

## **Buddhism and Ecology**

*by Akuppa*

Audio available at: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM731>

*Talk given at the Western Buddhist Order International Convention 2005*

### **'Silent Spring' – Rachel Carson and the modern ecological movement**

One morning, back in the late 1950's, a woman in Massachusetts looked out of her window into a garden and saw a dead bird. After this dead bird she saw another dead bird, and then another dead bird, and another dead bird, and she began to wonder whether this had anything to do with the fact that, the day before, a state-hired aeroplane had been over the local woodland, spraying chemicals to control mosquitoes. She was concerned about this, and wrote to a friend of hers who was a biologist. Her name was Rachel Carson.

Rachel Carson spent a few years researching the link – the effects of DDT, the chemical concerned. She was quite shocked at how extensive these effects were. The outcome was the publication, in 1962, of a book called 'Silent Spring' which is commonly regarded as the beginning of the modern ecological movement.

So the modern ecological movement isn't all that old – it's 43, which I like to think is quite young.

So, what made that book so significant? Well, three things. Firstly, for the first time here was a scientific perspective – Rachel Carson was a scientist – and it cut against the prevailing idea of science as the technologically engineered control of Nature – science in its most mechanical, reductive, materialistic form, insensitive to the complexity of interconnections in the real world.

So it was perhaps the beginning of the end of the road for positivist science, for that kind of mechanical science. Actually, after Jnanavaca's talk... perhaps the beginning of the end had been some years previously. But it was certainly a turning point in the end of that kind of science.

Rachel Carson concluded, in the last words of 'Silent Spring', that *'it is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against insects it has also turned them against the Earth.'*

She was the first one to say something of that kind.

So the second reason why the book was so significant was that it was also, as well as the beginning of the end of one road, the beginning of another road – of what Rachel Carson actually called 'the other road.' And this was 'ecology the science' – ecology as a

transformative idea and movement; an outlook that would actually change the relationship between humans and their environment. Along this other road, science would not be a blunt and brutal tool but something of an exploration – something that could invoke an element of humility – or, as one writer has put it, 'something that can move us to silent wonder and glad affirmation.'

The third reason why the book was significant was just, I think, its prescience, because what was true of the technology of DDT has turned out to be true of the technology of other chemicals: of the internal combustion engine; of the jet engine; aerosols; nuclear technology; pesticides; chemical fertilisers; industrialised fishing; urbanisation, etc etc etc. Again and again, in the last 43 years, we've been bumping up against the limits to technological development and growth.

### **Ecology as the big idea of our times**

So the result, now, almost 43 years on, is that if we ask ourselves: 'What is the prevailing image of our time? What is the prevailing idea, the big idea of our thinking?' I would contend that there could only be one answer, and that is ecology. The awakening to ecology is the overarching reality that we live in, of the time that we live in. If it's easy to miss that, it's only because it's so massive.

So we have this image of ecology, this metaphor of ecology, of interconnectedness. And it's interesting to note that this truth hasn't dawned from the East. It hasn't come, in the main, through Buddhism; nor has it been the invention of philosophy. It is a lesson that is being taught to us loudly, clearly and urgently by nature herself... by reality itself. That grand old anarchist Kropotkin once remarked: 'Nature is the first teacher of Man.'

### **How does Buddhist practice relate?**

So what can it mean to practice Buddhism in times such as these? Are ecology and Buddhism the same thing? Has it got anything to teach us as Buddhists? And have we got anything, as Buddhists, to offer ecology and the ecological movement?

To begin to answer these questions I will be looking at so-called 'deep ecology', which is the perceptual and emotional exploration of ecology. However, before I do that, I would like to stay a while with ordinary ecology – the 'science of ecology' – just in case there is something in 'ecology the science' that we might overlook on our rush for the deep spiritual stuff.

