

# **Ecology and Ecstasy**

*by Ratnadevi*

## **Introduction**

This piece of writing is based on a talk I gave at the Glasgow Buddhist Centre on February 21, 2002, to launch an eco-group. As well as generally exploring ecological issues, the aim of this group would also be to suggest contributions for communal rituals within the overall seasonal programme, that emphasise change in attitude towards the environment.

Ecology and ritual (within a Buddhist context) present the theme of a doctoral research I am currently undertaking at Dartington College, Devon, UK. As part of my research I am interested to see how rituals can be used in the field of Buddhist environmentalism. I am interested to find out, essentially, how rituals can become part of a discovery process that 'reveals our nature as nature' as Wes Nisker says. When we engage in ritual, we might be using chanting, poetry, instruments, movement, dress, objects, sculpture, textiles - in short, we are using various art forms to create a special atmosphere, just like our ancestors have done for millennia. It is an atmosphere that opens our often tightly protected bodymind to feel included in a larger reality. This ritual experience, in combination with meditation could be an important vehicle for a transformation of consciousness that will shift our attitude towards our planet.

*'And you might awake one morning and find that nature is part of you, literally internal to your being. You would then treat nature as you would your lungs or kidneys. A spontaneous environmental ethics surges forth from your heart, and you will never again look at a river, a leaf, a deer, a robin, in the same way'* Ken Wilber

## **Context: FWBO developments**

Within the FWBO (Friends of the Western Buddhist Order), the topic of Buddhist attitudes towards the environment has recently been brought to the fore, largely due the initiative of Lokabandhu, an order member who is involved with Buddhafield (a branch of the movement specialising on out-door events, camping retreats and festivals. ). But as early as 1975, during the 2nd order convention, Sangharakshita, the founder of the order said, that 'there is no doubt that we should be more conservation-minded'. He pointed out that awareness of nature and natural resources is part of basic Buddhist teaching. During the last year an informal group was founded called 'PS network'. PS stands for Pratitya Samutpada, conditioned co-production, or dependent co-arising. PS represents the Buddha's insight into the true nature of existence, the truth of interconnectedness. This PS network has representatives in most UK Buddhist centres (I am the Glasgow rep) and operates a website: [www.ecopractice.fwbo.org](http://www.ecopractice.fwbo.org). The aim of the group is to further ecological awareness and action within the FWBO. (Last summer, Lokabandhu introduced the chairmen's meeting to a 5 point eco-action plan, which was met with

general support. The 5 points are: 1. consuming less, 2. consuming more wisely, 3. going carbon-neutral, 4. creating and safeguarding havens for wild-life, 5. raising awareness.)

### **Difficulties communicating about the subject**

My previous experience of discussing environmental topics with friends has sometimes been difficult. On reflection, this is probably partly due to bad timing: yes it is true that carbon dioxide emission caused by air travel is 30 times higher than that of trains, but you don't want to be told that just when you are in the process of booking a cheap flight to London. And you probably don't want to hear that the chocolate you are just about to pop into your mouth is produced through exploitation of cheap labour and degradation of the land. It's a bit like being caught in the act, and one is likely to resent being told off for being selfish and uncaring, or feel that one is not allowed to enjoy oneself. In other words, feelings of guilt kick in only too easily and one might be quick to think, rightly or wrongly, that the person who is educating us about these matters is sitting on a rather high horse.

### **Avoiding reactivity**

So my aim here is to present the subject in a way that doesn't invite this kind of reactivity, that doesn't evoke feelings of guilt or resentment. Nor do I want us all to get depressed or despairing, which is another likely response to hearing about impending catastrophes like global warming. I would like to help create an atmosphere where we feel encouraged to apply the best in us to contemplate the frightening developments of the last decades. Where we get in touch with the courage to face the truth, with loving kindness for all beings on the earth, including those of the future, with a healthy sense of ethics, responsibility, intelligence and creativity. I'd like us to find inspiration and confidence that there are ways in which we can make changes to the way human beings live on this planet. Maybe we can even be ecstatic about ecology! Sangharakshita has made it very clear that there is an imperative for us to face the world situation, and he is of course not the only Buddhist leader who thinks that way. In his lecture 'Current world problems' he said: *'Our initial reaction may be a very strong one...but only too often, when the initial feeling of indignation, or concern, or outrage, or worry had died away, has exhausted itself, the feeling that we experience is simply one of helplessness..... We close our newspaper, or we switch off the television set, and we get on, perhaps, as best we can, with our personal lives; and we try to forget the current world problems.... In my opinion, thinking all this over, this sort of attitude, of just retreating from the problems, retreating into the personal in a rather narrow sense, is really not worthy of a human being, one who's trying to be a human being in the full sense of the world.'*

