

Tuning In to the Buddhafield *by Kamalashila*

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One of a series of talks on the theme of "A Force for Good in the World" given in the Dharma Parlour at the 2010 Buddhafield Festival in Somerset, UK.

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, if there are any. Welcome to this talk. I just have a couple of words introducing Kamalashila and then hand over to him.

I'll just tell you one reflection I've been having this morning and it just seems very relevant. When I joined Buddhafield I kind of thought I was going in to the simple life - you know, close to the land, woods and water, and stuff like that. And I kind of realized after a while, after some difficult experiences, that it was not really the simple life at all, it was the elemental life. Life was not simple, life was elemental - there was wind, rain, earth, fire, space. And simplicity was just to stay in your flat and watch tv, to make yourself a cup of tea and flick the switch and if you wanted to do something else you just pushed the button, it's really simple. So I hope you're enjoying the elemental life. Whether or not that's part of Kamalashila's talk I don't know. It's called "Tuning In to the Buddhafield."

Before I hand over I just want to say three things about Kamalashila, because he has been a Buddhist and a practitioner for many, many years. So I just thought I'd mention three things he's done over his many years of practice. So one was helping to start our main meditation centre, Vajraloka, in the Welsh Hills thirty years ago - opened as a meditation centre. It's celebrating its thirtieth anniversary this year, I believe. But when Kamalashila moved there it was just a ruined Welsh farmhouse with nothing. You know, the walls, I guess, but not much else. And they chose to move there, I'm not sure why, in the middle of winter together with thick snow on the ground to get going. There was no water supply. I heard stories of having to dig a trench right down the hill, across the bridge and up the valley the other side to pipe in their water. So, anyway, he did that - pretty elemental. Lived there for many, many years as Chairman of Vajraloka - kind of getting it going, as well as the building work - and there it is today, it's a great meditation centre.

The second thing was, some years later feeling some kind of impulse - some kind of inner impulse - to go on a long solitary retreat. So he took some time to set that up, to kind of get out of all the things he was into, but he eventually did that and went to Tipi Valley in Wales. Just put up a bender in a remote corner of Tipi Valley, which is in a remote part of the world, and did an eighteen-month solitary retreat. And I think he loved it so much he just stayed on and on and on afterwards and ended up living there four years. So quite a strong experience, I think, for Kamalashila. And I didn't know him well before, but I think he just came out of that different - something happened to Kamalashila. He was just

in touch with some different perspective. I remember one thing he was saying when he came out is “the elements are our friends,” - the elements are our friends. So in Wales, I mean, what do you get? Winds, water, et cetera, et cetera, but “the elements are our friends.” That was the next thing.

And then the third thing is kind of still in process, and maybe this will be part of his talk. After that long solitary retreat he had a strong impulse to form community, to come together in community. So from solitary to community, and I think he’s been on a quest for community ever since. It led him to join Buddhafield, which is a great big kind of network and community. It led him to Ecodharma up in the Spanish mountains - a new retreat centre we started. And now, by some mysterious chain of cause and effect, it’s led him down the mountain to go and live in London. But something to do with community there, an eco-community. You know, a “close to the elements” community. So, his talk is called “Tuning In to the Buddhafield.” I have no idea what he is going to say. I hope he does. I would just like to hand over to Kamalashila, and ask you to welcome Kamalashila - “Tuning In to the Buddhafield.”

Tuning in to the Buddhafield

Well, I don’t know what to say after that! And I just hope my glasses don’t slip off my nose, and that I can read my notes that have been written in the last couple of days - in very elemental circumstances, in pencil.

Well, I would like to start by making clear that what I’ve got to say about the Buddhas and their field of influence - their fields, their Buddhafields - it isn’t all from my own personal experience. Or rather, it is all from my personal experience but it’s more like how I interpret my experience in my own particular ways. You know, I read it - I assume we all do this actually - I read my experience in all kinds of ways. I read the signs, if you like, that come to me. Just for example, in modern life we’ve become accustomed to a very defined account of the world around us. It’s based on a fantasy that we exist as concrete, unchanging individuals whose world is simply what it seems to be - something that can be measured in terms of time and space.

But Buddhism takes a very different perspective on all that. The Buddhist vision of reality is that, basically, everything is alive. It’s a little bit like Lokabhandu was saying, “the elements are our friends,” I’d forgotten that one. Everything is alive, and each individual can awaken to this - you know, the nature of Reality. So when we hear this little phrase, “the nature of Reality,” it has a very particular meaning because when we start to think about the “nature” of something we start getting into the territory I’m going to try and get into in this talk.

