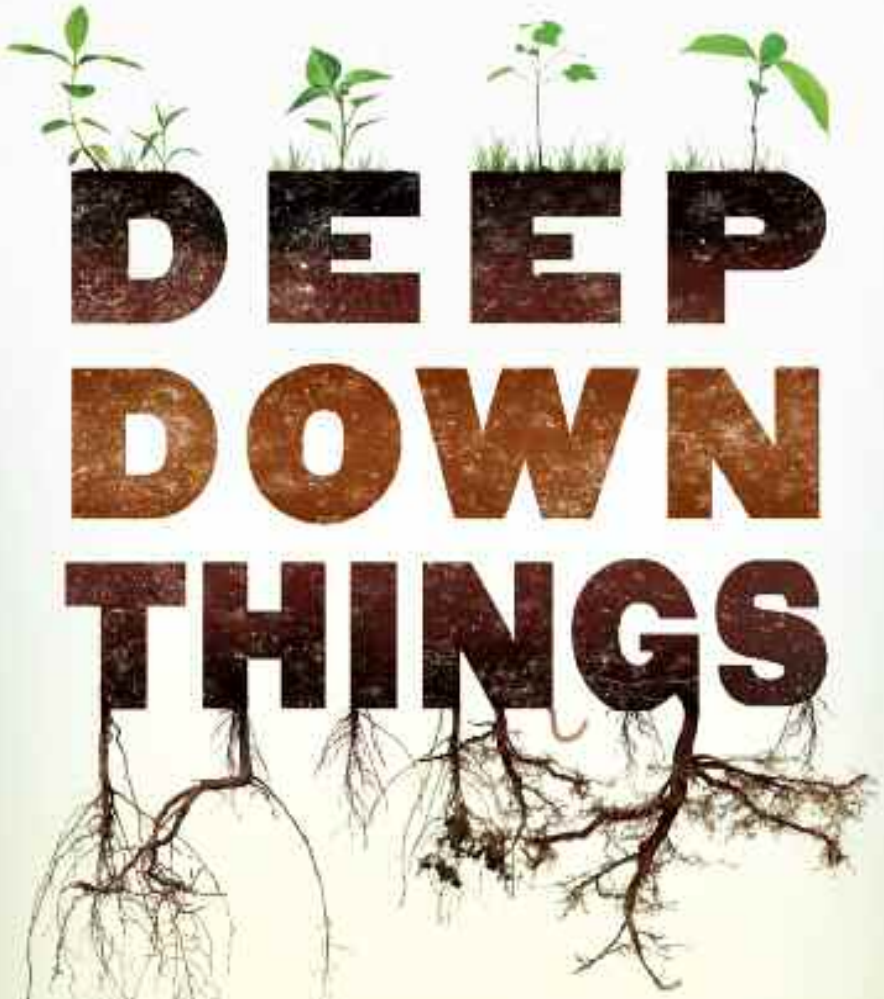
"Urgently recommended."
—Karen Maezen Miller, author of *Hand Wash Cold*

LIN JENSEN



DEEP DOWN THINGS

THE EARTH IN CELEBRATION AND DISMAY

A Note from the Publisher

We hope you will enjoy this Wisdom book. For your convenience, this digital edition is delivered to you without "digital rights management" (DRM). This makes it easier for you to use across a variety of digital platforms, as well as preserve in your personal library for future device migration.

Our nonprofit mission is to develop and deliver to you the very highest quality books on Buddhism and mindful living. We hope this book will be of benefit to you, and we sincerely appreciate your support of the author and Wisdom with your purchase. If you'd like to consider additional support of our mission, please visit our website at wisdompubs.org.

DEEP DOWN THINGS

LIN JENSEN

DEEP DOWN THINGS

The Earth in Celebration and Dismay

WISDOM PUBLICATIONS

Wisdom Publications
199 Elm Street
Somerville MA 02144 USA
www.wisdompubs.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Jensen, Lin.
Deep down things : the earth in celebration and dismay / Lin Jensen.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-86171-611-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Nature—Religious aspects—Buddhism. 2. Human ecology—Religious aspects—Buddhism. I. Title.
BQ4570.N3J46 2010
294.3'5691—dc22
2010025724

14 13 12 11 10
5 4 3 2 1
eBook ISBN 978-0-86171-922-8

Cover design by Phil Pascuzzo. Interior design by LC. Set in Bulmer MT 12/16.

Earlier forms of five chapters herein have appeared in the following periodicals, websites, and anthologies: "Ten Hearts of an Earthworm" in *Tricycle*; "Roots" and "The Whole World Is Kin" posted as *Tricycle Web Exclusives*; "Digging Holes" posted on Powell's Books' website; "Buddhist Economics" in the anthology *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency*.

