

COPENHAGEN 2009

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On Tuesday 8 December my husband David and I left Charlbury on the train, squeezing our rucksacks and cases into racks and the floor around our feet. I fell into conversation with my neighbour, a bearded man in his 30s who turned out to be a Kurdish refugee. He was studying art at the University of Worcester, but had been a languages and psychology teacher in Kurdistan. He had been shot three times, in the hand, arm and head. He showed me some of his paintings on the little screen on his camera – beautiful, bold colours, some showing shadowy human figures or birds and mountains. We talked about art, psychology, religion, about living in contact with nature, about homelessness; there was a sympathy, a connection – a shared pleasure in communicating meaningfully, as we listened to each other and found the common ground amid such apparently very different life experiences. It felt like a good start to this adventure.

The glossy shopping mall of St Pancras International astonished me. In the midst of all its fantastical luxury, though, there was a touch of earthy vitality: a girls' school choir singing gospel songs, evidently enjoying themselves, their voices strong and assured.

Eurostar took us to Brussels rail station, busy with early evening commuters. Again, the sense of material abundance – the shops, people's clothes, the lights. By the time we reached Cologne, the mood and the lighting were more sombre. We had a couple of hours to wait until our sleeper train arrived, and found our way to a waiting room – warm and clean, with an exemplary array of refuse bins divided into types of rubbish. We shared the room with a couple of solitary men and a woman – she was slumped, apparently half-asleep. I noticed that she had no bag, and her clothes were rather thin for a winter's evening and a bit grubby, and her hair was uncombed. After some time she got up and wandered off down the platform. I sensed hopelessness. She stayed in my mind, and I reflected on how little it can take to move from 'within society' to its margins, and how desperately we try to hide our vulnerability and our needs, to pass as 'okay', not to be seen as 'losers' or 'inadequate'. But the gloss is very fragile and needs so much to maintain it.

On the platform waiting for the sleeper, I began to feel a sense of shared destination as we saw other travellers we recognised from the Eurostar terminal. I was assuming by this time that everyone travelling to Copenhagen during these days was going there for the summit – finding accommodation had been difficult, so surely no-one would be visiting just as a tourist. Or so I supposed.

The central railway station in Copenhagen was bustling when we arrived the next morning, sleepless and still swaying from the train's movements. We got helpful advice about travelling around by bus, and bought two 10-journey tickets. These got us onto our first yellow Copenhagen bus, to take us out to the suburb of Amager where we had booked a room in a guesthouse. It was a comfortable ride – the seats were good, the bus clean and warm, and there was space for children's buggies. We used the bus service throughout our stay, and it was excellent – frequent services, always on time, and well-used by people of all ages. This system, plus the high proportion of bicycle travellers (who have dedicated cycle paths alongside all main

roads), reduces the number of cars on the roads; and all road users follow the instructions at traffic lights, so that there is a sense of safety and of mutual ownership of the public thoroughfares. The contrast with Oxford and London was very marked.

On our first day, we returned to the centre after settling into our guesthouse – a gem, with a comfortable bed and use of a little kitchen, and a welcoming, helpful owner – and began to orientate ourselves. We found the venue of the 'Klimaforum' – a parallel conference of NGOs, billed as 'The Peoples' Climate Summit' – and picked up a printed programme from the piles of literature stacked near the entrance. The foyer area was fairly busy, with a couple of places selling reasonably priced (for Denmark) food and drink: organic teas and coffee and cakes, or a small range of snacks and hot dishes (though very little vegetarian food, to our surprise). A large screen was advertising the afternoon's lectures and workshops, and the walls were covered with various displays on the theme of climate change by different groups, including photographs and artworks.

The various halls and rooms in the centre had been given the names of colours (Green Hall, Red Room, Yellow Room etc) and there were paper signposts stuck on walls. It had a creative, extemporised feel and the atmosphere was one of energy and interest, a clear sense of purpose, good will and generosity. It seemed to be well run (in contrast to the main UN conference, as George Monbiot pointed out in an article which we read after our return to the UK), almost entirely by volunteers; and we were struck by how, even when it got much busier at the weekend, there was no pushing and shoving, or sense of impatience. People here were walking their talk.