### **Deep and scientific perspectives**

So, first I will look at 'ecology the science' and what resonances we might find there. Second, I'd like to say something about my own experiences of deep ecology – why I've

found them to be integral to my own Buddhist practice. And finally, I'd like to draw out some of the implications for us as Buddhists practicing in Western or Westernising societies, and in the Western Buddhist Order in particular.

### **The science of ecology**

So first, then, the science of ecology – what is it? Well, the word 'ecology' was actually coined back in the mid-nineteenth century by a German Darwinian scientist called Ernst Haeckel, and he used it to refer to the study of organisms in their environment. 'Eco,' from the Greek, means 'house' or 'household' – hence, 'habitat'.

Later on, ecology has evolved in meaning not just to look at the interconnection between organisms and their environment, but also the interconnections between organisms – so it is the study of 'ecosystems'. You could say ecology is the science of the interconnectedness of living things.

So, while biologists had been concerned with life as individual organisms – usually pickled (apologies to any biologists for that crude characterisation!) – ecologists saw living things more in terms of their relatedness... and generally felt much less inclined to pickle things. Pickled things don't really relate very well.

I think Buddhists are bound immediately to find a resonance here. An ecological perspective is seeing things in their relatedness, and I think that naturally implies a deeper understanding of conditioned co-production – seeing beings not as 'things' but as patterns of relatedness.

### **Applying ecological views to ourselves**

For Western thought generally, ecology marked one of the great steps forward from narrow, positivistic materialism. And ecology becomes even more interesting when we start to apply it to ourselves: it means learning to see ourselves as part of a set of relationships. There is an Australian ecologist called John Seed who puts it that we need to see ourselves not as isolated skin-encapsulated egos but as part of the larger body of the Earth.

I'd also like to remind you of the quote from Albert Einstein that Jnanavaca finished with, because I think that also puts it very well:

*'A human being is part of the whole, called by us Universe. We experience ourselves – our thoughts and feelings – as something separate from the rest; a kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. The true value of a human being is*

*determined by the measure and the sense in which they have obtained liberation from the self. We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if humanity is to survive.'*

That was Albert Einstein, decades ahead of his time. This is an insight into connectedness – it is an insight that Nature is teaching us loud and clear as a society. Our choice is between trying to resist it, and facing the consequences, or embracing it – and embracing truth is, of course, precisely the business of the Buddhist Path.

### **Indra's Net**

The Buddhist symbol that is very often invoked as a description of ecology is, of course, that of Indra's Net. It is a symbol that combines pure relatedness with pure individuality. I must say that I've found Indra's Net to be a very powerful tool. I think somehow just as an imaginative tool it has helped me to have a sense of feeling part of a greater web of life, without plunging into the other extreme of nihilistic non-existence.

So Indra's Net is a very powerful image for ecology. This isn't to say that the natural world IS Indra's Net – I'll come back to this – but Indra's Net does seem to represent a deeper pattern which ecology mirrors, or at the very least it is a very effective, strong, imaginative device for the truth of ecology.

### **More than interconnectedness**

So ecology does have this very immediate affinity with Buddhism, and the basis for that is the idea of interconnectedness, symbolised by a network or web – the web of life. Quite often this is where the Buddhist exploration of ecology stops. I'd like to come back to interconnectedness later, however I think there is more to it than just this. There's more, I think, that we can draw on from 'ecology the science' than just interconnectedness, just Indra's Net.

There are two things that I think we can draw from it. One is the actual empirical content of ecology – I'll explain that in a moment. The second one is the other truths, other general patterns, that we can observe at work in ecology.

### **Empirical content of ecology**

First, the actual empirical content of ecology. What do I mean by this? Well, I think there's a sort of danger, one that we are far from immune to, as Buddhists, in appropriating the truth of interconnectedness in quite a glib and abstracted way: kind of, 'hey, man, we're all interconnected.' It can sink quite easily into a sort of sentimental truism.

If we actually go back to scientific ecology and look a bit closer, what we actually see is that ecology isn't quite Indra's Net – it isn't a perfect reflection of Indra's Net; it isn't a pure mutual interconnectedness. The similarity with Indra's Net is only partial.