Wisdom Publications' books are printed on acid-free paper and meet the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America.

This book was produced with environmental mindfulness. We have elected to print this title on 30% PCW recycled paper. As a result, we have saved the following resources: 10 trees, 3 million BTUs of energy, 913 lbs. of greenhouse gases, 4,398 gallons of water, and 267 lbs. of solid waste. For more information, please visit our website, www.wisdompubs.org. This paper is also FSC certified. For more information, please visit www.fscus.org.

To Joanna Macy
in gratitude for her tireless efforts
to preserve and protect the living earth

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I THANK ALL THOSE who throughout the years have written and acted in defense of the earth, such as the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, E.F. Schumacher, Arne Naess, George Sessions, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, and Joanna Macy, and who have appeared in the pages of this book. And I thank as well others who haven't appeared herein but whose influence on my own environmental concerns and philosophy has been profound. Among these some of the most important are the brothers Ronald and Donald Culross Peattie, Wendell Berry, Francis Moore Lappe, Edward Abbey, Terry Tempest Williams, and Masanobu Fukuoka. And I'm thankful as well for the profound aspects of deep ecology that pervade the teachings of the Buddha and that have shaped a path of economic restraint and voluntary simplicity for myself and other Buddhists to follow. Once again I thank my wife, Karen Laslo, for her support and guidance not only in matters of writing but in life as well. Karen has shown kindness and forbearance in her toleration of the long

hours and days I sometimes spend at a computer when an outbreak of writing has overtaken me. I also want to thank Josh Bartok, editor at Wisdom Publications, for his guidance in shaping this book in its finished form. This is the fourth book of mine that Josh has edited, and with each book my gratitude for his wisdom and insight deepens. Josh believes in what I'm doing and, more importantly, he understands what I'm doing. He knows where my strengths as a writer lie and where they do not. And when I've strayed away from the path I was meant to walk, he puts my feet back on home ground once more. Where else would I find an editor with the affection and courage to tell me to take a deep breath and hold on because he's about to suggest cutting three major chapters from a book of mine? After the lightning quits flashing and the thunder recedes and the wind dies down, and after I quit fretting over three months worth of discarded paragraphs and sentences, I'm invariably grateful to see that my writing is much the better for this tough love of his. Josh, I can't thank you enough.

EARTH: AN INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, I have some unavoidably bad news to report regarding the state of the earth. It can't be helped. It comes with the facts. The truth is we're poisoning the planet with our industry, bringing uncountable other species to extinction, and heating up the planet with potentially disastrous consequences. It's enough to break the heart. It's not new. As long as a century and a half ago the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, residing in the coal-blighted suburbs of London, witnessed conditions much like our own:

> Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Hopkins didn't flinch from the harsh truth of what he saw, but he saw as well another truth that might easily be overlooked:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things. . . .

I read these words here in a twenty-first century American town, and I take heart from the persistent tufts of grass and that inch their way up through cracks in the asphalt pavement of the street outside, and from the backyard dogwood tree that season after season ripens red berries for flocks of waxwings to feast upon. Everywhere I look, I see evidence of deep down things. I might never have become a Buddhist had I not first encountered Zen Master Dogen's *Tenzo Kyokan* or in English "Instructions to the Cook." It was the first Buddhist text I ever read, and it engaged me in such a way that I entered the path of Zen and never looked back. It's often said that while the *Tenzo Kyokan* gives literal instructions on how to cook, it's actually an analogue for how to live one's life whatever one happens to be doing. I don't doubt that Dogen's instructions can be profitably read that way, but the Tenzo (as the chief cook of a Zen monastery is called) actually spends his hours and days, sometimes years, devoted to the duties of the monastery kitchen and garden. The gardening and cooking of the monastery cook isn't metaphorical, it's actual. If I respect, honor, and value the rice and vegetables that come to hand and know how best to prepare them for use by the body, then I know what I most need to know of life. My kitchen work stands as it is without adjunct interpretation. The *Tenzo Kyokan* is earthy and rich with the growth, care, and use of living things. The work of kitchen and garden is a quintessential human exchange with land.

The nature of that exchange is of great concern to me, and this

book was written in an effort to better understand the relationship between society and environment, between the people and land. A wealth of detail regarding specific interactions within an ecosystem is already being compiled through the systematic methods of inquiry utilized by the science of ecology. We humans are involved in that interaction, and what I'm after in this book is not so much the data but the condition of mind essential to a genuine human interaction with earth. What has been lost to us that we no longer know how to speak the language earth speaks? What have we forgotten to think or say or do that, could we but remember, would restore our acquaintance once more?

