

'Be like [water](#) making its way through cracks. Do not be assertive, but adjust to the object, and you shall find a way around or through it. If nothing within you stays rigid, outward things will disclose themselves.' *BRUCE LEE*¹

As a child, I spend quite some time on the [water](#). My parents owned a small sailing boat and took me, my brother and my sister on weekend trips and three-week vacations during the summers of our youth. I enjoyed the swaying of the boat while trying to sleep. I liked the sound of the [water](#) splashing against the walls of this temporary house. Sometimes the big [waves](#) of the stormy weather scared me. But mostly, being this close to the [water](#) made me feel safe. Even now, when I hear the sound of sloshing it soothes me.

My father comes from a family in which being at [sea](#)/being at [water](#) was custom. Both my grandfather and great-grandfather had been fishermen and my father learned to sail at a young age. My great-grandfather sailed a [sea](#) that doesn't exist anymore, the [Zuiderzee](#). In their battle with [water](#), the Dutch closed this [salt water inlet](#) in 1932 from the [North Sea](#), by building a 32 km long dam. A [fresh water lake](#) came into being, and big parts of it were used for the reclamation of land by using polders. The main purposes were to improve [flood](#) protection and create additional land for agriculture.

In the Netherlands we have a long history of [floods](#) and [flood](#) risk management. When in 1953, more than 1800 people died due to flooding, and about 100.000 lost their house, the government commenced the building of the Delta Works. This enormous hydraulic engineering project in the south-west of the country, includes dams, sluices, locks, dikes and storm surge barriers, which work as a defensive system to keep the [water](#) out when necessary.

All over the country systems like these, but smaller, are built to guard land from [flooding](#). Fact still is, that about 29% of the Netherlands is situated under [sea](#) level and 55% lies at risk of being [flooded](#). In 1995, over 250.000 people were evacuated from their houses. In case of dike bursts, several villages would have been devoured by the [water](#), which in some areas, would have reached a height of 5 meters above street level. Now, with the [sea](#) level rising much faster than expected, and more extreme weather coming our way, the average Dutchman doesn't seem too much worried. We don't think much about it, and we are not afraid. Even the fact that the Delta Works can only handle a [sea](#) level rise of approximately 40 cm, does not set us into action or even question. Most of us trust the government in keeping us safe.

Last week, while waiting for the ferry to arrive, I noticed the following:

While standing on a floating platform, your knees slightly bend, muscles all relaxed, the [water](#) sets you in motion. It moves you. Small [waves](#) make their way into the platform. Into your feet, into your calves, into your knees, into your hips, all the way up to the head. The [water](#) becomes you and you become the [water](#). Suddenly, you will find yourself as a [river](#) flowing across Nizhny Novgorod. As a small [stream](#) up in the mountains of Torres del Paine. You're a [rainstorm](#) raging over West-Jakarta as well as the [water](#) in a cup of a nine-year old boy living in the south of Benin. You're the [water](#) which is contained in the blood of António de Oliveira Salazar.

"If you put [water](#) into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put [water](#) into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, [water](#) can flow or it can crash. Be [water](#), my friend." *BRUCE LEE*²

We look at the [sea](#) as something we should be afraid of. Its' infinity and grandeur makes us merely tiny beings. The land, we can conquer. We understand it. We can draw lines on it. Divide it. Make borders. We can cultivate the land. The [sea](#) is a stranger who always be our superior. And that's why we fight it. In the Netherlands we have this proverb 'de beste stuurlui staan aan wal', literally translated 'the best helmsmen stand on shore'. It means something like 'the watchers always know better than the doers'. But apart from its actual meaning, it also makes me think about how we, as worshippers of the land, always have tried to tame the [sea](#) with the hardness and strictness of the land. We fight it with soil. We fight it with metal. We want to domesticate the water by forcing it into intelligible, straightforward systems.