We left the Klimaforum to look for a vegetarian meal – there was a 'people's kitchen' somewhere in the vicinity, but we couldn't find it on this occasion, so headed to Parliament Square, where there was another 'event' called 'Hopenhagen'. This turned out to be a kind of tourist exhibition, presenting aspects of Danish business enterprise with a 'green' flavour. We ate some green and rather pricey soup, got the name of a vegetarian restaurant, then headed on to explore the city centre. At night it is dominated by the Tivoli Gardens, a huge area of brightly lit amusements with switchback rides and the like. A strange contrast to the focus of the Klimaforum – and a reminder that not everyone here was concerned about global warming. It made a useful orientation point, though.

That evening we wandered into two more special exhibitions linked to the conference. One featured a huge inflated orange globe representing one ton of CO₂ and a giant wooden rubber plant, plus a few tents – an event organised by scouts, a poster told us, and there were some young people around with knotted scarves, keeping warm by an open fire. On the other side of the road, in a square close to the Christiansborg Palace, we came across about ten gigantic severed tree trunks, each on an individual spotlight white podium, their tangled root systems and muscular buttresses gleaming in the rain – a display of rainforest trees by the UK artist Angela Palmer, shipped from Ghana. An information board gave the story of this work, the challenges it had presented. No-one else was around, and the trees' extraordinary presence, their physical testimony, was very powerful.

By now we had begun to appreciate that this was a very special time to be in Copenhagen. We had gone intending to meet up with a group of other Buddhists from

the UK, including my teacher Rob Burbea, to take part in the main march on Saturday 12 December; on other days we anticipated spending some time at the Klimaforum but also exploring the city as tourists, looking at museums and galleries. But reading through the Klimaforum programme, our focus shifted; here was an opportunity to find out more about the many strands of investigation and debate – scientific, economic, cultural, spiritual. At any one time, there might be 7 or 8 talks, panel discussions or workshops going on – and there was just not enough time to pack it all in.

Over the next few days, we went to a number of Klimaforum events, starting with 'Limits to Growth', whose panel included Tim Jackson of the Sustainable Development Commission (and author of *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a finite planet*) and Mathis Wagemagel, of the Global Footprint Network, who stressed the need to ask the right questions, quoting Einstein who said that, were he put in a position where he had just one hour to make a decision on which his life would depend, he would spend the first 55 minutes working out what question to ask – as a result of which the right answer would be clear. His presentation showed how, by asking themselves what their 'ecological footprint' is, countries can see whether they are 'ecological debtors' or 'ecological creditors' – the latter being those whose biocapacity (the biologically productive land and sea it has available for its population) exceeds the resource and waste absorption needs of its population.

These and many other speakers – Vandana Shiva, for example – were clearly very experienced communicators, people whose voices were strong and confident, powered by a sense of the urgency, the possibility, the necessity of a radical rethinking of our relationship with our fellow beings and our home planet. Who, I wondered, could hear the arguments and evidence they were presenting without being convinced and energised to act? Moreover, many of the speakers were in organisations that had access to governments and political processes – or, in the case of a panel of Green Party leaders from Europe, Australia and Canada (most of them women), were elected members of legislatures. With such well-informed, energetic and coherent people consistently and persistently arguing for change – system change, not climate change, as the Klimaforum slogan ran – why was there such apparent deafness in the Bella Centre (the UN conference venue), and among those whose role, as members of governments, is to promote and safeguard their citizens' wellbeing? Tim Jackson hinted at the deep-rooted resistance to change when he referred in passing to meetings with UK Treasury officials whose visceral reactions to the notion of abandoning growth as the goal of economic policy had left him 'personally bruised'.

So, I began to appreciate even more strongly that clearly reasoned arguments, based on overwhelming and corroborated evidence, are not enough to change people's ways of looking at the world and their place in it. Nor is it a matter of a lack of practical solutions. As an article in a special Copenhagen issue of a US-Dutch magazine, *Ode* (subtitled 'for intelligent optimists'), pointed out, 'We are not in a crisis because we have no solutions. We are in a crisis because we are not implementing solutions that are already there.' It was to the credit of the majority of Klimaforum speakers whom we heard that they did not spend time railing against the system or its defenders – though there were moments of evident frustration and condemnation of particular policies and political leaders – but generally focused on what needed to happen and

the many ways in which the people of the world could bring about changes without waiting for our governments to tell us what to do.

