

Buddhism and the Natural World

Deep Ecology, Community, and the Dharma

by Kamalashila

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I am not sure why it is, but we seem to be witnessing a new wave of interest in environmental issues. I remember in the early days of the movement, concern about the worsening state of the earth was very much in the air. For example, I remember I was part of the small team building Vajraloka in 1979. Atula was our boss. And Atula got me to make a composting toilet. As I remember I designed it like a huge throne, with a small ladder to take you up to the seat. Some of you may even have sat upon it. The actual seat was made from the same kind of mahogany as was used at the LBC shrine room. And after six to eight months, this wonderful throne brought forth huge barrels of rich, and quite odourless, dry manure. A very satisfying conclusion, I always thought, to that whole process. In the early Vajraloka community we also grew vegetables in the front garden – leeks and flowers. But as the 80s gave way to the nineties, compost –etc.– became less and less interesting – even, increasingly, almost an object of disdain. It seemed that the more agitated the green activists got, the more disdainful the popular response was. What became popular was money, material comfort and personal security. And for that whole decade, the ethics of nature and the environment seemed somehow irrelevant.

But now, something seems to be shifting. Maybe the shift started with the attack on the Twin Towers. That, and what followed, has been a deep shock. There now seems some sense that we need to look for new approaches. More inclusive approaches to life, approaches that don't depend on isolating ourselves from underprivileged nations and underprivileged people. Also there's an uncomfortable awareness of the damage our way of living has created, a sense that we need to find approaches that harmonise with the living forces of nature, instead of just isolating ourselves from them.

No doubt the shift, if there is one, is different for different people. It was a bit different for me; it happened over the eighteen month solitary retreat that I spent in a canvas dome, alone in the midst of wild nature. I went there soon after 9/11. I lived very simply, burning wood, drawing water from the hillside, and very immediately affected by the sun, rain, insects, animals, and the wind. That experience taught me how we always learn from nature, in a very simple way, in a way I, at least, seem largely to have forgotten. Nature very straightforwardly taught me how, for example, to let go my preferences, and my need for convenience.

I found that when you live on the side of a hill, you learn from simple natural facts. For example you often have to go outside into the weather. You cannot avoid it; you have to go out to get some more wood, get some water. To go to the toilet or clean your teeth,

you have to go out there. Often that is quite OK as you can imagine. You want to be outside. It is beautiful to be living in a grove of trees, with a view of hills and mountains. Sometimes, though, you feel resistance, and sometimes, if the weather is very cold or very wet - or you are very ill - there is great resistance. Yet there is no choice. Resistance or no resistance, you just have to go out there and do it.

After a few months of this, something shifts. You learn that it doesn't matter, that *it will be* OK to go outside even in the snow or the pouring rain. It is never as bad as you *think*. Indeed, you start to notice how much your thoughts actually cause your resistance, actually are your resistance. That one constructs a wall of ideas about how things are that merely obscures how things are.

Country people sometimes understand this better I think. In the country, you have to accept the weather. In the city, we can feel that nature hardly touches us. Perhaps that is how human beings have acquired that sense that somehow, we are more powerful than nature, or even we are something beyond it.

But this seems a very great mistake. To feel superior or even different from nature seems a great *hubris* or arrogance. For Buddhism there is no such separation. People, animals, insects and plants all participate, in an amazing diversity of ways, in what is essentially the same nature. What is that nature? That's something we need to reflect deeply about, if we want to try to approach it. But some kind of understanding of our place in nature seems an essential basis for gaining insight into reality.

Nature, as I understand it, is not separate from Buddha Nature. Bugs may be a long way from being Buddhas, but all beings partake of mind in some form. The only difference is in realisation of the nature of mind. So we should not reject nature, even subtly, but revere it as a teacher and expect insights from it. Of course, to see how nature is not different from Buddha Nature, we need to appreciate the connection with nature in the first place. That is a problem, because most of us, in our present society, are already quite alienated from it. So it's lucky that the dharma is precisely what counters alienation. The dharma is precisely what re-connects us to our real nature. That is, first of all, with simple nature – our elemental, embodied, earth-and-water nature. Secondly, and more fundamentally, with our Buddha Nature, with the fact that all forms of being somehow contain the seed of Buddhahood.