(We use) this word “nature” in the sense of a characteristic quality of things, and I think this is the best and most meaningful use of the word “nature.” You know, the word “nature” can very easily slip into being used in a highly conceptual, abstract and also romantic way. So I can say, “I like nature.” I can say that. Or I can say, “I like being in

nature,” and you know what I mean by that. “I like being in the woods,” you know, “I like being in streams. I like streams, I like landscapes, I like skyscapes.” I can even like rain.

But woods and streams are just a part of nature in that sense. You know, because nature is everywhere - something Lokabandhu was also pointing to in his introduction - nature is everywhere. It’s in the city just as much. The sun and the moon still come and go. The seasons come and go. Day still follows night in the city. Stream and landscape even are still there in the city. They might be buried under quite a lot of concrete and all that, but it’s there. It’s there, nature is there as powerful as ever. So nature in this sense of the word is everywhere. It’s also in our body. It’s our body, and it is also our mind. In Buddhist terms it is *dharmaniyamata*. You don’t have to remember that, but it’s the ordered or natural aspect of all things. All things have a nature in that sense. So when I say, “I like being in nature,” I really mean, “I just like being out of the city” or “I just like it when it’s just me and a few other people around - just me and a few other human beings around.” And there are lots of other non-human beings.

That’s what I mean when I say, “I like nature,” because all words are abstractions. All words are abstractions because words are pointers to experience. They just point us to experience rather than the experience itself. That’s the nature of words. But some words are more abstract than others. And nature in this sense, “I like nature,” is a highly abstract and vague idea or concept. It’s a very flexible concept, put it like that. And so that’s why I like the way we use the word as in “the nature **of** something.” The nature of fire is to be hot, yeah? People have particular natures. It’s in the nature of jeans to, after a year or two, have holes in the knees, isn’t it? You know, it’s their nature. Grass grows, rain falls, grass is green, rain is wet. It’s their nature. Everything has its particular nature, its particular set of qualities - the way it works, the way its particular conditionings come about.

So that’s certainly the Buddhist way of looking at things - in other words, in terms of in all the conditions that bring stuff about. Or you could say the way things emerge from their unique conditionings that surround them. There are all kinds of natures in this sense. You can see many different realms of life with their different natures. Buddhism singles out of the infinite number of different natures of things the famous Five Niyamas, or natures you could say.

There’s matter in the sense of the elements of earth, water, fire and air, the planets, gravity, physics and chemistry. This is a big part of the world that we exist in, and nature operates in those particular ways in terms of gravity, et cetera. There is the whole biosphere - the realm of organisms like you and me, bodies, bacteria, organs of reproduction, digestion, growth, decay. So there’s that biological nature of things - green nature you could say, you could call it that. There’s the nature that governs mental functioning, like sensing - you know, perceiving things, responding to things, reacting to things. All beings sense one another in various ways. They detect the stuff that’s around them. There is an automatic coordination of hand and eye, or idea and voice. And there is the subtle nature of connection - that whole area that conditions how our senses

function and the way we create a world out of that sense of functioning. It's as though there is another whole realm of nature.

But then getting more subtle, Buddhism singles out in particular the nature of action, the nature of deliberate action. All conscious acts - everything we do consciously - has a particular effect on the person who acts, and this is a very particular realm of nature which Buddhism specializes in, you could say. It's the area of karma or ethics - karma meaning action - or you could say the area of directing the mind and of personal change. Ethical sensitivity has its own world of conditionality. The way you are sorry when you've hurt someone, so you do your best not to do that, you do your best to be kind - on a good day.

It just shows how subtle the conditionality is that we have around ethical sensitivity. We have it, (but there are all the ways) that it can go wrong - you can kind of slip from that ethical sensitivity and become very hardened to others' suffering. You can become totally hardened and insensitive to others' suffering. You can become more and more of a monster. And this, again, is a potential we all have - some of us more than others in different ways. This area of conditionality of the area of action of ethics, or action, or karma is also that whole area that covers what you do in your head. The acts you do without anyone knowing about them, and also those acts that you make very sure people do know about. And all that will, all that "will-ing," is having an effect on us behind the scenes. It's like Dorian Grey, you know, this guy in one of Oscar Wilde's short stories. He had a secret portrait of himself and this secret portrait reflected how he really was. So, in normal life he just looked like a nice handsome young guy, but up in his attic the portrait increasingly became more and more horrible, and more and more monstrous. And the more kindly he was in his real life the more beautiful this image became. That's a bit like us in a way.