As both a Buddhist and a student of deep ecology, I'm struck by how much the two have in common, each exacting of the follower a genuine paradigm shift in perception. For the Buddhist the shift is an awakening to earth as an extension of one's own body wherein the dichotomy of self and other dissolves. For the deep ecologist the shift is a similar awakening wherein earth is realized as one indivisible body comprised of all beings of any sort. In both instances, this awakening is of profound proportions arguing for a shared communal relationship with earth that is unknown in modern industrial society. Of the eight principles of deep ecology as set down by Arne Naess and George Sessions, the seventh principle states the extent of the change required:

> The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating quality (dwelling in situations of inherent worth) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.

For both the Buddhist and the deep ecologist, quality resides in dwelling itself. Anything that dwells—a stone, leaf, rabbit, the back

yard elm tree, my next-door neighbor—has an inherent worth not derivative of its value to others. The quality of dwelling resides in its own stead and can't be valued on the market. The difference between big and great that Naess and Sessions cite lies in the fact that bigness is a comparative valuation based on quantity, while greatness comes large *or* small and its valuation exists outside comparison. In America, our higher standard of living is largely a matter of bigness, a standard external to the inherent quality of life itself. The insistence that the worth of a thing inheres in the thing itself and not in its value to others is what weds Buddhism to deep ecology and distinguishes deep ecology from the science of ecology in general. It's a perception that recognizes the right of all beings to exist simply because they do. Nothing is left out, nothing excluded.

In the pages that follow, I've written a great deal about farms and food because it is there in the orchards, fields, ranch lands, and kitchens of a nation that we humans enact an intimate and essential interaction with earth. But I also write a great deal about human culture and society itself. I can't reason intelligently about the land without including the humans who inhabit the land, particularly since I'm interested in the impact of the exchange between the two. I suppose that what has driven me more than anything else to write *Deep Down Things* is that in our society, such as it is now, we are often attending to things that are less and less deep down.

Long before I discovered its expression in Buddhism I felt the body of earth as though it were my own, just as you did. Just as we all do when we set aside false distinctions to the contrary. It's a love affair really, and one we need to take up again while the loved one is still responsive to our need. If such language seems excessively anthropomorphic, it might be that we've forgotten how reciprocal our relationship with earth actually is. We've forgotten that love of

earth is a mutual exchange, a call and response, a giving and receiving from both sides.

I have written as much in celebration as in dismay, for it is my faith that there still lives "the dearest freshness deep down things." On the east side of town prime orchard land lies buried under Chico's South Mall, but on the west side of town the fields of a young and thriving organic cooperative are green with new life. My prayer is that to the very last of this planet's brief tenure in the vast cycle of the universe someone will remain to say "earth" and to say it from the heart's core.

ROOTS

We humans live a seesaw sort of life, going up only to come down again, going down in order to push back up.

I NEED TO SAY SOMETHING OBVIOUS ABOUT ROOTS, namely that it's the root that supports the plant. Without roots, there'd be no leaves, blossoms, or fruit. This is the natural way of growth. I think we humans are like that too though we may at times fail to recognize our connection with what's under foot. What's under foot is earth itself, and while we possess the gift of locomotion, as say a tree does not, we are no less tethered to earth than is any plant. I'm a Buddhist, and I've always felt that it was the way of a Buddhist to put down roots like those of a tree and to draw life into oneself in that way. I thought that what Buddhists call wisdom is knowing how to connect dirt with sky. Even the highest mountain rests on the lower plain.

There's a story told about the Buddha that at the time of his enlightenment Mara, the Buddhist mythological embodiment of temptation, appeared with intent to undermine the Buddha's resolve. Mara challenged the Buddha to name by what authority he claimed enlightenment. The Buddha didn't name the authority of

any god or prior teacher or mastery of any scripture; he simply touched a hand to the ground. That gesture has always seemed to me a peculiarly Buddhist expression of something deeply felt by nearly all we humans. We understand somehow that body and mind are born of earth, a maternal heritage that remains forever intact. And we know as well that when this mothering bond is broken, we wither and die like pulled weeds.

There's nothing in Buddhist philosophy like that of the biblical tradition granting humans "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." Nor is there anything in Buddhist teaching that puts the *care* of earth in human hands. What the teaching actually does is put we humans in the care of *earthly* hands. We are the offspring of dirt and air and water, and no prideful boast to the contrary alters that. In my mind's eye I picture the Buddha sitting cross-legged on the ground. I like to think that earth somehow holds fast to him and secures him in the face of Mara's attempt to shake him loose. I like to think that when the Buddha put his hand to the ground that, in that single gesture, he pointed to the birthplace of his and all our lives, and thus could not be dislodged by the cleverest effort to bring him to doubt.