My talk today is an exploration of nature in both these senses. After my long retreat, I discovered deep ecology, and though I am totally unqualified, I want to share it with you. Because Deep ecology seems, potentially at least, to be a form of dharma. Certainly in the sense that it is a way into ultimate reality. And in our time, it seems important that we find forms of the dharma that address our place in the natural world.

So what's deep ecology? Well, ordinary ecology is the science of natural relationships. It's the study of all beings' relations to one another and to the physical environment in which they live. By studying how all beings relate to one another, studying them in all

their variety of needs and desires, I think one gains a kind of overview of all life, everywhere. This could lead to a kind of insight.

However, we tend to use our scientific knowledge to promote what we human beings want. On the whole, that comes to mean whatever ensures a comfortable and convenient lifestyle. So in that way, the potential for insight through an ecological world view is rather spoiled. Yes, you do get an overview of universal life, but there's a very strong self-serving ego observing it.

As we know, for insight to arise, the ego has to dissolve. And that's where 'deep' ecology comes in. Because it looks for a viewpoint on life within which mankind's needs form just part of the picture. The whole of life is seen as an interplay of forces, so one finds a truer, fuller, overview. Deep ecology is simply an exploration. It is not someone's fixed philosophy. It is a way that anyone can attempt to gain a deeper viewpoint, and act from it. Obviously the exploration is still a human construction, but nonetheless one tries to see things as they are, and with compassion. It is a vehicle in which one tries to let go human self-cherishing, to seek deeper truths, *undiscovered* truths, for the sake of benefiting the whole of life.

Perhaps in itself, this is still not quite Buddhism; but for existing Buddhist practitioners, I think this begins to evoke the perspective of the Mahayana. Ultimately, it looks like it can evoke even the perspective of simultaneous emptiness and compassion. For example, some Buddhist teachers take this perspective very deep indeed, right into *anatta*, *anicca*, and *sunyata*. For all life forms really do depend on each other, ultimately, for their existence. We actually define one another; and so, in a certain sense, we are one another. Here we start exploring interbeing or interconnectedness. My identity can't be described as separate from any being anywhere. In a sense I am my enemy, because she or he is not separate from me, and has a strong influence on me. We are all inseparable.

I know such reflections seem obscure when you're not in the mood, but that's inevitable; no one can explain interconnectedness in a way that everyone will find intellectually satisfying. Like everything, when you look into it, it is inconceivable and cannot be expressed in words. The real nature of identity and ownership can be revealed only to the individual, through deep reflection and meditation. And the experimental method of deep ecology gets us doing that - looking from the point of view of other beings, imagining what it is like to be them, looking out for their needs, and avoiding treating them with violence. Nature becomes the 'other' which can enable us to break through self and other. And 'other' is not limited merely to other *human* beings, though it doesn't exclude them either. Deep ecology is an ethical perspective that provides insights in our relations with *all* others.

An ecologist called Aldo Leopold remarked [1] on how we have enlarged our ethical sense over the years, and how this has enhanced human life. Not long ago, people could be disposed of like property. You could give away your son, wife or daughter to someone else, if you wanted to. And sometimes people do want to. You could sell them for cash. You could buy a servant. You could hang your slaves, execute your workers. We don't

do such things any more, thankfully. But we do still treat nature as though it were property. You can still do pretty much what you like to the land you own, and to the animals on it. Indeed, you *can* still *own* animals. You can still *own* land. When you think about it, owning other beings and their worlds comes to seem rather a peculiar idea. Leopold said that it will be a significant new evolutionary stage when human beings extend their notion of ethics to the environment, and we start actually feeling that *using* nature, like property, is wrong. The Mahayana Buddhist angle is that it is unethical to 'use' nature because nature is nothing else but living beings. Life *is* living beings. There is no life outside living beings. So it is wrong to use nature like property, because it would be an abuse of our own brothers and sisters. The land we have always lived on is not just soil. It is not just dirt. How can we see it like that. It is just not like that, not at all. If you look at it closely, you see it is a community of living beings. The reason we don't see this is because we are cut off from our place in that community.