## **Particularity**

What we actually see if we look at Nature is that beings are related to some beings more than they are to other beings, and they are related in very particular causal relationships, very particular ways. So I think there is as much to learn from ecology about why it doesn't conform to Indra's Net, as there is about why it does.

Ecology really is about the particularities as much as it is about the general truth, the general pattern of interconnectedness. Ecology as science is interested in the particular empirical realities of living systems, and that brings us into a deeper experience of actual living beings.

## **Elephants**

I'd like to talk for a minute about elephants. It's always a pleasure.

Elephants, as you know, have been kind of wandering around on the outskirts of Buddhist history right from the outset. And yet our understanding of elephants has, in a way, really been quite limited, compared with the modern ecological understanding of elephants, which in a way has gone where two and a half thousand years of Buddhist contact with elephants, and Buddhist compassion, hasn't.

Let's have a look at the history of elephants – first of all in the Jataka tales. The Jataka tales tend to treat elephants as they do other animals: basically anthropomorphically. Basically these are stories about people, using animals as agents in the story. So the Jataka tales are very wonderful stories but actually they don't really tell us a lot about how it is really for actual animals, elephants and others.

If we look at the Pali Canon, there is that very famous story about the Buddha and the bull elephant, where the Buddha, who is feeling oppressed by the duties of leadership, feeling oppressed by all the different visitors and so on, goes off into the forest for a period of time and comes across a bull elephant, who is in the same predicament – he is oppressed by his herd, by the pressures of leading the herd.

Actually that wouldn't have been the case, because we now know that elephant societies are very strongly matriarchal – so, again, a good story, and it makes a point, but actually the understanding of elephants was quite limited.

And since then we have two and a half thousand years of Buddhist history where elephants have been kept in captivity and used in human service by Buddhist societies.

The understanding that we now have of elephants is that they are deeply social animals – that they actually have quite a complex network of social relationships – and also that that network of social relationships is really bound up very strongly with territory. It's almost like you could speak of an elephant culture – knowledge about connections and territory – that is passed from one generation to another, and can very easily be lost. So we now know that when elephants are held in captivity they suffer to a degree that perhaps other animals don't, because of this social and territorial richness that they have.

### **An ecological ethic**

So nowadays, human understanding of elephants is vastly more advanced than it ever has been, despite two and half thousand years of Buddhist history. So the capacity for compassion towards elephants is correspondingly increased: our ability to really empathise with elephants, and understand what it might be like to be an elephant, is still far from complete, but it has increased.

This is a bit ironic at a time when, through our actions as a society, a lot of the habitats of elephants are actually being destroyed... but at least, through the science of ecology, there is a strand of thinking in our society that is more empathic.

And what is true for elephants is true for much of the natural world, even for the less appealing species – insects, slugs and so on. So, in other words, there is a sort of ecological ethic as well as the science of ecology, which have to some extent gone together.

And I think that for a Buddhist this has to be significant. The first precept is, after all, sensitivity to life – and thanks to ecology as science, our capacity to be sensitive to life is greater than it ever has been. You could even stretch the definition of ecology as 'sensitivity to living systems', and as such, ecology pretty well IS the first precept.

So that resonance between ecology and Buddhism isn't just to do with the idea of interconnectedness, that you could say is the wisdom aspect of ecology. Modern ecology as science is perhaps even more significant to us than that, because it marks this new understanding of actual living beings in their uniqueness, in their particularity – the beings who we share a planet with. It has brought the possibility of a more effective, more down-to-earth compassion, and while there is a long way to go before our society runs according to this ecological ethic, at least we can be grateful that the ecological ethic is there to the extent that it is.

So I would just like to say, 'Sadhu' for scientific ecology, for introducing an ecological ethic, and also for working to save at least some species. Ecology has actually had an effect on the world; it has actually diminished the sum total of suffering of some species.