This is not to suggest that there was unanimous agreement with the analyses and solutions on offer. In one session, a young woman expressed doubt that global warming was a result of human activity, arguing that it was just part of the natural cycle of changes in Earth's climate pattern which we should respect and have the humility to accept, rather than seek to change. There was no attempt to cut her short, or any negative reaction, and this felt right to me. This was during a seminar on geoengineering, which we dropped into just as the two speakers were inviting questions and comments from the audience. Other contributions revealed the complexities of the scientific arguments, as well as concerns about policies being formed by groups of 'specialists' whose focus might be too narrow. It also pointed to a suspicion of any 'solution' that seemed to offer the equivalent of a 'Get out of jail card', especially those that propose a large-scale intervention. On the one hand, there is a global problem – so it may be tempting to look for a similarly big 'solution'. But, as we now know, the unintended consequences of an apparently beneficial action may be disastrous – just as replacing the hard labour of slaves and bondsmen with the profligate use of fossil fuel has proved. Smaller scale and more local manipulations of our environment may be less risky than a large-scale single intervention. For example, enabling small farmers to care for the soil, and enhance its carbon sequestration capacity, may be safer than experimenting with seeding the atmosphere to make rain in one country, with the possible reduction in rainfall in other parts of that region.

At the heart of this debate and several others was a sense of distrust of the 'top down' approach to responses to climate change, and a suspicion that this approach is too easily prey to economically powerful vested interests. Another parallel conference, taking place mainly in Christiania (a well-established alternative community in the centre of Copenhagen) was called 'Climate Bottom', which we took to refer to a 'bottom up' approach – though the entertainingly fractured English of their programme might have misled us. Overlapping in some ways with the Klimaforum conference, it was subtitled 'Windows of Hope' and it focused on the ways in which people are already engaged in living in sustainable communities, in eco-villages for example (of which there are several in Denmark). Speakers from around the world, including indigenous peoples, talked on topics such as conflict resolution, education, building techniques and sustainable energy. One day – the Saturday of the march to the Bella Center – was devoted to a mix of ceremonies and rituals, meditation sessions and music; and each day included expressions and celebrations of the creative and spiritual dimensions of human life.

We didn't find our way to Christiania until the end of our stay. Had it not coincided with the two marches, I would have liked to have gone to its Saturday morning gathering of spiritual leaders and representatives, especially as they included the American monk Bhikkhu Bodhi, one of the growing number of Buddhists for whom the path to the ending of suffering makes no split between 'inner' and 'outer' transformation. The Klimaforum programme, perhaps because of its NGO character, gave less attention to the spiritual dimensions of the crisis, but there were a couple of sessions during our time there. One, titled 'The Inner Dimensions of Climate Change', opened with a short initial guided body awareness meditation by Sister Jayanti (a Brahma Kumari) who began by inviting us to have both feet on the ground – I noticed

that several of the speakers on the platform didn't do this, which disappointed me (suggesting a sense of separation on their part from 'the audience'), though I noticed that I could also interpret this in other ways, such as nervousness about being 'up there' on the platform. The six speakers then offered their explanations of why humans had created this global crisis and what was now needed. The first to speak, a Thai Buddhist monk, identified greed – craving – as the root cause, and this was echoed by most of the other speakers. So too was the dis-ease of disconnection – for many of the speakers, this was understood as disconnection from a supreme being (and in her summing up, the session's convenor was swayed, I felt, by her own beliefs, since she claimed that this was the view of all the speakers – notwithstanding there was at least one Buddhist on the platform). Several spoke of the role of prayer and meditative practice, of making space to listen. The one divergent voice was that of a Senegalese Sufi teacher, who suggested that whatever was happening must be God's will, and we should show greater humility, accepting whatever divine retribution was unfolding. Again, I felt that the convenor's wish to promote unity meant that this contributor's rather different perception was glossed over.

