

Community, Nature and Buddha Nature

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What does Buddhism mean by ‘nature’, and does the Buddhist vision of Awakening have anything to do with it? If it does, what is our relationship, as a Sangha, to the Buddhist vision of nature?

I recently became interested in starting some kind of large, land-based community. The idea arose after an eighteen-month retreat in a canvas dome above a Welsh valley. It was the most deeply inspiring time of my life, and three years later, I am still assimilating it. I was alone throughout, and lived simply, burning wood and drawing water from the hillside. I discovered something that thrilled me to the core: that being close to nature enlivens my understanding of Dharma like nothing else does. Now I want to live like that with others. I would like to help create a Dharma based ecological vision for the FWBO.

When I started my retreat, I was not at all interested in ecology. I was in the countryside simply to escape the distraction of other human beings. I expected insights and realisations to arise not from nature, but from meditation. Yes, I would learn how to light fires, tie knots, chop wood, and carry water, but I never thought natural things themselves would give insights into the Dharma. Yet in the event, every single insight came from these things, bestowed by the elements earth, water, fire, wind, space, and awareness. I had many deeply unsettling experiences, and they awakened my whole relationship to nature.

In other talks, I have mentioned the more colourful events that sparked off insights: the night I got totally lost in the fog, and the time I slipped knee deep into my shit pit. However, one experience grew to become a constant companion. I can describe it as a deeper relationship with nature in which the Dharma, the nature of existence, was more visible than usual. This relationship, and the experiences that arose out of it, gradually undermined my habitual pride and rigidity. I experienced an ongoing collapse of my idea of myself, and of the world I thought I lived in. That happened because in that situation, Nature is so uncompromising. If I needed to urinate or get water and firewood, I was forced go outside, whatever the weather or my state of health. I am in my fifties. I began my retreat in December. Over those freezing winter months, whenever I felt very cold or very ill, I longed for the convenience of piped water and mains electricity. I became impatient with practical matters, cursing the need to tie a knot or split logs. Eventually however, my tetchiness and anxiety about the realities around me dissolved. I began feeling at home in it all. I began to love it. I saw increasingly that my resistance to painful experience, the pain itself, and the person experiencing it, were all natural, unfixed realities that could teach me about the Dharma if only I could be open and curious about their nature. I finally came to inhabit my environmental niche, in accordance with my Dharma training. From that point, I came into a creative Dharma relationship with every local plant and animal.

Now it is over, I want to explore this more, with others. I imagine us establishing somewhere large, land based, unkempt, and diverse. It would perhaps be a bit like a mini Buddhafield festival, with writers, artists, hippies, yogis, yoginis, Buddhafield workers, Dharma teachers, activists, ecologists, poets, playwrights, mechanics, accountants, musicians, dogs, cats, and parrots, all living together. This great diversity of living beings would share their lives as single individuals, couples, and families. There could be women's and men's communities within the overall community. I suppose most of us would live in converted barns and farmhouses, but I would also like to see trucks, caravans, yurts, and benders.

I think such a community could develop a dharma philosophy based on collective experience. I imagine that would be lively, controversial in some respects, yet helpful and attractive. Indeed, it ought to attract visitors. People could come and attend retreats, meditate, and explore the Dharma from the point of view of nature and deep ecology. Within the community, we could help one another live harmoniously, raise a livelihood and maybe some children, teach Dharma, and work on ourselves individually. Over the years, Buddhafield have introduced thousands of ecological minded people to the Dharma. If large numbers of us actually lived together, we could take that much further, and develop an approach to Dharma that really explores and co-operates with nature.

My retreat helped me imagine how nature must have informed the Buddha's own feeling for the Dharma. I even wonder if this understanding is only available to those practising, in some way, in a natural environment. It is a matter of actual connection. Certainly, that kind of sensibility has been in Buddhist teaching right from the beginning. The Buddha chose to live in nature even though, after his Awakening, he could easily have returned to a conventional indoor life and made that his basis for teaching. No one would have thought any the less of him. His decision to remain in the wild indicates that it supported his realisation better. Certainly, after his awakening, the Buddha became as considerate of the needs of non-human beings and plants as his own kind. He taught his disciples how to cultivate love for snakes and other fear-inspiring creatures. His instructions were abundant with examples drawn from practical experience in the wild. And his central teaching of vipashyana is a revelation of the nature of things, of the vastness and profundity of Nature as it is beyond all concepts of space, time, location, and relationship. Yet we can apply this profound revelation right here in the so-called real world, through ethics, love, and helpful activity.