So that's one of the two other things that we can draw from 'ecology the science': an ecological ethic.

### **Other ideas and patterns in nature**

The second thing I'd like to talk about is to look again at the range of ideas and patterns that we can see in nature, that ecology teaches us. Interconnectedness is one of these, but there are others. I'm referring to a phenomena such as complexity and emergence, which I think are subtly and stealthily finding their way into our thinking. Ecological terms in general, in fact, are finding their way into our everyday language. We talk about finding one's 'niche'; we talk about letting things happen 'organically'. Even the word 'community' can have overtones that are drawn from ecology.

These phrases imply a whole world view which I think is worth exploring a bit more explicitly. I'd like to consider in particular the idea – the pattern, the phenomenon – of 'emergence'.

I'd like to talk about ants for a minute or two.

When I was at Guhyaloka five years ago, one of my favourite pastimes was putting little piles of stuff out for the ants. When I was at Guhyaloka (no doubt others have experienced this) my feet got very tough and dry. I had a lot of dead skin and I used to cut it off with a Swiss Army knife and make a little sort of pile.

And also, when I cut my toenails and fingernails, what I used to do was sort of collect all this stuff, all the dead skin and bits of toenails, and put them in a little pile on a rock outside our hut, and then just watch to see what happened.

I can recommend this as a pastime – it was very, very sort of absorbing and satisfying, kind of seeing yourself recycled in this way.

What would happen was that, eventually, an ant would happen upon this pile of detritus, and it would kind of look very pleased with itself... as far as you could tell... and it would put a bit on its back and would wander off.

Sometimes you had to wait quite a long time for the first ant to appear, but once the first ant had come and taken a bit of skin away, then it wasn't very long before a load of other ants descended on that rock from all different directions.

And that's really quite mystifying – in the absence of ant mobile-phones – how did the other ants know? I was quite mystified by that at the time. I thought perhaps, you know, they went back and did a little dance or something, like bees do, but that's not actually the case.

So the point about ants is that they're really quite stupid; apparently stupider than us, evidently (as we're repeatedly being told). An ant on its own... well, an ant basically only knows a few very simple behavioural rules: if this is the case, do that... if that is the case, do this. It really boils down to a few very very simple things.

And on its own, an ant would find it very difficult to forage for food. It would be a kind of hit and miss affair – they would just sort of wander round until they bumped into something. The ant might starve if it was on its own.

However, put that ant with other ants, and they have a whole sort of complex system, a very efficient system of foraging for food (or toenails). Those simple rules, I don't quite understand them, but they have got something to do with the particular scent that another ant leaves, and the number of other ants that it sees around, and somehow it uses this information to know where food is.

So if you get a few dozen ants, they can begin to form a much bigger, complex, intelligent system, and they can forage for food. In fact, not only can they forage for food but they can build quite complex ant colonies.

Ant colonies, apparently, have quite carefully located elements: you'll find an ant cemetery in one corner; a sort of ant waste-disposal site in another corner; a kind of ant dormitory suburbs; ant motorways and supermarkets... and they're all appropriately located in relation to each other.

Now to a recovering town-planner like me, that's quite a challenge, because they do this without a planning department. There is no ant planning department. There is no ant strategic local plan, or whatever. There is no ant mastermind sitting in the middle of it all, planning it all. Each ant remains really quite stupid. But ant colonies are these incredibly complex, efficient systems.

And this is what emergence is, as far as I can understand it. It is complex, viable, effective systems that emerge from the interaction of lots of individual, very simple decisions.

And you will find that this phenomenon of 'emergence' is very common throughout the natural world. It is not only in the natural world – you can simulate it on computers. I believe actually the 'Sims' computer game is an example of 'emergence' software, where they have used emergence (don't ask me how) to make a game.

But in the natural world, emergence is very well developed. Tropical rain forests' ecosystems are the result of emergence – no-one plans those; they have arisen as the result of a vast number of small interactions. Coral reefs, flocks of wild geese, are all emergence phenomena. Consciousness itself is the same as this, so I believe. Consciousness itself is a phenomenon of emergence – don't ask me how, but I once read something explaining why that was.

