



**INSPIRATION
APPRECIATION and NOURISHMENT**

A NON-DUALISTIC approach to community gardening

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September 2016*

THE WAY IN



A bedtime story

Plum Village, March 2015 – Waking up at two o'clock at night. Why is my alarm beeping? Putting on as many clothes as possible I walk down the hill, illuminating the path with my little head torch to look at our little baby's in the polytunnel. It was a cold and clear night in south France, and even though it's March, temperatures were close to freezing so I had to check if the little gas heater was still working in the greenhouse. Arriving, slightly shivering, I was happy to see that all the tomato's, courgette's and lots of lettuces were peacefully resting in their seeding trays. After a quick look at the thermometer and heater, I could safely confirm that no vegetables were in danger of a painful freezing dead. Aware of my inner parent manifesting, I took a breath and smiled. What a joy to jump in my warm bed, knowing that all my babies are sleeping save.

Another night in the life of a Happy Farmer!

***"Growing food for others is an act of compassion,
compassion is the real thing"***

Satish Kumar

The great joy of food growing

After two years of living and gardening in communities I have seen the great joys of growing food for others, as well as creating a space where people can reconnect with the earth and heal.

While living in Mindfulness Practice center Plum Village, home of Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, I came in contact with the seasons again. I came in contact with my body and mind. Learning how to take care of the little vegetable seeds so they could grow into the food we eat and experiencing the interconnectedness between myself, the seasons, the garden and the community changed my view on life completely. Now living and learning at Schumacher College, England, I've had the great opportunity to deepen my understanding of sustainable food growing. Taking care of the land in a way that nourishes the soil for future generations.

Is gardening hard work?

Living in these two communities' I see the same patterns in relation to the garden. A small team is trying to produce a lot of food for a big community. Beautiful produce but often at a high price: the wellbeing of the gardeners. I feel that this way of working is not sustainable on the people side; the community is still a reflection of our current modern society with its strong work ethics, individualistic values and goals, and fragmented departments. How can we find a way to work in a different and take a more holistic approach? I think is possible by looking at the gardens in a different way. The food we eat is the first and most essential

ingredient we need for living. Mother earth provides us so generous with food if we take care of her.

The Heart of the Community

I want to propose to see the garden as the Heart of the community, and like a real heart, it is connected with everything in the body: the blood, the muscles, bones, etc. We can only take good care of our heart if we take good care of our whole body. We can't take only care of our heart and not take care of the rest of our body. It just doesn't work like that, it's interconnected. If we now imagine the garden, where we grow food for the whole community, as the heart it is very easy to see that everybody is involved in some way to keep The Heart of The Community healthy. Gardening, cooking, eating and by doing so feeding oneself and each other.

This will not be an essay with answers but rather a framework for further exploration. A framework of three very simple words, to help us to think of the gardens and community as a whole and to get out of the dualistic mindset where gardener, garden and the rest of the community are separated.

♣ *Can we create a place where everybody can get in touch with the healing qualities of the earth and find Inspiration, Appreciation and Nourishment for oneself, the garden and the community?*

PART1. INSPIRATION



The Drawing in of Breath, Being Stimulated

Often we think of inspiration as some kind of magic energy that only a genius can get. But if we look at the definition in a physiological sense it is very simple. To inspire just means *the drawing of a breath*. So inspiration is not something to wait for or to attain, it's always there. And if we are really able to take a breath and see what we are doing, we are: *Stimulated to do or feel something*, which is the main definition of the word inspiration. So what does this have to do with me, the garden or the Community? For me, inspiration is also the feeling of connection. When we know how we create a feeling of inspiration for ourselves we can really connect with the world around us. And being in contact with the earth and plants in the garden can help us to find the peace of mind to be inspired, it's a cycle.

The second layer we want to look at is the garden. How can we create the conditions for the garden to breathe? We need to nourish the soil, with life and air so the plants can breathe. There are hundreds of ways and techniques to enjoy gardening. But for a real understanding, we should not treat the garden different than our own body. If the garden has the good conditions to breath it will be surely be stimulated to thrive.

In Permaculture they say: *Don't just do something, stand there*. Observing is so key to connection and inspiration. If we don't take the time to wander aimlessly thru our garden we may miss out on all the beautiful bees and bumble bees in the phacelia bed, thousands of animals helping us to pollinate our vegetables. The best fertilizer is the gardener's shadow they say; we should not forget that at the end of the day the plants grow themselves. We don't need much knowledge to know what the plants need. Obvious to see that it is hard for a plant to breath when there is no water or space to grow to its full potential. Would you find inspiration without any water or space to flourish?

By observing we may gain the insight that our body is not so different from our garden. If we don't rest sometimes, without any aim, we may never notice that we are tired and that our body needs time to heal. And by just continuing in this way, not observing, we may lose our inspiration or get sick.

Checking in with myself by taking a breath can create a bit of distance and give the opportunity to see if I am doing the right thing. Will my action create inspiration for myself, the garden and my community?

♣ *Will my community be inspired to take action as well?*

PART 2. APPRECIATION



A Full Understanding of a Situation

Picking beans in the full sun for a couple of hours or prepping beds and digging docks for a couple of days made it not always easy for me to appreciate the garden. I sometimes was frustrated about community life. Why is this person always talking, or why are we sowing carrots in this particular way. But in the end, I often realized I had a wrong perception. The carrots came up beautifully, single sowed one by one, and the person that was talking so much was just going thru a rough time.

