

Earth-touching Buddha

Kamalamani

SYNOPSIS

This article uses the traditional image of the earth-touching Buddha to explore creative relationships between Buddhism in theory and practice, ecopsychology, Embodied-Relational Therapy, Reichian character theory and climate change politics. It describes a developing earth-based, 'underneath' approach to spirituality. A poem by Pablo Neruda, 'Keeping Quiet', twines through and dialogues with the article.

It is said that Gary Snyder, the great Beat Generation poet, spent 40 years writing 'Mountains and Rivers Without End', his epic poem about Native American mythology, Zen Buddhism, and humans' connection with wider nature (Snyder, 2006). That is almost as long as I've been wandering the planet; no wonder it feels daunting to write about ecopsychology. I bow to the elders in this field, both living and long gone.

What I *am* able to write about is a recurring image for me at this point in my life and practice; that of the earth-touching Buddha. The Buddha sits, quiet and still, in

meditation. The fingers of his right hand lightly touch the earth. The historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, is said to have made this 'mudra', or hand gesture, on the night of his enlightenment; the night he fully woke up and saw things as they are, rather than as he was. In touching the earth he called the earth goddess to witness – she who had seen all the twists and turns in his enlightening path.

The image of the earth-touching Buddha makes sense of where and how I find myself in my practice of Buddhism – if, in fact, I'm anywhere in particular. This image also integrates Buddhist practice and my practice of Wild therapy, the facet of the jewel of ecopsychology with which I am most familiar.¹ The roaming thoughts and reflections which follow celebrate the earth-touching Buddha. They also weave in one of my favourite poems, 'Keeping Quiet' by Pablo Neruda (Neruda, 1972).

Now we will count to twelve

And we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth,

Let's not speak in any language;

Let's stop for one second,

And not move our arms so much....

The Buddha taught me how to sit still. Quite by chance, really. My friend Sue and I used to go out together on a Tuesday evening. Sometimes salsa dancing, or film-watching, maybe the pub; this particular evening, the local Buddhist Centre. I was sceptical when I first met the Buddha in a candlelit shrine room that night in my early twenties. I went on the proviso that we could leave in the tea break.

I wasn't sure about the shrine, with its Buddha statue (or 'rupa'), flowers, candles and incense. It didn't mean much to me then, and quite honestly, most shrines still don't really do it for me. What matters is that the Buddha taught me how to sit still, on the earth, with others, captivated by the simple but radical nature of the 'metta'; loving kindness practice we were being taught. Sit still and notice your receptivity towards loving kindness for: yourself, a friend, someone you hardly know, an enemy, and all life everywhere.

This practice stopped me in my tracks. I didn't sit still in my early twenties. Two radical things happened that evening, I sat still, silent and contented for 40 minutes, and I was bowled over by the simple but transformative nature of noticing and fanning the flames of loving-kindness. Better still, there was even an enemy stage. I wouldn't then have thought for a moment that Buddhists would talk about enemies, thinking they would be way too enlightened. What a relief to discover that Buddhists

aren't pious saints.

Needless to say I didn't leave in the tea break, and nearly 20 years later, I consider myself a beginner in mastering the ancient art of meditation. What moved me, and still most moves me, is the final stage of the metta practice – wishing all beings well, everywhere. May all beings be well, just because they're alive and breathing too, not because you know them and like them, not because they're human, just because they're alive.

I love the respect, expansiveness and potential of this stage of the practice. It changes my relationships with myself and others when I'm off the meditation cushion. It is most worth doing on a day when I am crabby and can't see the point. It never fails to open up a chink of light in my awareness of self, other and world, however small. Meditating gets me to sit on the earth and keep quiet. On blessed days this is by the sea or under a newly-blossoming apple tree, but at home in the midwinter is fine, too.

...It would be an exotic moment
Without rush, without engines;
We would all be together
In a sudden strangeness...

I found myself in a sudden strangeness one day doing a particular meditation practice: the going for refuge and prostration practice to the Buddha called Shakyamuni, the enlightened historical Buddha. I was sitting visualizing the Buddha, with my mother on my left, my father on my right and all sentient beings behind me, which is how the practice goes. I realized, as if for the first time, that these two people made me, and that I belonged to a family stretching back through time. Doing this practice coincided with a time when my father was terminally ill and dying. His dying and death took me on a long voyage of seeking where I belonged; ancestrally (who *were* my people? Who *are* my people?) and karmically; what were all the conditions that lead to this life, right now? I was shown the parts of my family tree that needed nurture, and others that needed pruning and light.