Deltares, a Dutch independent institute for applied research in the field of [water](#) and subsurface, collected and categorised all kinds of proposed ideas and plans that have been made to prepare the Netherlands for the rising of the [sea](#) level, and placed them into four different strategies of adaptation.³

- 1.To protect (closed). In this strategy, the Netherlands is permanently closed from the [sea](#). [Rivers](#) will be pumped off into the [sea](#).
- 2.To protect (open). This actually means we will go on with our current strategy. All of the Netherlands will be situated in between dikes, and [rivers](#) will stay connected to the [sea](#).
- 3.To go seaward. We will keep the Netherlands safe by broadening or coastal areas and by creating big islands all along the seaside.
- 4.To move along. In this strategy, we will abandon the weaker spots of our land, and only protect places with economic high value. We find ways to connect these areas. Also, we adjust our usage of land in such a way that we can still use it in spite of [sea](#) level rising. For example, by creating floating houses/greenhouses and by focusing our agriculture on the growing of salt tolerant crops.

Learning to sail, means learning to work with the elements. At a young age, me and my siblings were taught to take the wind into account. For example, when you need to go to the exact direction where the wind is coming from, you cannot sail straight towards that place. Your sail simply cannot catch the wind, or, when you pull it in a way that it can, it will blow you backwards. You can only get to your desired location by zigzagging towards it.

To protect ourselves against [flooding](#), we should be like [water](#). Flexible, supple, adaptable. [Water](#) does not confronts. [Water](#) finds its way around. In Japanese Buddhism the element of [water](#) – 水 [Sui](#) – flows, and represents the formless things of the world, like [rivers](#) and [lakes](#), but also [body fluids](#) like [blood](#). Also [plants](#) are categorised under this element, for they adapt to their environment. Growing with the seasons and towards the sun. While shaping the future, [we](#) should dare to leave the rigid way of the land. [We](#) have to start thinking non-linear and non-hierarchical. For [water](#) is like a rhizome. It has no beginning and it has no end. /Additionally, rhizomatic thinking suits [our brain structure](#) very well/

The deep ecology movement states that all [human](#) and nonhuman life on Earth have value in themselves.⁴ It means that that [we](#) cannot value the other-than-human solely for its usefulness to [human beings](#). Everything existing on this planet has an inherent value. Therefore [we](#) must not merely take [ourselves](#) into account when it comes to decision-making. [We](#) are obliged to think for or even think with the [sea](#). [We](#) are obliged to think with [rivers](#), [glaciers](#), [lakes](#) and the ones dwelling

in and with them.

To make acquaintance to the **water**, take a glass. Turn on the tap. Fill the glass. Close the tap. Take the glass to somewhere where **you** feel comfortable. Place the glass in front of **you**. Look at how the **water** gets motionless. Observe still **water**. Where exactly in the glass is the **water** situated. Can **you** see how the **water** touches the surface of the glass? Now move the glass for a moment, and again, look at how the **water** gets motionless. Which path does it take to get there? Now stick one of **your fingers** into the **water** and keep it still for a bit. Did **you** notice how the **water** made way for **your limb**? Whirl **your finger** around. The **water** keeps relocating to give space. Now take **your finger** out again. Where did the **water** go? Which part decided to stay in the glass en which part settled on **your finger**? Is it ok for a **water particle** to hesitate?

‘Eens zullen **we** ons land met een zucht van verlichting aan de **golven** prijsgeven’

‘One day **we** shall, with a sigh of relief, give up our country to the **waves**’

JOHAN VAN VEEN, FATHER OF THE DELTA WORKS

- 1 Bruce Lee during an interview in the 9 December 1971 edition of 'The Pierre Berton Show'.
- 2 Bruce Lee during an interview in the 9 December 1971 edition of 'The Pierre Berton Show'.
- 3 <https://publicwiki.deltares.nl/display/KWI/Adaptatie+aan+zeespiegelstijging>
- 4 Naess, A & Sessions, G (1984) 'The Deep Ecology Platform', Foundation for Deep Ecology, retrieved online from <http://www.deepecology.org/platform.htm>

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