To take our place in nature again - to notice our alienation and dissolve it - to cultivate this greater ethical awareness - we need to do more than just think through these issues. The main thing is to spend time in nature. Change isn't going to happen through thought alone. For us westerners, being in nature can be one of the profoundest meditations we can engage in. For it shows us our natural place amongst living beings.

I wonder if we have any sense of this at all; maybe you're thinking, why does this matter. Well, if you're a typical Buddhist, you probably feel you need to be on your own sometimes. And that a good way to get some solitude is to go into the country. That's why a lot of people move out to the country, or do country retreats. Your experience is that you go to the country for a week, say, and you are refreshed. But is that refreshment really a consequence of being alone? It may have a lot to do with not having other humans around, but in fact, when we go into the country we are not alone at all. We are much more alone in the city, actually. In the city, there is just tarmac, glass, machines and some other humans. OK, a few flies and cockroaches, maybe a pigeon or two. But in the country, we are surrounded by vast numbers of non human beings. Surrounded by plants, trees, grasses, birds, insects, animals –thousands upon thousands of them. Maybe it's just a coincidence, but I have wondered if some of the refreshment we feel by going into the countryside is actually a consequence of that experience of the sheer diversity of living nature. I'm not sure, but maybe that is a spiritual need – something we recognise only dimly, because of our habitual mode of life and our way of thinking of nature.

Anyway... we don't feel that very often, if we ever do. On the whole, our family relationship with nature is rather dysfunctional. We don't have much sensitivity to others in that community. We tend not to notice or think about them. So perhaps we need to ask more, 'what *is* nature? What *is* life?' Make it an insight practice to look, with full openness, at natural things. It can be a beneficial and refreshing reflection to look deeply at plants and other beings, to read about and study them, to try to understand their existence and their point of view.

The Buddha himself lived out of doors. And all spiritual practitioners benefit, like him, from deep contact with nature. We can all use that awareness, in the Mahayana spirit, to

gain insight into reality. Meditation, too, in the sense of dhyana, offers us a way to connect deeply with nature: it's also a kind of communion with vast, unexpressed nature, manifest in the four great elements, the great spirits, the Mahabhutas.

Nature is vastly other than ourselves. We can use its powerful otherness to see beyond conventional ego. And in a more obvious way, involvement in nature offers insight into ourselves simply because we ourselves are *part* of nature. "Nature" is never somewhere else, in a park or a flower pot. Just look at your own body and senses, and you realise how much you don't understand even that which is closest to you and which governs by far the greatest part of your needs and desires. We can discover our alienation from nature, and the reunion we need with nature, right here inside our clothes. Our relationship with nature is there in the way we hold ourselves, it is there in our tension and stress. Perhaps it is even there in our disease. We think of nature as being somewhere else somehow, but our own bodies are incredibly mysterious, wild nature. We can become so much more intensely conscious of the earth, water, and fire of our body, and of its movement in space. All these are great mysteries. Perhaps if we became more physical and sensuous, we'd practice more fully the foundations of mindfulness: awareness of the body, its sensations, its feelings, its immediate tactile reality. Then its pleasures and its joys. Then our responses, and our understanding of what is really going on. What are bodies? There is so much here that relates to our social relations, our sexuality, and our sense of community. Through these things, nature provides gentle feedback that is humbling and humiliating. So it's easy for us subtly, perhaps without really noticing, to withdraw from its light. For nature is so awesome in its diversity and its devastating power. Its otherness transcends the ordinary world even though it is none other than the ordinary world.