Emergence is quite an astonishing phenomenon. For me, the emergence of these complex, beautiful, almost fractal forms that we have in nature is perhaps THE thing – certainly one of the things – that fills me with silent wonder and glad affirmation at nature. I think nature is teaching us something about the depth and beauty of reality, of conditioned co-production, of ourselves – our own emergence from the primordial simplicity of the universe – how something as complex as the human mind could emerge from simplicity.

### **New things arising from emergence; unpredictability**

Here's a really interesting thing: with emergence, genuinely new things can arise in the universe. New things appear. An ant colony is different from just the sum total of ants. These new things – emergent phenomena – are continuous with what has gone before; the rules of causality haven't been broken. And yet, at least from our limited perspective, they are qualitatively different.

Another example of this, perhaps drawn more from physics, is the quality of 'wetness'. In water you have hydrogen atoms and oxygen atoms. These are both gases. Put them together and you get water – you get this quality of wetness that just wasn't there before. So through emergence, through these kinds of interactions, you get newness.

The second thing about emergence is that those new things are quite unpredictable. You couldn't have predicted 'wetness' from looking at hydrogen and oxygen. You can never know what's going to emerge until it has emerged.

Try to imagine that you're back at the beginning of the universe, if you can conceive of such a thing – back to that primal simplicity. From that point of view, imagine a duck...

Now, ducks, to us, are fairly commonplace, ordinary – there are a lot of them wandering around here. But from the point of view of the beginning of the universe, from that utter simplicity, to conceive of a duck would have been absolutely mind-blowing – it would have been quite impossible to even think of a duck. And if you were presented with an image of a duck, you would probably be lost in awe and wonder at how such a thing could possibly come about. You wouldn't have been able to even imagine it.

And the universe has taken a few billion years to come up with this complex system that we call a duck. Does that make ducks any less astonishing? Try to look at ducks from that point of view: what has gone into the arising of ducks? You can look at a duck and just think 'wow – how incredible!' It brings you that 'wow' factor of looking at nature.

So this ability of conditioned co-production to give rise to the unpredictable, for me it resonates with the wisdom of Shunyata – of openness, of emptiness. The world's nature isn't, after all, only about developmental, predictable chains of causes and effects; it's also teaching us to expect the unexpected – to be prepared to be awestruck. In a way, the universe – reality – is inherently creative.

I think there is another lesson we can draw from emergence, which is that if we are concerned to bring about change in some way, then it gives us an understanding of how change happens.

So if we want to bring about change in ourselves, perhaps there is something we can learn from emergence. There is, I think, a more than eponymous connection between 'emergence the ecological phenomenon' and 'emergence as model for spiritual development' – but I'll let you unpack that one on your own.

And I think there are also implications of emergence for how we bring about change in the world – but I'll come back to that later.

### **Deep ecology**

So much, then, for ordinary ecology – 'ecology the science' – understanding the patterns of nature, the patterns of reality. Now for deep ecology.

I see deep ecology simply as ecology taken to the level of contemplation, rather than just knowledge. So, in a way, I have kind of been straying into deep ecology already, I think. What has become known as deep ecology is a body of writings and reflections and poetry and exercises that are designed to help us experience interconnectedness at the heart level. I think deep ecology is kind of 'felt interconnectedness' or 'heart-felt ecology'.

It was called 'deep ecology' to distinguish it from, well, shallow ecology – by which was meant ecology that put itself at the service of big business, perhaps ecology that wasn't fully informed by an ecological ethic, or by compassion.

Just a health warning: if you 'google' deep ecology you will find quite a wide range of references and writings, and some of them are quite obtuse; others come from quite a politically green fundamentalist background, and some of them can even be quite anti-human – you know, regarding humans as a kind of virus on the face of the planet.