The most unexpectedly encouraging part of this session for me was the testimony of Richard Cizik, an American evangelical Christian. For about 20 years, he had been the main lobbyist in Washington for the US evangelical movement (whose members constitute a third of the US population) and shared their suspicion of scientists – characterising and vilifying them as opponents of creationism. In 2002, he had accepted the invitation of a friend to attend a conference on climate change in Oxford – more out of friendship, he implied, than any openness to learning anything from these untrustworthy evolutionists. But what he experienced was, he said, no less than a 'second conversion'. On his return to the US, he began to speak about the evidence, and to urge his fellow evangelicals to open their minds to it. His erstwhile colleagues attempted to dissuade him, but he refused to be silent. Although he did not say so, it must have led to a loss of status, of identity, of community, probably a financial loss too. I felt heartened to hear his story, and also by his discovery that, mainly among younger evangelicals, there were people willing to listen to the scientific evidence and to communicate the implications to their congregations; and the US evangelical movement now has what he termed an 'old guard' and a 'new guard', split roughly along age lines.

It's been suggested that faith communities and their 'leaders' may be the most effective way to reach many people who currently do not engage with climate change. The day after the march, one of our Copenhagen Buddhist sangha attended an ecumenical service in Copenhagen's cathedral where she heard the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. Reading his address on our return to the UK (on the Archbishop's website), I was struck by two things. One was his recognition of the danger of letting fear dominate our emotional response to the situation and his call for love to be what moves us to respond:

'The truth is that what is most likely to get us to take the right decisions for our global future is love. The temptation is to underline fear so as to persuade one another of the urgency of the situation: things are so bad, so threatening, that we have to do something....But this is just to drive out one sickness by another. That kind of fear can simply paralyse us...[and] tempt us into just blaming one another or waiting for

someone else to make the first move because we don't trust them. We need more than that for lifegiving change to happen.'

The other aspect that struck me was less explicit. How we perceive ourselves and our relationships with the world are expressed in myths that have great power. In Christianity, the story of Genesis has fed a perception of the human being as the pinnacle of creation, given dominion over the rest of existence. This can reinforce and justify an exploitative relationship with the world, particularly if there is also a view that God is in charge and will act as a kind of guarantor against whatever ecological debts are being incurred. Rowan Williams offered a different way of perceiving the place of humanity in creation: as beings who are 'called to be, and are enabled to be, the place where God's love for the world comes through...to show in our lives some echo of the delight God finds in creation'. In this relationship, humans are guardians who are 'faced with the consequences of generations of failure to love the earth as we should; and we are also faced with the choices that might make those consequences less destructive than they would otherwise be'.

The Klimaforum slogan, 'System change not climate change', suggested the need for radical – root – transformation. The teachings of many spiritual traditions are concerned with radical transformation of our inner systems – our ways of perceiving, and the beliefs that underlie and are reinforced by our perceptions. Joanna Macy has written about the three interrelated aspects of transformative action: 'holding actions', which seek to prevent further harm (like restraining one child from hitting another); 'restructuring', which are ways of developing alternatives to institutions and systems that perpetuate injustice and unsustainable consumption (for example, the current dominant economic system); and perceptual change. The second of these aspects, restructuring, constitutes system change in the Klimaforum sense; but all three interact and support each other. Without inner change, we are likely to repeat the same mistakes. Without holding actions, the ongoing damage caused by the existing systems threatens to sabotage attempts to build new ones.

The Buddha taught that we need to examine our frameworks of meaning, to see which perceptions bring about suffering and which bring about liberation from suffering. The dharma offers a way beyond 'pain, sorrow, lamentation, grief and despair'. In this context, I've been reflecting on my perceptions during the trip and since.