Nature is the reality of otherness. In the FWBO we talk a great deal about the insight of transcending self and other. And we talk about the Mahayana perspective of connecting with vast numbers of living beings. We talk about creating Pure Lands etc... yet it seems we tend to think of all these living beings as *human*. Sometimes we perhaps may think of them as angels. But certainly nothing much "below" the human realm gets included. Our imagination of the world tends to consist solely of humans and human artefacts: human buildings, human technology, human relations. Human art, human culture. We know that animals etc., do of course come under the category of 'other beings', but when we think of the Bodhisattva going around benefiting others, I reckon we think, mostly, of *human* others. I wonder why, when there are so many *other* others just as evident to our senses.

The standard answer there is, of course, that human beings are in the best position to benefit from a Bodhisattva's dharma teachings. Humans are uniquely able to listen, understand and apply the teachings. Animals, insects and plants just don't have time, leisure and opportunity. Or the intelligence, we like to think. But their receptivity to us is hardly the point. Their apparent lack of what *we* have is hardly relevant. Because there is such a thing as compassion, empathy, and friendship. The point for a practitioner is, surely, that they *exist*. Other beings do have a life, and they definitely have needs. And in our society, for most of the time, we don't even *know* that they are there. This, for Buddhists, especially Mahayana Buddhists, seems quite odd. No, it seems to me that we

have a duty towards our fellow beings, simply because they are there and have definite needs. Their apparent lack of intelligence is not only irrelevant, it demonstrates the vulnerability we need to be aware of. And the fact that our present society is systematically walling them up in a kind of tomb, covering over their existence with concrete, and media culture, - that fact makes our duty as Buddhists even stronger, it seems to me.

Buddhists are going to want to protect the needs of their fellow beings. That's where our practice leads. I think we want to be aware of others' existence, and *not* behave as though our world consists only of humans, or that it is appropriate to mistreat non-human beings.

No disrespect is intended here towards humanity. There may seem to be a conflict between the emphasis I'm making here, on our place in the overall community of nature, and the emphasis in traditional Buddhism on the importance of *human* birth and *human* enlightenment. But there isn't really a conflict – it's just different for our time and culture. Traditional Buddhism arose within natural cultures, societies in which everyone was well connected with nature. Our present society is, I think, extreme. It seems to have become unusually artificial, extraordinarily separated from natural realities. I imagine on the whole, much of society in the Buddha's day was the other way round. Certainly there were far fewer people, and there was far more wilderness. Then, nature was unavoidable. And it was dangerous. It was overwhelming. Human beings clustered in towns for security. But nowadays it's the town that is everywhere, and there is virtually no wilderness anywhere. There are only '*designated* wilderness areas' - which seem rather like contradictions in terms.

Sometimes deep ecology is caricatured as being against the human race, somehow, because humans are the ones causing the ecological problems. I think this *is* a caricature, or an extremist interpretation. Deep ecologists do make the distinction that I described earlier, between anthropocentrism - an overview of life that is human-centred - and ecocentrism, a more objective overview that includes all points of view. But the analysis is just operational, for understanding the situation better. Deep ecology is not really saying that anthropocentrism's bad, and ecocentrism's good. It's simply pointing out that our human centred-ness poses certain ecological problems. We are far, far more powerful, and are capable of far, far more greed and violence, than any other beings on the planet. That capability has certain implications. For one thing, it implies that we should be responsible in our behaviour towards others. Even for our own good.

The reason that Buddhism puts so much stress on the human state, as we know, is only because it's us who can talk and think about enlightenment. Buddhism is not saying that other beings are unimportant, just because they can't do that. This is evident from the Buddha's own very respectful behaviour towards animals and other non human beings, and his recommendations to his disciples.

Their capacity for enlightenment is not the issue. The issue is that nonhuman beings are aware in more or less the same way as we are. They have bodies that feel. They have eyes. They have ears. They have skin. So they feel pleasure. So they feel pain. They

experience positive emotions and negative emotions. They have likes and dislikes. They get hungry, and they get horny. They become sick, and pretty soon they die. Just like we do. The objects and qualities of all these feelings are different, but then their worlds are different. Just like ours, really. So I think we should reflect about the actual reality of their awareness. We should not dismiss other beings simply because they do not, apparently, have the capacity for enlightenment. Remember, we aren't enlightened either. And they are there. So for now, they are part of our family and they deserve our respect, because they depend upon us, and because we can learn from their very existence.