So there are all these different natures, you could say, different aspects of our nature which we are very much in touch with. Everything has its particular nature and works only in accordance with its nature. Raindrops don't rise up in the sky, they just keep falling on our heads. Wounds fester or heal up - it just works that way. Food is digested - it works that way. If you open your eyes you are going to see something. It works that way, it's how eyes work. Be generous and it's usually going to have a good effect on everyone around. That's the way that works, you could say. So everything according to its nature.

Even spiritual development, even insight and awakening, has its own way of unfolding, has its own nature. And we can call that the "dharma nature" or the Dharma Niyama, the conditioning effect of the real truth of the way things are. When you come under the influence of Reality in this sense - actual reality - things happen. Things happen in particular ways. You come under its influence through your practice. Through the practice of waking to reality through *samatha* - calming the mind. Through helpful, ethical behavior. Through meditations like the Mindfulness of Breathing practice, which have a calming, harmonizing effect. And through your practice of *vipassana*, coming closer to the real truth of things through seeing their insubstantial nature - that's the other

branch, if you like, of Buddhist practice. And doing these things touches something very, very deep. Or looking at it another way, and perhaps a more real way, something touches you very deeply. You come into its orbit, under its influence, into the world of influences that is the *dharmakaya* or the Dharma Niyama. This is also called the “dharma nature,” the nature of Reality or Truth. And as you might notice in my talk I’m trying to paint a bit of a picture, give a feeling or an impression of the conditioned nature of all existence on all these different levels. We live in a world of influences within which we ourselves are an influence. That’s the way things really are. That’s *pratiyasamutpada* or conditioned arising. And we are a very important part of that pattern, and that’s the kind of area I would like to get into a bit in my talk.

Individually we inherit loads of influences, we inherit the influences from the deep past of our ancestors. The way our bodies are, our skills and also our knee-jerk responses in different areas, the nature of our biology and the nature of our perceptual processes, and the way those have emerged into the present, the present which is us. We inherit the very basic natural conditionings that are the great physical elements and the way they inter-react. All this we inherit with our birth as human beings. Everyone does. I’m only stating what you know but I’m trying to give a perspective on it. Our birth as human beings also connects us with the influence of our cultural and spiritual ancestors. You know, all the cultural traditions of the English, for example, or the Scots, the Irish, European, African. Whatever they are, whatever those influences are - their poetry, their myths, their science, their knowledge, arts, crafts, design and even fashion. Our spiritual ancestry, our spiritual ancestors, like the Buddha for example, they’re all there, if you like, in the background too. Even if we have no idea of the great spiritual practitioners in the many traditions, at the same time that they are there we inherit their influence. We come under their influence in some way, in ways that can be activated. So we are born into this great web of connections. And the more you reflect on this *pratyasamutpada*, this conditioned nature, the more you understand the various natures of all its parts, the more you can make it work for you in your search for awakening. And this is also where you can make yourself receptive to the influence of the Buddhas. This is where you can tune in to, in the terms of the title of my talk, the Buddhafield. It’s the field of influence of the awakened ones. This is what I mainly wanted to talk about.

It’s taken a while to get here because it is a very big picture that we sit in the middle of and that whole picture is relevant. As you probably know, the Buddhist Path emerges from the establishment of mindfulness or awareness. Mindfulness is the basis of the Buddhist Path. Mindfulness of the great elements, mindfulness of the body and its functions, mindfulness of the mind and its activity, mindfulness of the ethical value of all our actions attitudes, tendencies and habits. And mindfulness of the insubstantiality, the transparency if you like, of all things - including ourselves.

And all this practice (which many of us are doing, I would say the majority are doing this practice) of seeing through the transparency leads to those little “deaths” of the ego fantasy - our pride and our arrogance, our defensiveness, our concealment and all the things that are standing in the way of the unfolding of wisdom, everything becoming transparent and letting in the light. To put it in more mythic terms, the light of the

Dharmakaya, the real nature of life and existence. And all this being lived socially in community and society and relationship. You know, that's the Buddhist Path that leads out of the establishment of a ground of awareness and the taking action in the field of behavior. I wanted to sketch it out in this way to give some sense of the vastness of the field of our experience. You know, not only its vastness - vastness in a way can be a bit confusing even though it is vast - but also its character. Maybe this is the most important thing - its character, its quality, its nature. This is the important thing. Not only that it's alive but what the quality of that life is. It's this incredibly dynamic field that is our experience here and now - as we wake from sleep, as we lose consciousness and awareness and fall into the sleep state, as we are born into life and as we fall at death into the after-death state. Even in addition to all this incredibly varied experience that is our lives, I want to draw attention to it's also being a field of awakening - a Buddhafield.