A new, nature-based approach to Dharma will need considerable articulating. As well as living in nature with mindfulness and curiosity, we need to talk about the experience, study others' writings on it, reflect on it, write, and argue endlessly. Discussion and comparison help us deepen our Dharma relationships. Obviously, we also need to work, and keep our personal practice alive. Nevertheless, relationships are the natural world; nature is an infinite field of inseparable, total relationship. Awakening to reality must involve inquiring into the meaning of relationship. We each have a personal history that is unique, and which we cannot alter. The connections we have made with others are inescapable; we reinforce them with every meeting, thought, and decision. As Dharma followers, we also have inescapable connections with the Buddha, through the tradition

of practice that he founded. These connections are all very much alive; as I also discovered on my retreat, our waking mind, and our dreams, are populated by a universe of relationships.

Because ecological awareness is about relationship, the ideal eco-dharma community would include families and sexual partners – and, of course, many single individuals. Obviously, it would also be excellent for monastic or single-sex communities to cultivate an ecological ethos; [1] but a mixed-sex environment reflects the whole of life, and for certain individuals such as myself, offers stirring material for reflection on the nature of things. There are socio-historical arguments for this, too. For approaching forty years, despite the fact that there are many families in the FWBO, almost every FWBO community has been single-sex. Most of us have partners, so why do we prefer living single so much of the time? This obviously has a lot to do with the lack of mixed community opportunities, but that itself is rooted in circumstance.

A tradition of single-sex activities has nourished the F/WBO Sangha since the early '70s. Since the Western Buddhist Order is non-monastic, single sex situations have provided our main setting for intensive dharma practice. There the young and unattached, especially, enjoy a safe haven, where they can practise less distracted by the powerful forces of affairs and relationships. However, the system has proved unsustainable in the last decade. Many seasoned practitioners have left their community to live alone or with a partner. Why is this? For one thing, single sex communities are often geared to the needs of newer and younger people, and so can become less rewarding for the more experienced. Moreover, single-sex environments are not automatically friendly places, despite the standard rationale, i.e. that the absence of the opposite sex relaxes emotional inhibitions, particularly in men, thus fostering friendship. That rationale works, in my experience, and I believe it does for many women too. I have personally benefited tremendously from my time in single sex communities and would do most of it all over again. However, long-term experience shows that there is something important missing. Many have had to face the disappointment of realising that their home over the last ten years is actually rather cold and uninspiring. It is difficult to leave when one has invested so much hope and energy, knowing that outside the mainstream Sangha one may encounter stigma, loss of Sangha contact, and isolation. Yet for many, leaving has become a spiritual necessity.

It is a shame so many people have undergone such conflict, when couples and families could very easily found Dharma practice communities. At first sight, it seems amazing that there are none in the FWBO. However, family and sexual ties do involve strong attachment, and it can take considerable collective experience to manage these within a larger group. There were some spectacular failures in religious communes, for example, in the 80s. Buddhist organisations other than the FWBO, such as Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing, have reportedly found mixed communities harder to establish. Yet it can be done. No doubt it helps when a trusted teacher lives close by; I think of Dhardo Rinpoche, Sangharakshita's friend and teacher in 1950s, whose community in Kalimpong included a large school for Tibetan refugee children.

It seems clear there is a need, and that various forms of mixed community living will soon be upon us. It is to our advantage that our formative years taught us so much about community dynamics. We are so familiar with that opposition between the ideal of 'spiritual community' and the tendency to fall into ordinary 'group' patterns. Yes, ideally, each member of a spiritual community consciously works on him or herself. They reflect, meditate, practise the precepts, and thereby come to understand essential truths about themselves. However, in a real life situation, people lose interest in such truths, cease to cultivate meditation and ethical principles, and become insensitive to the thoughts and feelings that are actually motivating their actions. This strengthens the tendency to 'group' behaviours, of which there is an infinite variety depending on each individual's past conditioning. Typical examples are bullying, deference, favouritism, and competition. Behaviours like these arise within a group, when over-dependence on others obscures the general capacity to take initiative in communication. We may be unconsciously relating to a perceived 'pecking order'. We might be over-compliant, unwittingly afraid of offending some authority, or have an unnoticed tendency to manipulate others who put us in that position. Everyone is subject to group patterns like these; but at least ideally, spiritual community is a space where each person has the freedom to discover them and learn to relate as an individual.