Given any chance at all, most children like to play in the dirt, sensing somehow an unspoken intimacy with earth. They seek low places, insinuating themselves into the dark beneath the limbs of trees, mashing down little clearings in patches of spring weeds as places to sit, in general soiling their clothes, staining their elbows green, and getting their hair gummy with dust and grit. After a night of rainfall, they ruin school shoes and splash mud up the backs of trousers and skirts stomping in mud puddles. Their mothers are forever telling them to clean their fingernails. These children somehow remember dwelling in the ground from which their lives so

recently sprang. They hear the call from underneath and, in their innocent play, enact the journey home.

My wife Karen spent her childhood in a crowded little trailer park in San Fernando Valley, California. It remains to this day as it was when Karen was a child: not much more than a patch of gravel and dirt with trailers spaced row on row. When Karen took me there, I saw with my own eyes that she had grown up in a parking lot, devoid of trees or lawn or much of anything that would soften the stark bareness of the place, the single exception being an unpaved drainage canal that ran parallel to the property, its banks grown over with straggly grass and dotted with a few scrubby trees. It's here that Karen and the trailer-park children played. They were drawn to that patch of weeds and grass as though it were whipped cream on a pound cake. Not one of you reading this is likely to be surprised by that. That's what children do—give him or her a choice and it's a rare child that won't go for even the most pathetic surviving strip of residual nature in preference to acres of other paved options.

So Karen and her friends hung out in the hours after school on the grassy bank of the drainage canal. It was there that they ate their popsicles and ice cream bars from the vendor. And when sitting became tiresome, they rescued old cardboard boxes from the dumpster and slid down the slick grassy bank of the canal in these makeshift sleds. When the city sprayed the grass with herbicide and the children were told to stay off it, they fretted until allowed back again. They couldn't do otherwise. It was simply their nature to do as they did, an urging they responded to without exercising choice. Even the most withered and yellowed remnant of the natural world called them to return and that's what they did. If you bother to notice at all, you'll see that that's what most kids do and what you probably did once yourself.

I know it's what I did. In a patch of willows and cottonwoods on the banks of the Santa Ana River, a quarter mile from the farm where I lived as a small boy, lay the site of my own return to earth. On a warm day, the sun filtered down through the cottonwood canopy overhead onto a little clearing of sand swept clean by the river in seasons of high water. An undergrowth of willows encircled the clearing like the walls of a private room. I never brought anyone here. I was highly excitable as a boy and seldom still, yet there on the warm sand of my riverbank retreat I could sit in quiet reflection for periods stretching out to an hour or more. I seemed to tolerate my own company better there than I could anywhere else at the time. I once discovered the presence of a jack rabbit nearby, sitting perfectly still as I was, its large dark eyes seemingly focused on my own and, for the moment, the eyes of the rabbit were mirrors returning the reflection of my own face.

I was a precocious reader as a child, reading Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, Emerson's essays, Thoreau's *Walden*, and later such books as Le Comte du Nouy's *Human Destiny* with a surprising degree of youthful comprehension. My reading seemed to hold out a promise to me that, if I persisted, I would come to see my place and purpose in the world more clearly. I would turn the pages one after another, and the words I read held for me an appealing and yet frightening promise of heights as yet unvisited and I was left feeling elevated somehow, like a child hoisted unto his father's shoulders to see the parade go by. Both my reading and my riverbank solitude seemed born of a longing I could not have described, the direction of which seemed both up and down. And so I sometimes lay as flat to the earth as I could and let my mind drift upward through the overhead canopy. Holding fast to earth seemed to me then and still seems now the best position from which to view the skies.

Wordsworth wrote, "The child is father to the man." Doesn't

the child residing in the adult father's mind retain some teasing recollection of that earlier relationship when he was mentor to the man he has become? When, of a weekend, this grown man has dug around in the garden a bit or raked up some fall leaves and gone to the shower with dirt caked under his nails, he might just remember one of the lessons he once gave himself. And throughout the following week the smell of wet leaves and turned earth may reach him up the forty-eight flights to his office complex calling him back to earth below.

Our highest aspirations, like the highest tips of the tallest trees, must of necessity remain rooted in the ground below. It's natural to look upward as well as down, to reach for the heavens while depending on the earth. We humans live a seesaw sort of life, going up only to come down again, going down in order to push back up. It's an intricate cooperation between rise and descend, and, while the going up is good and the heights are grand, it's essential to come back to earth again, back to our roots.