This particular meditation practice also opened my mind to liminality, or perhaps more accurately, challenged me to pay attention to liminality as much as I did the other, perhaps more obvious channels of information. In doing this practice I became more familiar and at ease with seeing form and then emptiness, the constant play of things coming and going; being born and dying. Sitting at the foot of what's known as the 'refuge tree' in that meditation practice, and through practising Wild therapy, I have returned to a much fuller appreciation, even awe,

of trees. Trees of lineage which I find in my mind's eye in meditation and trees which stop me in my tracks walking through towns and in the middle of a woodland. Now I realize when I'm entering their sphere, as I walk past sometimes mindfully and other times mindlessly, sometimes greeted and other times warned off.

...Fishermen in the cold sea
Would not harm whales
And the man gathering salt
Would look at his hurt hands....

In the same practice there's a particular verse which refers to 'great reverence of body, speech, and mind'. This created an implosion one morning, my hands touching the ground as I dropped to my knees to prostrate. *I've got a body. Oh – a body!* I had a sudden insight – definitely insight with a small 'i' – about my body. Not only did I notice I had one, but that I had studiously ignored it since I was about 10 years old. There was great pain in acknowledging that ignorance. In this practice I am confronted with looking at the hurts and joys of my body, as the man gathering salt looks at his hurt hands.

Years later, studying Embodied-Relational therapy, I was overjoyed to be taught about the work of Wilhelm Reich, and I delved deep into 'Character Analysis' (Reich, 1990) and 'Reichian Growth Work' (Totton and Edmondson, 2009). Reich's development of character structure coincided with my understanding, somewhat limited most of the time, of conditionality, the Buddhist teaching that all things arise in dependence upon conditions, and cease to exist with the falling away and cessation of those conditions.²

Reich's character structure filled me with hope. Not hope of the '*one-day it'll all be alright*' variety – otherwise known as wishful thinking – but hope made of something warm, moving and fluid. My body-mind is illuminated as I continue to learn how we are each shaped by conditions as we find our way in becoming incarnate. Reich's realizations and their coincidence with conditionality offer such possibility; deepening self-awareness can lead to change, embodied change. If certain conditions have given rise to our body-minds being formed as they are, then presumably, with the ceasing of those conditions, our body-minds too can change? Eureka. This is great news for someone who used to like meditation because of the chance for disembodied flights of fantasy, interspersed with spells of serious, head-first meditation, generally resulting in a throbbing frontal lobe and tight belly. I bow to all beings as I stand, sun-witnessed, in a glade in Derbyshire on my first Wild therapy workshop, realizing

fully for the first time that I am glad to be human.

I continue to learn about 'great reverence of body, speech, and mind'. This great reverence extends to other humans, long-gone ancestors, animals, other-than-human life and the planet herself. These days I feel the pain on a daily basis of seeing the hurt on earth. It is everywhere. And it's not the whole story. Freedom, spontaneity, creativity and love are all here, too. I relish moments in the wild. Sometimes these are wild meditations, wild conversations, other times being alone in wildernesses. Standing on top of a col in the Spanish Pyrenees in the depths of winter. The wind whips around me and I feel a chilling fear: of heights, of being blown off the mountain, of getting lost and never being found.

The Buddha known as Amoghasiddhi immediately arrives in my mind, with his mudra (hand gesture) of fearlessness and his symbolism of the element air.³ His mantra whirls around my head. Weight and feeling return to my feet and belly and I realize I'm feeling immense reverence. Great reverence for the earth around me – all these mountains, surrounded by earth and air element – and great reverence for my body, standing here, reaching this peak.

Bubbling energy quickly turns to intoxication, and I'm brought back to earth when I'm tripped over by a hawthorn bush who, in my mind's eye at least, does the hawthorn-bush-equivalent of raising his eyes and chuckling at me and my zooming-about energy. 'One of the strongest places to learn about this changing body is in nature' (Halifax, 1990). Ain't that the truth.

...Those who prepare green wars,
Wars with gas, wars with fire,
Victories with no survivors,
Would put on clean clothes
And walk about with their brothers
In the shade, doing nothing....