The information has been available for a long time, we have all known about climate change, loss of bio-diversity, environmental pollution, world wide decline of quality of life, etc for at least 30 years. When I first became aware of these issues as a teenager, I

was passively caught between 2 attitudes: on the one hand I had an inkling that this wasn't just information to be treated lightly, that is was not just another unessential item on the curriculum, but that these were matters of urgent importance. On the other hand, I believed that adult human beings in positions of responsibility would surely not let this happen, that this decline would be stopped by others who were more capable than me. Three decades further down the line, I recognise that in some areas progress has been made, for example the cold war has come to an end and the danger of nuclear war is perhaps not quite so imminent as it was then. Many of us in the developed countries have changed some of our habits, maybe we recycle some of our waste, use low energy light bulbs, cycle to work. But there is no doubt that there is need for more, and perhaps more drastic changes, not just on a personal level. Because if we look at the world wide situation, it does seem that we are rushing like lemmings to the edge of the cliff to commit collective suicide. Before having a look at some of the facts, lets prime ourselves with a poem by Wendell Berry, an American farmer and poet.

*The Peace of Wild Things*

*When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
or grief. I come into the presence of still water:  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting with their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and I am free.  
(in: Openings)*

**Some facts**

(mainly from: the Little Earth Book)

Perhaps we can retain the flavour of poetry in our hearts, as we turn to face some facts about our world.

Global warming: The IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on climate change has recently revised its prediction from the Rio summit in 1992, because within this decade global temperatures have been rising faster than predicted in their 'worst case' scenario. The panel now says global temperatures will rise 6 degrees Celsius over the coming century. Others say at least 10 degrees. There is no doubt that this is caused by the green house effect, due to human induced increased carbon dioxide emissions. There is uncertainty about the consequences of this climate change, the last time it happened was half a million

years ago; we don't know whether the West Antarctic ice sheet will collapse and raise ocean levels by 6 meters. But we know what happened 1998, the hottest year on record. Flooding of the Yangtze river displaced 56 million people. 26 million were made homeless in Bangladesh. Hurricane Mitch killed 18,000 people.

Water: most freshwater in the world is in aquifers, which means groundwater, and a quarter of the world's population depends on them for drinking. Yet all over the world, aquifers are being depleted, and many of them are not going to be replaced. Even those being replenished by surface water have problems: 60 % of the nitrate fertilisers used in farming remain in the soil and gradually seep into the groundwater, where it is joined by other pollutants. Global consumption of freshwater is doubling every 20 years. One billion of people already suffer from a shortage of fresh water. It is estimated that two-thirds of the world population will suffer severe water shortages in 25 years. This shortage is entirely man-made - we could choose to give priority to people rather than industry and industrial agriculture (which at present use up 90% of our water).

Food: February is naturally a lean month in this part of the world; even a few decades ago, most people would have needed to be content to eat oats, cabbage, brussels sprouts, potatoes. Now it seems like paradise: from tomatoes to avocados, products from all over the world are readily available, at lower prices than ever before. Supermarkets will buy from abroad if they can get the food cheaper, even if it could be grown in this country. Can this continue, given our serious problems with fuel pollution?

75% of food costs in the developed world lies in processing, packaging, and distributing. In 1996 Britain exported 119,000 tonnes of fresh milk and imported 114,000 tonnes. Carbon dioxide emissions for the transport of 1kg of apples from New Zealand amount to 1000 grams, compared to 50 grams for locally grown apples. Daffodils from Cornwall go to Lincoln in refrigerated lorries, are flown to Holland for packaging, then flown back to the north of England, put onto another plane, and flown to New York for sale.

There are lots of other dangerous practices around the production of food: genetic manipulation, chemical farming, monoculture, practices that contribute to pollution, loss of bio-diversity, and ultimately starvation. Already 1 billion people in the earth face daily insecurity about whether they will find anything to eat. There are many more issues that I could mention here, but maybe it is time to move on to the next point which is the question:

### **Why do we not act?**

Or: why do we not act more decisively, thoroughly, quickly? After all, our very survival on this planet is threatened.