For most of the time in Copenhagen, I was aware of a joyful sense of connection – with other people from all over the planet who had made the journey there, and through them with their communities; and also with the integrity of this act of being there. When pondering on whether to go, I had realised that my misgivings were mainly of two kinds: doubt about whether my presence, or indeed anybody's outside the UN conference, would 'make a difference', and an associated sense of hopelessness; and worry about how uncomfortable the whole trip might be. I also wondered whether the money would be 'better spent' – was this a kind of indulgence? I found myself oscillating painfully between these misgivings and a sense of the importance of the event and a wish to participate. Recognising this vacillation as a manifestation of the hindrance of doubt was step one; what then dissolved the block was to see that the misgivings were motivated by psychological habits that I didn't wish to feed. So, regardless of whether my presence made any difference, or how uncomfortable I might be, just resisting these habits was an overwhelming reason to

go. And these habits – the ‘what difference does it make what I do?’ turning away from engaging with life’s challenges, and a fear of discomfort – are two of the strongest inhibitors of personal and social change, in the context of climate change and any form of injustice.

So I had this sense of alignment with a less self-concerned, more spacious and curious way of being. At the same time, I also felt at times that I was somehow playing the part of ‘the activist’, and watching how my self-sense was trying on this new ‘identity’. I noticed how, the first time we encountered a police barricade, I saw their uniforms, their role, not the people – I had adopted a ‘them and us’ perception, and I either avoided eye contact with the police or looked unsmilingly through them. This felt inauthentic and diminishing. By contrast, on a subsequent occasion, when we were prevented from going our way by a police cordon around a fairly small demonstration which we had wandered into, we spoke to one of the policemen to ask if we could pass. Aware that I had an opportunity to connect, not to polarise, I spoke as one human to another, noticing his eye movements, his slightly wary but polite response (a refusal), his fluent English. A bit later, as the demo moved off in the opposite direction, we asked again, and were allowed through. And I reflected that this brief encounter might also have dissolved some of the perceptions he might have had about activists. Then again, he might also have been sympathetic to some or all of the message of the demonstrators, and just doing what, during this exceptional period, his employers were requiring him to do.

While we were in Copenhagen I rejoiced in the intelligence, energy, diversity and commonality of humans – our capacity for courage and creativity in the face of the impending and actual destruction of so much of what is dear to us. Our last Klimaforum session was the chance to hear the testimonies of a number of indigenous people – people who are typically living in a profoundly intimate relationship with the natural environment, and who are also typically a low-status minority in their countries. In a packed room, we listened to the experiences of two women from Peru, one of them a healer in her 60s or 70s, dressed in traditional clothes; three young Masai from Kenya; a 14-year-old Panamanian girl; a young woman from the Inuit of North Canada; and a man from the Andes. Speaking mainly through interpreters, they told us about the impacts they were already experiencing – droughts, soil erosion, environmental pollution, loss of cultural identity (often intimately linked to their environment), discrimination in the face of commercial interests. Extraordinarily, the first speaker – a Peruvian woman – began by observing how unhappy we all looked, and urged us to smile: ‘Mother Earth wants us to be happy’, she said. And she looked so at ease in her own skin. The group had spent a week ‘on retreat’ together before the conference had begun, getting to know each other and hear each other’s stories; and their evident tenderness and respect for each other was very moving and delightful. Someone asked how it had been for them to hear about each other’s experiences, and one of the Masai said that it had helped because they now realised that their community was not alone in their struggle to survive and adapt to loss and uncertainty.

When I witness someone’s suffering, it may distress me – but it can also connect me. I feel the vibrations in my own heart, and there is a deep harmony in this which I know to be true. Equally, I can connect through joy, generosity and shared delight, and there were many instances of that during our trip. There was the ‘People’s Kitchen’, for

example, which we eventually tracked down – a large tent, with trestle tables and benches, and volunteers serving simple vegetarian food for a suggested donation of about £4. On our first visit, we sat beside some lively young French people who made space for us and exchanged friendly comments. Under an awning nearby, with the banner 'Free illegal seeds!', young Swedish vegetable growers were offering delicious home-made/home-grown soup from a vast cauldron, again on a donation basis, as well as giving away free vegetable seeds (illegally, apparently) from the plants they were growing in their community allotments and 'guerrilla gardening' plots.

There was also a lot of creative energy and good humour on the two marches we joined on the Saturday. The first, organised by Friends of the Earth International, was 'The Flood' – theme blue (blue plastic ponchos were on offer), like 'The Wave' march in London in early December. Among the various delights was a man who set off with an inflatable dinghy on his head and then had it hoisted above people's heads, hauled himself up into it, and was passed back and forth along the march – as much an expression of trust, co-operation and a willingness to take risks as a reminder of the threat of rising sea levels.