I personally have no difficulty in choosing what I find helpful from deep ecology, and I think the vast majority of it is helpful, and as Kamalashila said, sometimes it is kind of characterised in the terms I've just described. It is worth just picking and choosing what we draw from deep ecology.

I would like just to say a bit about my own experience of deep ecology. I think it was in my teens that I first started to think of myself as an environmentalist, or something like it. And I was moved to do that by something very wise and profound that I heard Spike Milligan say... I can't remember what it was! But it was enough to sort of awaken me to a concern for wildlife.

After that, I pursued this interest through study, through studying geography, and my work in local government became quite centred around environmental stuff. It also came into the political involvement that I had: I used to go around Labour Party branches in the north-east of England, back in the eighties, trying to persuade them that global warming was something important. Most of them were ex-miners who still got free coal, so I was onto a bit of a loser!

So after I got involved in Buddhism, and became a Buddhist, I came across deep ecology – first through Saramati, through a retreat some time in the late 1990's – I think there are at least two people here who were on that retreat – and then after that I explored it through a deep ecology group in Newcastle.

### **Practical exercise: evolutionary remembering**

Now, on the face of it, these deep ecology exercises don't look very Buddhist. Saramati, in fact, had us jumping round the shrine room at Dhanakosa like monkeys at one stage, so they don't necessarily involve sitting in meditation posture... They often involve interaction with others, group exercises and so on.

But it has been my experience that they can lead to insights that are very Buddhist indeed – especially, I think, combined with ordinary sitting meditation.

The exercise that we were doing when we were jumping around like monkeys was called 'evolutionary remembering' and this was devised by John Seed, who I've already mentioned.

Just to describe this exercise: with the help of a guided commentary, participants start by lying on the floor, and in time we kind of recapitulate the whole story of evolution, right from those days when we were just sort of floating round the oceans as single celled organisms (it was great then, wasn't it?) – right through to the modern day.

And stage by stage, limb by limb, we would act this out physically. So: each limb; each hand; each foot; eyesight; opposable digits; warm blood; fur; being able to stand up; our size grown to our present size; you experience each of these things in its turn, as it is unfolded in our evolutionary story. You feel in your body the unfolding of the story – you feel *paticca sammupada* in every cell of your body – you are a walking story. You realise that actually we contain the whole memory of our history in our bodies – in our body memory.

So deep ecology uses modern scientific knowledge to help us reflect about who we are and where we have come from. And I think this gives body awareness a whole new dimension. Evolutionary remembering could be straight from the *Anapanasati Sutta*. I think it probably would have been, if Darwin had been around at the time. And I found it to be quite a powerful practice. I think it does yield some insight into conditionality, and

it helps to dissolve that tendency to human chauvinism, to thinking that we are higher and separate from nature.

### **Practical exercise: reclaiming the gifts of the ancestors**

Another deep ecology exercise is called 'reclaiming the gifts of the ancestors' and I participated in this one earlier this year with the woman who devised it, the well known great Buddhist and deep ecologist Joanna Macy.

This exercise is rather similar to the previous one except that in this case you are retracing just human history, right from the time we emerged, in the literal sense, from the rain forest, right through to the present day.

And this one puts you in touch with the mental and emotional qualities that we have developed as humans – how they have emerged through our successive struggles to survive.

For me, the result of that one was a very clear sense of being part of the bigger story of the development of consciousness on the Earth – the development of conscious life. And in that context, my own sense of a little spiritual life 'in here' kind of paled into insignificance, not in a nihilistic way but in a way that left me feeling very much connected with humanity and with meaning and purpose. It mainly just left me with a profound sense of relief.

### **Connecting with the future**

Other deep ecology exercises open up our connectedness with future generations. These days, with such dismal forecasts abounding, it's kind of difficult to look to the future – to look to the longer term future with a sense of optimism, or hope. And this isn't normal – these are not normal times.

We can forget this – we can feel cut off from the future, from a healthy sense of the future. And I think it is a very basic human need to feel good about what we pass on to future generations, but one that we can lack in the present climate.