In December 2001, I read a Guardian article entitled 'The lazy person's guide to saving the planet'. The author, Polly Toynbee informs us about the new wind power, Juice,

which works in operation with npower and is being endorsed by Green Peace. The more people switch over to Juice, the more windmills are going to be built, at a site off the north Wales coast, and it costs exactly the same as ordinary electricity. She also mentions Fair Trade, Ecover products, recycling etc, and asks ‘All these things are dead easy - a simple consumer choice. So why not?’ She thinks that inertia is the only enemy here, plus ‘a sinking heart at the thought of “doing good”’. It is worth being curious about this question ‘why not’? There might be more to discover behind this inertia.

## **Despair**

Joanna Macy, an American Buddhist ecologist has some very useful and enlightening comments to make on this topic of our psychological responses to impending global disaster. She wrote at a time when nuclear war was an imminent danger: *‘As a society we are caught between a sense of impending apocalypse and the fear of acknowledging it. In this “caught” place our responses are blocked and confused.’* She thinks we are leading ‘double lives’: *‘On one level we maintain a more or less up-beat capacity to carry on as usual.....and all the while , underneath , there is this inchoate knowledge that our world could go at any moment. Awesome and unprecedented in the history of humanity, it lurks there, with an anguish beyond the naming. Unless we find ways of acknowledging and integrating that level of anguished awareness, we repress it; and with that repression we are drained of the energy we need for action and clear thinking.’*

Macy has not only explored the topic of Buddhist environmentalism through many books, but also run workshops and trained workshop leaders world-wide. Here is an example of the kind of questions she asks:

### **Why in my daily life do I avoid expressing my deep concern about the future of the planet?**

Some of Joanna Macy’s suggestions :

Fear of pain; our culture conditions us to view pain as dysfunctional...

Fear of appearing morbid: feelings of anguish and despair for the world can appear to be a failure of stamina or even competence. ..

Fear of appearing stupid: we should not complain about a situation, unless we have a solution...

Fear of guilt: through our lifestyle we are accomplices...

Fear of causing distress: reluctant to burden our loved ones with our inklings of apocalypse...

Fear of Provoking disaster: superstition that negative thoughts are self -fulfilling....

Fear of sowing panic...

Fear of appearing too emotional...

Sense of separate existence: assuming that all our drives are ego-centred, we tend to wonder if feelings of despair for our planet are not manifestations of some private

neurosis.’

### **The 5 viniyatas**

The examining of mental states is something Buddhists have always been good at. It is a gift we can bring to the world-wide campaign for planetary health. We know it’s not enough to have good intentions, as every period of meditation proves to us again and again. To follow through our intention requires a high degree of self knowledge and artfulness, or skilfulness, be it in the arena of meditation or ecologically informed action. We need to know how the mind works. The Abidharma development of early Buddhism consisted in the categorisation of the vast body of teachings on the nature of the mind and the universe. Here we find listed the 5 viniyatas, or object determining mental events: first there is chanda, interest, then comes adimoksha, intensified interest that stays with the object, then you need smrti, or continuity of attention, fourthly samadhi, sustained engagement, and finally prajna, penetrative understanding. I will mainly expand on the first viniyata, and briefly mention the others.

**Chanda, inspiration, drive, enthusiasm** constitutes the basis of our engagement, and it might well be that the answer to the question ‘why not?’ is to be found here. We obviously need more than the knowledge of facts to stimulate the desire to change our behaviour. Knowing what’s going on is not enough. The ecological arena can seem to be devoid of inspiration, but filled with dread - we get ourselves to act, perhaps, we ‘do our bit’, but there can be a dry, joyless feel to it.

I think we need to bring in more passion and poetry into our encounter with the ailing world, rekindle the shamanic spirit of our ancestors many of whom lived in harmony with the land. This does not just mean to ‘rest in the grace of the world’ as Wendell Berry says in the poem quoted above. Here is Gary Snyder (quoted in: Urthona, Art and Buddhism, issue 16): *‘Life in the wild is not just about eating berries in the sunlight. I like to imagine a ‘depth ecology’ that would go to the dark side of nature - the ball of crunched bones in a scat, the feathers in the snow, the tales of insatiable appetite. Wild systems are in one elevated sense above criticism, but they can also be seen as irrational, moldy, parasitic....’* Snyder draws inspiration from the wild, he talks about the ‘art of the wild’ and ‘ecologies of the imagination’. Ecology celebrates the wildness of eco systems, their interconnectedness and complexity, diverse, ancient and full of information. Our human psyches are just like that. *‘Shame, grief, embarrassment and fear are the anaerobic fuels of the dark imagination.’*