We left this march early to go to the rail station to meet up with our Buddhist sangha, who'd arrived a bit earlier that morning. Someone suggested we begin by meditating, so we arranged ourselves in front of the huge Christmas tree in the centre of the concourse, each of us lighting a candle – which brought us to the attention of a polite but firm station employee who asked us to extinguish them. We complied, and then sat in a semicircle facing outwards and meditated for about 20 minutes. I was aware, through closed eyelids, of several camera flashes. It was a powerful and beautiful experience – the first time I have practised in such a context – and it reminded me that the day, whatever it brought, was an opportunity to practise mindfulness, kindness and equanimity, to stay in touch with the connection between 'inner' and 'outer'.

Looking back on the main march on Saturday, what now stands out? As with other marches I've attended in the last few years, there was the tolerance and patience of the crowd, as we stood around getting very cold until the march began and we slowly funnelled out of the parliament square to form a procession. There were communities of people sharing particular interests, identifiable by their clothes and banners – we carried one with an image of the planet at the centre of a blue and green lotus, bordered by the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, 'What we do to our world we do to ourselves' – as well as individuals and small groups on foot, on bikes or in wheelchairs. There was creativity and satire. One group, dressed in cream 'cocktail party clothes' (notwithstanding the temperature), swanned along toasting each other with 'All the more for us!' as they raised glasses of 'champagne'. Three people waddled along in balloon-like inflated 'survival suits' – for when the external environment becomes too hostile to inhabit. One of the strongest statements was a train of six low trolleys each carrying a human-size statue – the first three with white plaster replicas of the Statue of Liberty, their torches giving out black smoke and the open page of the constitution reading 'The right to pollute', and the last three trolleys with naked, emaciated black people, their stick-thin joints manacled by flashing red lights.

As the march wound slowly through the southern suburbs towards the conference centre and the daylight faded, we got out the candles again. Walking with lit candles

felt different – the procession became a sacred act, an act of service and reverence, a sense of protecting the flame of the human potential to know and manifest wisdom and compassion. Carrying a candle and a bag and one of the banner’s poles was uncomfortable, I was feeling hungry and cold, and for much of this part of the march I was also feeling anxious about David who had left our group in search of a loo an hour or so before and not rejoined us. So there was physical discomfort, anxiety about loss and separation from the loved – and keeping going anyway, unsure of when and where it would end. And I was grateful for this, knowing it to be a low-level but direct experience of what human life might be like for increasing numbers of us if uncontrolled global warming and resource exhaustion continue.

Walking through near-deserted residential streets we arrived at a crossroads below a raised railway line where we halted, unsure of whether and where to continue, and the march petered out. No surrounding of the Bella Centre – we couldn’t even see it, as the police were keeping us well away. The conference delegates might have been entirely unaware of our presence – 100,000 of us, as we later found out. On the Danish television news later that evening we saw that a handful of marchers had been allowed in to hand something over to a few of the UN conference organisers. And this inconclusive end to the march was also somehow as it should be – no triumphant rally, no sense of arriving at the desired destination.

We came home several days before the UN conference ended, and joined many others in continuing to lobby by email for a meaningful agreement. The outcome fell far short of what is needed; so how did I feel, several people asked me – was I very disappointed, even despairing, did I feel the trip had been a waste of time and money? I didn’t and I don’t, and that’s partly because just deciding to go, rather than following habitual self-centred limitations, was in itself a positive outcome. So too was the awareness of connection, the joy of that, which I had experienced. And there was something else, too – something that I found had been articulated a few years ago in another context, by Václav Havel, the Czech dissident who eventually became president of his country after its independence. Havel spoke about a deep kind of hope that is

‘a state of mind, not a state of the world...It is a dimension of the soul, and it’s not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation...Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is...an ability to work for something because it is good...regardless of how it turns out.’*

And what our trip to Copenhagen leaves me feeling, most of all, is a sense of gratitude – to all the people who, directly and indirectly, gave me this opportunity to share in working for the good.

* quoted in Donald Rothberg, *The Engaged Spiritual Life*, 2006, p204.