In practice, this is a challenge. In families and sexual partnerships especially, it is not easy to be so free. The attachment we feel towards a lover, parent, or child can enclose us in a kind of bubble. A couple beginning their relationship may look to one another for emotional support in such an exclusive way that they disengage from community life. Or parents, feeling intensely protective of their children, may keep them away from other community members. Group-based feelings are natural enough, yet they can undermine community life: when others react, we can start feeling isolated and unable to share. In our disconnected state of society, where increasing numbers live lonely and die alone, it seems worth our making the effort to form communities of all kinds, including the kind I am advocating. As Sangha members get older, the possibility of sharing with like-minded friends offers a richer quality of life, not to mention the mutual inspiration to practise. The alternative is hardly attractive: people living isolated from the Sangha in old age will easily lose their vision of Dharma. So personally, I would like to live with other Sangha members; I cannot think of a more interesting or more pleasant way to live.

From a practice point of view, I would find a monastic or single-sex community less useful as an object of meditation and reflection. I want to be around some kind of microcosm of society, to see men, women, and children of all ages – animals too – growing up in an ecological Dharma realm, and exploring our connection with the earth. Mahayana Buddhism and Deep Ecology unite around the point that all biological organisms have needs. All beings whatsoever need others to support their existence. The Bodhisattva appreciates this. He or she knows the need of everyone in the web of life, and especially what is needed most of all: Enlightenment. Obviously, very few are able to see Enlightenment as a need. The majority of humans, not to mention other organisms, have to occupy themselves with far more basic issues. These issues certainly need attending to. Our accumulated neglect of nature, both human and nonhuman, is an unparalleled disaster. It is most unfortunate that we have so naïvely, and appallingly,

exploited the earth and its peoples. Yet there is no point descending into despondency. A Buddhist ecological community can educate itself about these needs, practise Dharma, help wherever possible, and avoid doing further damage. For example we can generate as much of our own power as possible. We can eat mainly local, organic food. We can also be more politically active. In short, we can set a much-needed example of how everyone will need to start living in a sustainable future.

Currently, however, despite our Mahayana tradition, the FWBO often seems to reflect the self-interested values of the prevailing industrial growth society. It was typical of a Buddhist that I had virtually no interest in ecology when I started my retreat. Buddhists excuse themselves from such concerns: suffering is the result of karma, we say, so surely the overriding need is to deepen one's awareness. Yet a very effective way to do so is to give to other beings, and the need of humans, animals, and plants is currently crying out so loud for our attention that it is getting through even to some Buddhists. It does surprise me that, as I write, none of the large FWBO centres in the UK supports the need to supply local, organic food. I understand that an efficient charity runs on a tight budget, and I agree that the economic priority for Buddhists is to spread the Dharma. From a public perspective, however, our style can appear short on compassion. It is quite possible to be both ethical and economic. Buddhafield, for example, always provide organic food on their retreats. They manage it simply because they have committed to organic food a basic ethical priority. Others could easily do the same.

A Buddhist community will be looked to as an example in its attitude to nature, at a time when contemporary living is looking like a project to get us as far away from nature as possible. In the west, in our comfortable homes, we have come to feel that nature hardly touches us. Our technology has given us a sense that we are somehow more powerful than nature, even beyond it. This seems very self-absorbed; one only has to consider the effect of natural disasters like hurricanes and epidemics to see that nature is bigger, beyond all bounds, than humanity. American ecologist Frank Egler also famously expresses this fact: *"Ecosystems are more complex than we think – they may be more complex than we can think."*

Why, though, is life getting increasingly artificial? Why is it that we want it so – as it seems, in many ways, that we do? By what process did we get to this point, with such strong feelings of need for whatever is the latest, fastest, and most stylish? Our very effective technological development has brought us extraordinary convenience, efficiency, and safety, and that has no doubt disconnected us, in various ways, from our roots in natural reality. That disconnection, especially our loss of feeling, does seem partially responsible for our abuse of the natural world. However, in our justifications for that abuse, we also seem influenced by the inherited monotheistic view that nature is evil, something to master and rise above. Christianity's two-thousand-year suppression of pagan values, and its dictum that nature is a god-given resource for exclusively human use, seems, in retrospect, to have caused unbelievable suffering. In a society seeking freedom from all that, Buddhism becomes attractive in that it makes no separation between humanity, nature, and God. All humans are potentially God; god-like qualities are natural; and nature is simply reality. Nothing, not even God, is considered to be

outside nature. Nor are Buddhas, who simply have their own particular ‘Buddha’ nature, i.e. the general quality and dynamic of Awakening.