I mentioned a little while ago that we are connected to many kinds of ancestors and that this ancestry includes Buddhas, bodhisattvas and other great practitioners - you know not being too exclusive, but includes Buddhist ones as well. But what does it mean to say that? You can say it simply means there is a link. Buddha gained awakening two and a half thousand years ago, roughly. His disciples practiced and passed on the fruits of their practice, and it's all been kept more or less alive, with its ups and downs. It's been kept alive down to the present and we, coming into the orbit of these teachings and practices, participate in their life of those practices. And that's what it means, this "Buddhafield." We have a connection, a living connection, with the influence of our spiritual ancestors. We are part of that lineage or that momentum, if you like. All that is obviously true and it's an important part of the meaning of the word "Buddhafield," *Buddha-kshetra* in Sanskrit.

But there's a far more lively and direct meaning which goes beyond the rather mechanized literal and historical, sensible viewpoint that can still be felt hovering in the background in all this talk of influences. That is that Buddhas are not just dead people who have an influence in the same way that dead poets or dead writers like Charles Dickens, or dead activists, or dead visionaries. They all have influence, but in this notion of the spiritual ancestry of the Buddhas, the Buddha's influence is particularly special. Nirvana, awakening or full enlightenment, *samyak-sambodhi*, is a state beyond life and death in which Buddhas continue to act for the benefit of unawakened living beings. So their Buddhafield isn't just a cultural memory, however lively and meaningful that memory remains, but is a field of live interaction, which includes the living energy of awakening. And this is in fact is the meaning of *Buddha-kshetra*, Buddhafield, and other such terms like Buddha Nature, *Dharmakaya*, Dharma Niyama, the nature of awakening.

But in some way, and I'm trying to be not too literal here, but in some way we do not yet understand awakened beings exist from their own side. I don't wish to suggest an interpretation of how the awakened ones exist - it's beyond my understanding. I only have my own conviction, based on my interpretation of my experience, that in some way the energy of awakening is a tangible force in the universe. But even just on that scientific principle of energy that states that "every action has an equal and opposite reaction" it seems to me reasonable that volitions and consciousness are not simply cut

off at death, and that the continuity of consciousness applies just as much to enlightened as to unenlightened consciousnesses. And that doesn't mean that Manjughosha, or Avalokiteshvara, or Tara, or Shakyamuni, and all the Buddhas of the great trichilocosm - it doesn't mean that they actually exist out there, maybe on glorious thrones. It doesn't mean that they exist out there concrete, real, and permanent any more than it means that you and I exist here concrete, and real, and permanent. We just don't know about either mode of existence. The reality of being - and that's also the kind of being we know, this kind of being - is beyond our understanding. All beings are said to be non-dual, insubstantial, indescribable actually, in their nature. So the manner of the Buddha's existence is no less and no more mysterious than our own. There is also a very interesting link - you know, we don't know what we are either.

All we can say is that their nature is perfectly wise and compassionate. So this field of compassionate energy is something that, in the words of my title, can be tuned into. It's not like tuning in like a radio, it's not a wavelength with a kind of certain frequency and suddenly you get it and it just starts coming in. It's more like one becomes attuned to a certain atmosphere, a certain vibe, a certain vibration. And how we do this I've already explained. It emerges from the path of mindfulness, integration, positive emotion and those spiritual deaths that come from insights. All is seen as transparent and the golden light of Dharma can start to emerge from them. And this is the classic, you can say, this is the classic Eightfold Path or the Threefold Way of ethics, meditation and wisdom. You can say it's that, simply that.

We can also see tuning into the Buddhafield in terms of sadhana meditation - in which the initiated person visualizes his or her own body as it really is, conditioned and transparent in the way I've been saying. With the centres of subtle energy at the crown, the throat, and heart, and elsewhere as well, illuminated by subtle colour, symbolic colour and mantric syllable. And this subtle body being filled by the light of the influence of one of the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, under whose protection that person has been placed by their Preceptor. We can see also tuning into the Buddhafield in terms of devotional practice, ritual and especially puja. Puja is just a non-specialized form of sadhana practice and it can be a very powerful, inspiring medium for connecting to and attuning oneself to the field of the Buddhas. You do it and it works - you can feel it working.

So I hope, just concluding now, I hope this will help show in more depth the purpose of some of the less obvious results of our spiritual practice of mindfulness, ethics, meditation and the development of wisdom. I feel it is good to bring in the dimension that is not me or mine, that is not my project, that it comes from beyond anything I can know or plan for.