The Buddha I love isn't all serene; polished and smooth-skinned like a Buddha statue in a West End interior design shop. He's old, wrinkly, missing teeth, and wearing tattered, torn, faded robes. He's very present. I used to teach Buddhism and meditation in schools. Tales abound of the Buddha as a young, handsome, wealthy prince before he left home, before his enlightenment. As much admiration I have for the Buddha who initially 'went forth' into the homeless life, I'm much more interested in the Buddha in his latter years: he wanders, he doesn't know where he'll sleep from night to night, he lives near the roars and tracks of wild animals, he never knows where his next meal will come from, and his mindfulness and compassion

mean he treads lightly and care-fully on the earth, relating skilfully to others.

The Buddha I have meditated upon since my ordination is Amitabha, the Buddha of the West, the Buddha of meditation. His form is the colour of ruby, his element is fire; the fire of transformation, and he practises the rite of fascination. His beauty and warm welcome fascinates us into wanting to see things as they are, nothing added, nothing taken away, just as they are. I wonder how I can fascinate others in engaging with the world as it is.

Yesterday I found myself writing into a forum of fellow Buddhist practitioners. A debate – long overdue – has started up about climate change and our responses to it. The inevitable worldly winds of praise and blame, pleasure and pain, loss and gain, and fame and infamy are shaping the debate. I want to add fascination to the debate, so I post:

As well as taking practical action, I find a grounding starting point is connecting with my greatest awe for the earth and other elements – knowing I'm made of the same stuff – and seeing where that takes me in reflecting on the effect I have on the planet and other-than-human life in the way I choose to live.

Who knows if it will make any difference, but let us not forget about love and awe as we argue about flying or not, who to vote for; effortlessly and understandably dropping into defensiveness and blame.

...What I want should not be confused
With total inactivity.
Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death....

Despite a childhood grubbing around the earth and spending hours bobbing in the sea, it is the meditation practice which reflects upon the six elements which has had the most lasting effect upon me – though I'm sure the grubbing and bobbing helped. Contemplating the elements within me and in everything around me: mountain, dog, river, cloud. I, too, am a shuffling mixture of earth, water, fire, air, space, and consciousness. Constantly on the move and in flux. These elements will outlive me.

I am intrigued by earth and other elements even more since doing this practice, and am often left with a sense of deep and settled peace. Not complacency, but a sense of peace and vivid aliveness. I become less of an 'I' or 'me', and more of a constellation of elements. The divisions between this thing which I call 'I' and 'the natural world' and 'nature' are blurred. Nature isn't 'out there' at

the edge of the boundary of my skin or at Bristol's city borders. The boundaries between country and city, wild and tame, domesticated and undomesticated are much less tangible and much more blurry. Nature isn't there so we can have a nice experience, it's there because it exists (and it doesn't call itself 'nature'). We're here because we're here. Nothing to be appropriated because, in truth, nothing belongs to any of us. We're all stewards and hopefully, care-takers.

...If we were not so single minded
 About keeping our lives moving,
 And for once could do nothing,
 Perhaps a huge silence
 Might interrupt this sadness
 Of never understanding ourselves
 And of threatening ourselves with death....

The Buddha taught me about disintegration. In practising the visualization practice I first mentioned – the going for refuge and prostration practice, with my mother standing at my left shoulder and my father at my right shoulder and all sentient beings behind me – I became a bit unhinged. I lost my ground, I became incredibly disoriented, I couldn't make sense of my old maps and was extraordinarily frightened for a while. Perhaps this is something akin to what Grof and Grof (1989) refer to as a 'spiritual emergency'? I don't know. I rather favour Welwood's phrase for this, *'the moment of world collapse'* (Welwood, 2000: 148, original italics). It didn't have a name at the time, it had the flavour of panic, a thumping heart, and fear that *'just can't do it'*, whatever 'it' was.

Disintegration and awakening are said to be Good Things in the spiritual life. It didn't feel so good at the time. I'm glad no one said to me during the feeling of free-fall that it was a Good Thing, else they would have been in the enemy stage of my loving kindness practice for quite some time. Perhaps this was the time of a huge silence interrupting a long preceding period of distracting myself in busyness.

I'm grateful for that time of disintegration, and at other times, often after shock or bereavement. Disintegration eventually propels me to see and relate to myself and the world differently. It enables me to relate more fully: with friends, family, clients, supervisees, and animal friends. Increasingly there's a closer interweaving between a sense of spiritual disintegration and the grief in witnessing what we, human beings, have done and are doing to the planet and ourselves.