However, by imaginatively, playfully engaging with future generations as if they were real human beings, we can begin to find within ourselves what might be a positive legacy. It can focus us on what there is within us, what actions we can take that enable us, as it were, to look future generations openly and joyfully in the eye.

So those are just a handful of some deep ecology exercises.

## **Joanna Macy's fourfold stages**

Generally in her work Joanna Macy takes people through a fourfold sequence – four experiential stages:

1. 'Affirmation' – getting in touch with a simple, ordinary gratitude to be alive. Sometimes we speak of needing a basis of metta, of appreciative awareness, and I think this is basically the same thing – a sense of gratitude and metta.
2. 'Despair' – really, I think, this is the nub of the work of deep ecology. In this stage we face our own feelings about the state of the world – not our own opinions, but our own FEELINGS about the state of the world – we experience and honour those feelings. If the problem is the way forward, then this stage is about turning to face and experience the problem.
3. 'Seeing with New Eyes' – seeing afresh our connectedness with the past and with the future and with a more than human world. Those exercises I have already described a little. And from those quarters we can draw strength, or we can realise the strength that we have within us.
4. 'Going Forth' – that is, gathering the strength to move towards some kind of positive action in the world; expressing ourselves in terms of positive action.

So this fourfold process is sort of the heart of deep ecology.

## **Systems theory**

Joanna Macy draws quite a lot on her work on systems theory. At the workshop I attended with her in April she said something in this connection which I found particularly helpful: she was pointing out that it is very easy at a time such as this, when global problems seem so enormous, so intractable, to look at them and then look at yourself and think, 'well, I can't do anything'. This is in a way the root of despair, of paralysis: 'Think what it's going to take to turn things around – 'I don't have the qualities to do that; I don't have the resources to effect change.'

Now, what I was expecting her to say in the next sentence was: 'The good news is that with Buddhist practice you can develop those qualities.' I think that's what I would have said. But what she actually said took me by surprise, and filled me with a sense of relief and liberation.

What she said was basically: 'Don't worry – you don't have to.'

In a way, the very idea of me having to change the world is egoistic, and I think it is the source of much trouble and pain. The truth is, I don't exist in isolation. One of the things that Joanna Macy does is to draw on her work in general systems theory to point out that

together with others, a sort of synergy happens; together we are greater than the sum of our parts. There's a sort of magic that happens.

So it's no longer down to me, as I conceive myself. The pressure is off. I can't change the world. What I can do is align with the forces of resolution. I can become part of an emergent process. I can't put the world right, but I can help to create the conditions for resolution to emerge.

### **What I have gained**

Just to sum up what I think I have gained from my involvement with deep ecology (it's difficult, in a way, to separate that from Buddhist practice generally): first, I think it has helped to free me up, at least a little, from a sense of self separate from nature. It has helped to free me up from a kind of paralysing anxiety about the state of the world. I think it has released some energy just to act creatively. It has helped me perceive that task as part of a bigger whole, rather than on my own – and that's much more fun.

And I think from Joanna Macy in particular, through her personal example – I think she uses a very affirmative, empowering language about this whole area... you know, very often you come to a talk about ecology and you think you're going to be made to feel horrible about yourself; Joanna Macy doesn't do that. She has found a language that really empowers.

And I think for me it has helped bring the Bodhisattva ideal down to earth. 'All beings' can be a very abstract term, but to actually make an emotional connection with future beings, with beings elsewhere on the Earth, really helps to bring that down to earth, to make it real.

### **Implications for Buddhism in the West**

So, finally, I want to set out one or two implications for Buddhism in the West, and for the Western Buddhist Order.

We have going on the West, albeit so painfully slowly, a process of awakening – a learning from the consequences of our own actions, that is pointing us to deeper truths. This has largely coincided with the arrival of Buddhism in the West.