However, western Buddhists, including some FWBO folk, say that nature is something one transcends on the Buddhist path. That could appear, wrongly, to support the ‘nature is bad’ view. At the core of what the Buddha taught was *‘that which is beyond the world’*, which he realised through *vipashyana* or insight. The Pali word is *lokuttara*, which Sangharakshita has translated as ‘The Transcendental’. One enters the Transcendental at the point of insight. It would be easy to mistake this crucial transition as transcendence of nature – however, in Buddhist terms, what one transcends through insight is identification with samsara, the endless round of birth and death. One cannot, in fact, transcend nature. Nature is something bigger; nature itself transcends samsara. The Transcendental itself is natural.

Lokuttara means the transcendence of concept. It involves cutting through dualistic awareness to realise the ever-present non-dual nature of awareness, ‘Buddha Nature’. Thus, enlightenment is not something outside nature, but like everything, has its own very particular nature. Nature is not only season and cycle, death and rebirth, flowering and dying. It is also capable of other manifestations, as for example the ‘spiral path’ of 24 causal links, the Buddha’s description of the process of awakening as a natural process, which I will attempt briefly to summarise. Initially (and at a stroke summarising the first twelve, cyclical *nidana* links) one realises not only that one feels dissatisfied with our unquestioned, baffling existence, but also that it must be possible to discover its nature and find satisfaction. On bringing sustained awareness to that dissatisfaction by practising ethics, meditation and wisdom, there arises a special kind of interest, joy and happiness. Then, when reflecting on the nature of reality, this emotional expansion provides the individuality, the mental space, and the concentration of being necessary to seed and sustain experiences of insight. As these build up, and one enters the full, transformative experience of insight, one awakens fully to the nature of reality. This awakening is not ‘beyond’ nature. It is the discovery of real nature, big nature, the reality that is always there behind the hard shell of our concepts. Reality is, of course, simply reality, and never our idea of it. However, we spend most of our time totally identified with our ideas of it, with all the attendant ego-protecting emotions. We see these emotions and concepts as real. However, reality is what is revealed when the delusion collapses, and wisdom arises. It is called by such names as *Dharmakaya*, *Dharmadhatu*, *Tathata*, and *Buddha Nature*.

Talk of ‘collapsing delusion’ could give an impression that this Reality or Nature is not especially positive; yet on the contrary, it is positive beyond belief. The Buddha taught not only that nature is without an essence, that it is impermanent and insubstantial, but also that that is something good, something amazing. He taught that life is unsatisfactory only when we grasp it as permanent and substantial. Real nature only shows itself when we let go ideas and constructions of that kind. Even the notion of causes and conditions turns out ultimately to be our construction. The rich simplicity of reality is what has always been there beyond the constructions. Because we do not recognise it, we cannot help but continue constructing and reconstructing our reality. That may be a heaven, it

may be a hell, but whatever our experience, is not truly real unless we have woken up and recognised its nature. For once you spot it, reality is the most attractive object, the sexiest thing, the most intriguing and fascinating thing, in the universe. You have to learn to recognise it, but if you see it even just once, that will be the end of all hesitation. Once you see it, reality will have you hooked.

Buddhist tradition expresses this ‘hooker’ aspect of the Dharma in a number of different ways. Some Bodhisattvas actually hold hooks, for example. However, the enlightened being who most of all exemplifies this quality is Kurukulle. Kurukulle is a red *dakini*, a female Buddha. In terms of myth, dakinis live in cremation grounds; they live around clattering bones. They turn up at the awe-inspiring crossroads between life and death, manifest in the critical situation, where our practice suddenly goes deeper than ever before. Dakinis often appear, in a visionary way, to practitioners like us, at crucial points in our spiritual lives. And all dakinis have a special connection with Prajnaparamita, the mother of enlightenment experience, the perfection of wisdom. They are concerned with the collapse of ego, with the terrifying moment of spiritual death and the brilliant and colourful life that is then born. For these reasons, dakinis are sometimes called ‘mothers’, though perhaps they function more as a midwife.