Just yesterday in response to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

George Monbiot blogged about 'loss adjustment': '...the scale of the loss to which we must adjust becomes clearer, grief and anger are sometimes overwhelming' (Monbiot, 2014). Facing climate change, severe loss of biodiversity and environmental degradation, to name but three of our global challenges, still leads me, on occasion, to long nights of the soul. This is part and parcel of the times we're in, as engaged practitioners; knowing loss and grace, and keeping on living in these 'great turning times' which sometimes feel like the 'great falling apart'. Joanna Macy recognizes the need for 'shifts in perception of reality, both cognitively and spiritually' as one of three areas which need addressing during the great turning times (Macy and Young Brown, 1998: 21). For me this parallels talk and practice in Buddhist circles about a turning around at the deepest seat of our consciousness in the process of becoming enlightened.

But let's not get too carried away with shifts in consciousness and spirituality, it can all get a bit much. I am reminded of a favourite quotation from Andrew Samuels:

I seek to advance a vision of spirituality that is regular, ubiquitous and permeates every aspect of existence. It is not intended to be a lofty, exhortative, sermonising approach. Quite the opposite. My take on spirituality discerns its worm-like nature, not its eagle-like nature. Spirituality as an underneath as well as an over the top thing. And because approaches to spirituality so easily go over the top, it is often better to stay underneath. (Samuels, 2002)

I, too, like staying 'underneath' as I invite a turning around at the deepest seat of my consciousness. Sometimes I find that my Buddhist peers – and peers practising other paths – seem more idealistic than me. Perhaps I inhabit a grittier world, or I'm simply less enlightened and too in love with the world. Just now I favour worm-like spirituality, getting more intimate with the earth element, feeling mud crumble between my finger and thumb as I weed the veg patch. I also favour practising the path of ethics. I was dismayed this week, reading an interview with James Lovelock, in which he announces that it's time to 'enjoy life while you can' (Lovelock, 2008), with ethical living being a scam. Whatever our spirituality, practising ethics, or in my case, the path of ethics, meditation and wisdom, is worth doing, regardless of the outcome. Personally I've no doubt it is too late to save the human species, for this phase of history at least, but it's never too late to practise ethics. If we do, perhaps we'll stand a chance of dying with grace amidst the bloodshed.

...Perhaps the earth can teach us
As when everything seems dead
And later proves to be alive.
Now I'll count up to twelve
And you keep quiet and I will go.

At the beginning I said that I've not much time for shrines. That's true in the main, although I've recently had the good fortune to lead midsummer and equinox rituals in the West country. The first was inside the Iron Age stone circle at Stanton Drew and the second at Sand Bay, just north of Weston-super-mare. Both are in Somerset, my home county. Building shrines for those rituals was a whole different matter to sitting on a cushion, in a carpeted, centrally heated shrine room. First, there's the challenge of carrying the stuff across the cow-patted fields or sinking sand, then there's the interaction with others and their questions: 'What are you doing, then?'. Then there's the interaction with the place; seeing how traditions originating in the East meet Somerset and the Pagan histories of the land; rich with myth and legend.

The Buddha has taught me a lot. And the earth has taught me too. The earth element keeps me rooted. I find myself newly in love with the simple act of walking. I am in love with growing things in the earth, with the help of the heat of the fire element and life-giving properties of the water element. The earth-touching Buddha reminds me that the earth and other elements witness my thoughts, words and deeds – it's an active dialogue. The earth-touching Buddha reminds me of the historical Buddha as well as the innate Buddhahood within me and each of us.

On the night that Siddhartha Gautama 'became' the Buddha, the fully enlightened or awake one, it is said that the beautiful, tempting, enchanting daughters of Mara arrived, to finally test his resolve. It is when this happened that he touched the earth with his right hand, calling the earth to witness. I hope, on the night of either my becoming fully awakened, or my death – which is sure to come sooner – I'll remember my relationship with the earth. I shall touch it lightly with my right hand, in appreciation of the elements and all that lives, as the earth bears witness to my life. 5

Kalamamani works as an Embodied-Relational therapist, Wild therapist, supervisor and facilitator, and is based in Bristol; www.kalamamani.co.uk

Notes and reference

- 1 Nick Totton is founder of Wild Therapy. For the theoretical underpinnings of Wild Therapy see *Wild Therapy: Undomesticating Inner and Outer Worlds*, published by PCCS Books, 2011.
- 2 See Joanna Macy's *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory: The Dharma of Natural Systems* for an insightful introduction to conditioned co-production.
- 3 For an excellent introduction to the symbology of Amoghasiddhi, see Chapter 9 of *Meeting the Buddhas* by Vessantara (1993).

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