I believe we can learn to transform the very fears that let us shrink into self-protective passivity, into wholehearted living, that includes more active care for the environment. One way to do that is through appreciation of the arts and creative expression: dance, writing, painting. These art forms serve as vehicles to realign us with the spirit and the textures of nature. As Snyder says: *‘art is a matter of discovering the grain of things, of uncovering the measured chaos that structures the natural world.’*

## **Should we all become artists?**

It depends on how you define the arts, of course. One writer, Ellen Dissinayake says, art is simply 'making special'. She looks at the origins of the arts and finds them arising in the context of ceremonies and rituals. *'The arts "enabled" ceremonies because they made ceremonies feel good. Before they were ever consciously used to make things special, the satisfactions of rhythm, novelty, order, pattern, color, bodily movement, and moving in synchrony with others were fundamental animal pleasures, essential ingredients of life.'* So what I am saying is that it would be good to have access to simple, pleasurable, sensuous forms of expression. I think that perhaps many of us are sitting too much, engaged in cerebral activities, behind double glazing (which is good from the heat conservation point of view, of course, but cuts us off from the elements). And we can perhaps use our pujas and other rituals in more creative, and at the same time ordinary ways, let them be part of our lives again, as they used to be for ten thousands of years. Let's claim back our natural capacity for ecstasy (and I don't mean the drug) and make that the driving force for saving the planet.

## **Rituals for the Five Buddhas**

The mandala of the 5 Buddhas is a framework that can give us a sense of ritual in the old way, as being part of the natural cycle of the seasons. Each of Buddhas is connected with a direction in space, and with the elements. Akshobya is connected with water, Ratnasambhava with earth, Amitabha with fire, Amogasiddhi with air, Vairocana with space. I would like to look at ways of linking the ecological endeavour around the centre with these Buddhas.

A ritual for the Buddha Akshobya for example would contain a simple water ritual: During a guided meditation you hold a pebble and gradually imbue it with aspects of your mind that you want to transform: emotions that create disturbances on the clear surface of the lake (an image associated with the mirror-like wisdom of Akshobya, the wisdom that sees things as they are). We also bring to mind ways in which we pollute and waste water. Then we drop the pebble into water (which could be contained in a vessel indoors, or a body of water outside), one by one, taking the time to listen to the sound and watch the ripples gradually calming into a still surface between the throws. A simple, aesthetically satisfying ritual action of purification.

Having explored chanda, ways to inspire our interest, our passion, let's look at the second viniyata, more briefly:

## **Adimoksha**

This is perhaps not unlike the attitude Blake called 'Firm Persuasion', a sense of dedication, based on inspiration. 'My fingers Emit sparks of fire with Expectation of my

future labours' he writes to his patron, promising his hard work. (in: Blake, William. William Blake (The Oxford authors) , ed. Michael Mason. Oxford University Press 1988.) Setting out boldly in our work, full of determination, without being too rigid in our expectations.

### **Smrti**

mindfulness, in the sense of continuous application of our efforts. Remembering to turn the lights off when leaving a room. It really comes down to remembering the principles, the precepts, our ethical guidelines. Should Buddhists eat bananas? And what do Buddhists do with banana peel ? (At this stage in the talk a passed round an example of compost from my allotment, which even contained a worm)

### **Samadhi**

meditation, in the sense of absorption. Meditation leads to contentment, being satisfied with simple things, consuming less. Enjoyment comes from within rather than seeking continuous outside stimulation.

### **Prajna**

Penetrative understanding, or wisdom, in terms of ecological awareness, would be the felt sense that we are all part of a living system and profoundly interconnected. When this knowledge is arrived at through sustained practical efforts in behaving ethically sensitively towards the environment, and supported through meditation, celebrated in ritual, it will be more than just an intellectual understanding. It will have become part of who we are; we will be living it. We will have let go of separateness, the big vulnerable ego. We will have learned to let go of some of our craving for ever more pleasure and comfort to make way for a deeper contentment.

*'I lived for hundreds of years as a mineral,  
And then died and was reborn as a plant.*

*I lived for hundreds of years as a plant,  
And then died and was reborn as an animal.*

*I lived for hundreds of years as an animal,  
and then died and was reborn as a human being.*

*What have I ever lost by dying?*

*(Rumi, version by Robert Bly)*



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