There is a male dakini form called a *daka*, but the female form is far more common. This may be because to our minds, pleasure connects more naturally with the feminine. Whether or not it is true that girls just want to have fun, dakini symbolism certainly evokes the pleasure of enlightenment. Dakini dancing expresses the blissful enjoyment of perfect wisdom. They stretch themselves out, shockingly free, in the sky of the liberated mind. Their appearance is often also terrifying, but they are clearly enjoying themselves, often in a very sexually open and explicit manner. They are naked, totally exposed, and they love displaying themselves. Being real is immensely pleasurable, it seems, and they do not want to hide it.

The dakini Kurukulle is all of this, but she is also especially concerned with love and attraction. She is of course young and very beautiful, and her complexion is a deep rosy red. She is flushed, she is aroused, and indeed, she is very, very excited. For example, the sadhana text I know describes her as having erect nipples. To express the feeling even more, she is holding a flowery bow and arrow just like Cupid. This is because her enlightened activity is to cause people to fall in love. Of course, I mean to fall in love with the Dharma, go for refuge to the truth of awakening. Though it does seem that one may also invoke Kurukulle for arousing ordinary sexual love, so the question arises: what do we want, Dharma Sutra, or Kama Sutra? Yet we should not answer too quickly, since there is an important connection between the two kinds of love. What Kurukulle does essentially is to focus our strongest desires. She is concerned with what we really, really, want, more than anything else in the world. Essentially, she knows that in our hearts, what we are dying to do is fall in love with Dharma practice, or even for our practice to be a kind of lovemaking.

That might sound a little exaggerated, but it points to the big issue with Dharma practice: motivation. Each of us has problems with not wanting to do it that much, with being a bit

limp and half hearted, with not being in the mood tonight. However, if we could fall in love with Reality, with big Nature, there would be no problem of motivation at all. We would not wish to do anything else; we would be at it all the time. We would continually be meditating and reflecting on the Dharma. This is what we really, really want, in our heart of hearts. Yet desire needs an initial spark, and that is why Kurukulle holds the flowery bow and arrow in her hands, and spends her time firing love arrows into the hearts of all beings.

I mention Kurukulle because she expresses in such a delightful form the positive nature of ultimate Reality. We can sometimes be rather nauseated by (the notion of) ultimate reality, repelled by (the notion of) spiritual death, browned off by all the difficulties of practice – for example by the way spiritual insight seems to ruin people’s lives and change a person permanently (making some lose interest in pubs, occasionally even in football). However, when we can really let go our constructions and habitual concepts about life and who or what we are, the reality we let go into is intensely delightful and fulfilling. Not surprisingly, one experiences the nature of Reality – big Nature – as the resolution of the unsatisfactoriness that characterises *samsara*. The reality that is all there ever has been, but which we hide by our clinging to concepts, is far from being some abstract nothing, some ‘emptiness’, to use that misleading term: it is something amazing.

One of the Mahayana Sutras compares this Nature to honey. Reality is like some honey that is available to us all the time. We could lick it, taste it, and enjoy it at any time – if only we could see it! Unfortunately, we do not see any honey at all, because it is covered with furiously buzzing bees. That is all we see. We never think, even for a moment, that there might be something enjoyable there. It just looks busy, scary, and dangerous. The buzzing bees represent our strong attachment to concepts about our reality: all our tightly held attachment to a hard-shell personality and a fixed, artificial, little world. The actual Reality, the peaceful and delightful dakini dancing Reality, is only revealed when we unstick ourselves from these habitual concepts and emotions. Only when we let them fly away does the buzzing stop and we can start enjoying the sweet honey, the sweet love of Dharma that was there, unrecognised, all the time.

Notes

[1] This seems to be the kind of community the Buddha himself preferred, though he sometimes lived alone or with one other person. Since the scriptures make occasional references to female wanderers, it may be worth investigating the possibility that the Buddha’s Sangha was not as exclusively single-sex as portrayed by the monastic oral tradition.

<http://www.kamalashila.co.uk/>

http://www.kamalashila.co.uk/Meditation_Web/index.htm