I used to think of appreciation just for the things I like to enjoy. But living with the seasons and working in the garden made me realize the true meaning: Appreciation – *A full understanding of a situation*. For example, I developed a deep appreciation for the carrot. Since I know now how much skill there is involved in growing them. I remember a team member of mine suffering a lot when he found out about the reality of vegetable growing. The realization that every time a farmer plows his land an incredible amount of worms, insects and microorganisms are being killed is something we have to be fully aware of to be able to have a full understanding of our vegetables. Even in a small-scale garden with a sustainable organic approach, intervening in natural cycles is a big part of food growing.

So after doing all the work needed to grow this lovely carrot we can really appreciate the carrot for what it really is. I think, after growing and eating you own carrots, your perception of a carrot has changed forever. And off course, I could talk endless about the amazing taste of al those different varieties of tomato's, but the reality is: It's the experience that counts.

Gaining this full understanding of ourselves and the garden we can really start appreciating the whole. And in the same way, should we look at our community. At Schumacher College, a lot of students are looking at ecological problems and systems. I feel the garden could be such an important place of inspiration and understanding for every community member. To really come in contact with the seasons and the food by seeding, weeding, harvesting, eating, composting connects us to all. When we are sharing the work together, we can build a community based on mutual understanding and appreciation.

The Enjoyment of Good Qualities

During my time at Plum Village, I experienced the most beautiful moments while facilitating a Mindfulness Gardening retreat. Working with sometimes 50 people in the garden we got a lot of work done and gave the gardeners the opportunity to share their insights. We could feel the garden becoming the heart of the community, all thru a shared experience, shared goals and shared understanding.

Mahatma Gandhi decided to do at least one hour of spinning a day. By doing so lots of people were inspired to pick up this art again and started making their own clothes, as well as taking this time in the day as a meditation. The people of India also found their way again to express their creativity and produce beautiful local products.

I feel deeply that we should approach food growing in the same way. Having a community we have an incredibly fertile ground for full understanding and appreciation of ourselves and the food we eat. And although we do not live in a country colonized by the English like Gandhi. I think we do live in a time where we are colonized by monoculture. Real understanding, in my opinion, can only exist thru shared experience. Of course not everybody has the aspiration to be a full-time gardener, by sharing the work all together we learn to appreciate our most basic need, the food we eat every day. Seeing our food grow we connect to so much more than vegetables alone. It could be a space for sharing and understanding. The academic may find out about the enormous value of mother earth, and the gardener may be inspired to do research. In the end, we all end up with a more holistic worldview and benefit from the healing energy the earth can give us every day.

♣ *What does it mean to have a full understanding of myself, the garden and community?*

“The best fertilizer is the gardener’s shadow”

Author Unknown

PART 3. NOURISHMENT



The Food Necessary for Growth

In the Buddhist Monastery where I used to live, we used the word nourishment quite often but it took me a while to make sense of it. For me, it is essentially as simple as this: the feeling I get when I hear a beautiful piece of Bach, or when a close friend listens deeply to me. The feeling of waking up early in the morning and seeing the sunrise while I drink my coffee. We all know what makes our hearts sing and it's those moments that nourish us and help us to grow. Grow to be the most beautiful version of ourselves. Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh invites us to see ourselves as a flower. If the conditions are sufficient the flower can go through its natural cycle in a beautiful way. There is no struggle; it is perfectly happy being a little seed, seedling, plant, and flower. And perfectly fine to die and go back to the soil. All it needs is the soil, the air, the water and the sun in a delicate and balanced way. If the elements are out of balance the flower won't reach its full potential. We could say that real nourishment is a delicate balance of all the elements we need.

Nourishing Someone or Something

Having a community garden where we grow or own food, we have the best nourishment we can get, beautiful beetroots, parsnips, potatoes and much more. But to only look at the harvested vegetables we eat as nourishment is too simple. We have to look at all the elements that went into it: The seed, the gardener, the garden, the cooks, the seasons, the community etc. For me eating the vegetables is a great joy, but just one chain in the cycle of nourishment.

♣ *How can we nourish ourselves, the garden and the community? Can we grow all together into the most beautiful flower imaginable?*

The garden as the Heart of the Community can be a place of incredible nourishment on so many levels. A place of contemplation, a place to work, a place to heal, a place to grow, a place to connect with ourselves, the Earth, the people around us and the food we eat.

PART 4. THE WAY OUT IS IN



Gardener, the garden, and community there is no difference between the three. The same is true with Inspiration, Appreciation, and nourishment. They can't live without each other. They are more than the sum of the parts. They can be a framework to look at life. But we can be sure there are no right answers.

I just introduced you to three words. You could see them as a cycle, or a triangle or just a random set of words. Maybe try not to think about them too much, maybe just taste them, like you would do with a carrot. Maybe use them as inspiration, or appreciate them for their beauty or just let them sink in. Maybe you feel nourished by them and you need do something. Maybe you think different now about community, tomatoes or the whole garden. Whatever you feel or think, it is good.

*All I want is to live in a world where we Inspire each other,
appreciate each other for what we are
and nourish each other with all the love the Earth has to give.*

Lots of Love,
Michiel

To make a garden

We tried to make a Garden
aware of the seasons
we plowed the beds
sowed the seeds
and prayed for rain

We saw the field changing
from grass to soil, to seed to greens
we saw the birds, bees and endless worms

When drought and plagues hit the fields
we had to look within
don't let the drought dehydrate you
Or the flies eat you

I want to see my gardens
I want to make peace with all
Love the chaos
Embrace the unknown

If we can only take a little of
the abundance our mother gave to us
We will have more than enough to fill
our bodies
and empty or minds

Michiel de Koning

GRATITUDE



I want to dedicate this essay to Stuart Watson and Daniel Dermitzel, founders of Plum Village Happy Farm. You have been amazing teachers and friends, helping me to find the confidence to continue my path.

CONTACT

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**“There is no way to Harvest,
Harvest is the way”**

Thich Nhat Hanh