But I think the question for Buddhism in the West is: 'How do we respond as individuals? How do we respond collectively in our practice and communication of the Dharma?' The nub of the question, I think, is: 'How can we help?'

How can we help this bigger process of learning, this awakening, that is becoming crucial even to our survival?

And immediately that suggests a different perspective: perhaps not the old FWBO perspective of us being a small band of people who are trying to import a tradition into the West, but, in a way, being part of a much bigger process that is taking place – a process that we can help, that we can strengthen and inspire by being part of it.

This wider process is what Joanna Macy has come to refer to as the 'great turning', and she thinks this is already taking place, in fact it's gathering momentum, and it consists of all those people, individually or in groups, who are engaged in a shift from an industrial growth society based on positivistic, materialistic science, to an ecologically sustainable society based on a vision of interconnectedness. It consists of people preventing further ecological damage; of those involved in building alternative structures; and those involved in bringing about a more fundamental shift in world view and values.

This shift is happening, and you can see it in all sorts of ways. Perhaps it should be seen on a par with other great shifts such as the agricultural revolution, or the industrial revolution – perhaps greater.

The communication of the Dharma has a natural place right at the heart of that 'great turning' – out of compassion, because that is where we can very effectively alleviate suffering; and also because that is where the transformative cutting edge of our society is – that is where the energy is. If you want to know where the opportunity for transformation lies in a society, look at its deepest fears. And when we ask: 'What is the question to which Western Buddhism is the answer?' surely we can't ignore that overarching crisis... What is it to live a truly happy and meaningful life at a time such as this?

I think the Order and the FWBO already are at the heart of the great turning. We are already a massive force for good in the world.

Looking at it by ecological criteria, we exemplify the ideal of community very strongly. In a way, we are an international peace movement. We promote spiritual practices that tend people towards awareness and metta and material simplicity. We communicate ethical values whose very basis is respect for life. And we communicate the Dharma, whose effects are beyond calculation.

So we've got a massive amount to offer this great turning, and I think we are offering it.

Perhaps, though, that could be even greater if we did one thing, and that is just to make a more conscious and explicit connection between our practice and the state of the world.

The flavour of the Dharma as practised in the FWBO remains very much influenced by Bhante's lectures given in the late 1960's, and he suffused those with the great ideas of Western thought – of the individual, of evolution – and these remain as pertinent as ever.

At that time ecology was a child of the sixties – it was still an infant – and I think it is fair to say that, while there are some references in Bhante's writings to ecology, by and large

ecology kind of missed the FWBO bus. So, I think there is scope for ecology to succeed its older cousins – the individual, evolution – into the mainstream: into what we teach at Centres; into mitra study, ordination preparation, into our ritual life (but drums are not compulsory!).

Ecology is the great gateway for the Dharma in the West, and it would be tragic to ignore it.

### **Conclusion: making an individual connection**

What I would really like to emphasise, though, in conclusion, is that we make that connection at an individual level – a conscious, explicit connection between our practice and what nature is teaching us: what nature is teaching us through direct personal contact, as Kamalashila was describing in his talk, but also what nature is teaching us globally – the hard lesson of the ecological crisis.

And we can do this by asking ourselves: 'How do I feel about the state of the planet – about the state of the world?' and allowing ourselves to explore that, giving ourselves the space to explore it. But also asking: 'What gives me hope?'

So those two questions – how do I feel about the state of the natural world, and what gives me hope? I think other change will flow from that.

And we can also offer other people the opportunity to go through that process, and see that as core business for the FWBO, not just a fringe activity.

Letting in the lessons of nature in this way brings us healing. We have reserves of anxiety, guilt and alienation that we don't even notice, because we tend to take them for granted, but I think this process begins to heal those reserves, as individuals, as a spiritual community, and as a society.

I'd like to leave you with an image, and it's supplied by Bhante from 'A Veil of Stars':

*'Be like wax beneath the signet of green jade that nature wears upon her hand, and she will stamp deep upon your heart the secret emblem of her ineffable peace.'*