They can give us clues as to what awareness is. They can teach us something about our Buddha Nature. They can also be our teachers when they hold a mirror up before us. If we see our own attitudes towards animals, insects and plants, we can learn a lot about ourselves. If we are happy to treat *any* other being badly - even a plant, or an insect - it is affecting our mind right now. Violence happens in the heart, and it's a painful obstruction. That's why it helps us, as practitioners, to acknowledge attitudes we have towards the natural world.

I would like to talk in this context about community, and now I'm talking about human community, Buddhist spiritual community. The way we live together. The way we eat, sleep, work, talk to one another. The way we love one another; the way we reflect on one another, and even gain insight through our awareness of one another. I have spent most of my 33 years around the FWBO living in men's Buddhist communities, and I am very grateful for that opportunity. It was definitely what I wanted, and I am sure I would not have continued my Buddhist life more than just a few years without it. It is a very rare opportunity, indeed, even in the Buddhist world.

Single sex communities have never been socially acceptable in the usual sense. I can't see that they can ever be, by their nature. It took Bhante's particular vision and encouragement in the first place to enable us to create single sex situations. I think that was an incredibly effective piece of Bodhisattva work. I'm very pleased to see that single sex communities seem to be surviving our current phase of re-evaluating what we do. I am not really surprised, though. If it was what I wanted as a young man, it's likely to be what many other young people also want for themselves. And we have developed a lot of our FWBO culture on that basis. It is something very strong, and probably this is also a factor in their survival. The human bonds and the social habits we lay down in these situations impress themselves deeply upon us.

There has been an underside to this as well. It was from the underside of the single sex ideal that we also evolved our own, probably unique, culture of couples. I find it amazing that this came about in such an underground way. We have virtually no Dharma teachings, no Sangha teachings, for couples or for families - apart, perhaps from Bhante's 15 points for Buddhist parents. Couples and families have, on the whole, excluded themselves, or felt excluded, from the FWBO mandala. We have virtually no mixed communities, so far as I know, though there must be some; certainly there is no culture of mixed community within the FWBO.

It's interesting, then, that community is one of the FWBO's biggest successes. Community is always very difficult to achieve, so there have necessarily been many failures and mistakes over the years, but we've learned a lot and succeeded much more than we've failed. I wonder if now we have the maturity to extend that success into the area of couples, mixed community, and family. I feel that this would bring great benefits, and also if we try at this point, then we are likely to maintain a spiritual connection with more of us over the years.

Recently I was at Dharmavastu and I came across an old, yellowing FWBO Newsletter clipping inside one of their library books. It was a book review by Bhante called '*DH Lawrence and Spiritual Community*'. Reviewing a biography of Lawrence, the substance of Bhante's commentary was about Lawrence's failure to realise his ideal of a community. Lawrence had written about a new kind of relationship, which involved 'some sort of tenderness, sensitive, between men and men, and men and women – not the one up one down, lead on I follow... sort of business'. But he had totally failed to bring it about, and Bhante analysed this and drew some very useful conclusions from it about how to make community work. Bhante has actually commented quite a lot on community living over the years – he made quite a study of it in the eighties, and his concern in this area is, I think, one of the principal things we can thank him for.

In this review, which I think is reprinted in one of Windhorse's anthologies of his writings, Bhante comes up with four principles of spiritual community. They are, and I'm sure they are familiar to almost all of us:

1. *the spiritual community consists of individuals.*
2. *the 'couple' is the enemy of the spiritual community.*
3. *the spiritual community is not a group.*
4. *the spiritual community must have a common ideal and a common method of practice.*

What stands out from these, apart from the very strong reference to the 'couple', is the clarity of Bhante's insistence that one must strive to be an individual in co-operation with others. A spiritual community is only such when its members work on themselves and try to be, in his words, '*self-aware, able to think for (themselves), emotionally positive, creative rather than reactive in ... attitude toward life, spontaneous, sensitive, and responsible*'. And the spiritual community is the sum total of the non-exploitive, non-addictive relationships between such people. If its members don't work on themselves to become individuals in the sense defined, what we have is not a spiritual community but merely a 'group'. If one can't relate to others as individuals, one will do so in that '*one up, one down, lead on I follow*' sort of way that Lawrence criticised. It may be that one reason Lawrence's community failed was because he felt he had to relate as a leader, and no one wanted to relate to him like that. One of them responded by saying, '*I think you are asking what no human being has a right to ask another*'.

I think its very good we have been schooled so well in these inspiring principles; I think they certainly bear looking at again. Especially the fourth principle of spiritual community, that it 'must have a common ideal and a common method of practice'. We have all that. We have the meditation and ethical practices of Buddhism, and the ultimate overview of dharma which enables them all to become insight practices.

The second of Bhante's principles, 'the 'couple' is the enemy of the spiritual community' has probably been misunderstood. Indeed, I can't see that it can be otherwise when it's put in those terms. The word 'couple' is in single inverted commas to indicate it holds a very particular meaning. And this is, 'two people, usually of the opposite sex, who are neurotically dependent on each other and whose relationship, therefore, is one of mutual exploitation and mutual addiction. A couple consists... of two half people, each of whom unconsciously invests part of his or her total being in the other: each is dependent on the other for the kind of psychological security that can be found, ultimately, only within oneself'.

It's clear Bhante was referring, not to each and every sexual partnership, but to a certain *kind* of couple. Or perhaps to couples going through a certain phase in their life together. I suspect this particularly colourful analysis was very influential on our sexual relations in the past, and that in some ways we continue and pass that on to others. Whatever the effect, though Bhante's motive seems to be to get his readers to acknowledge the key problems in sexual relationships, the very difficult energies that can be involved between men and women. These energies can cause people to lose their individuality and relate solely in terms of the group, or the 'couple', single inverted commas, which is a group of two.

This is presumably the underlying reason why we, in the FWBO, have so far not encouraged mixed community in any form, even though the great majority of us pursue one or another kind of sexual relationship. Bhante had a point then; has a point now. However, since the point is never going to stop people having sexual relationships, I think it is a shame that we have so far not tried to address that point positively. There is no '15 points for Buddhist couples', or for Buddhist families. It is clearly possible for a couple, or a family, to be less of a group and more of a spiritual community, even allowing for the powerful energies involved in sexual and family relations. The way forward would be to make all this more conscious in actual living situations. I do think the time has come for some more experimental kinds of community, mixed community living. Well, it's very easy to say that since I know of at least three such projects currently forming.

For myself, having learned much from many years of single sex community living, and perhaps even more from eighteen months of solitude, I find I no longer want to live entirely alone; I find myself drawn to the challenge that mixed spiritual community living represents. But I would like it large and loose rather than small and intense. I feel this is what I need now, I know it is what a lot of us want, and I also feel that if we can find successful ways to do this, we will greatly enrich the FWBO mandala. I think it is my

experience with Buddhafield that has persuaded me that it's possible for a group of men and women to become a spiritual community under Bhante's definition. It is clear from his fourfold analysis that a single sex community is not by that fact a spiritual community. What counts is that it consists of people trying to act as individuals, who therefore do not relate as a group, and who have ideals and practice in common. I believe many male and female Order members, and many others too, are now capable of being that, and doing that, together in community.

There is no time to say more about the many interesting issues that arise in this connection. To my mind, one important connection is that of the view of deep ecology, and especially with its inspiringly positive vision of natural living. One reason for creating mixed community is to use it as a basis for insight into reality. I cannot imagine a mixed situation working unless its members are committed practitioners. When committed practitioners come together, there will be spiritual progress which means insight into reality.

Notes

[1] Aldo Leopold, *'A Sand County Almanac'*, Oxford University Press

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

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