

Dharma Ecology

In societies where there is respect for the environment, reinforced by a belief that mountains, lakes, rivers, springs, and so on, have guardian spirits who defend them, it is obvious that one needs to be considerate and careful when acting on the nature one relies on. Collaborating with nature increases attention to detail and this brings a deeper connectivity with the environment. Such a view decreases the dualistic perception of the world as something 'out there' and promotes attention to the dynamic co-emergence of self and world. The urge to dominate and exploit nature arises from a profound sense of alienation. *"I, the powerful human being, am in charge of all that I encounter. It is mine to do with as I choose."* Mastery over nature is a poor substitute for empathic participation which feeds gratitude and harmonious coexistence.

However there is a long history of human ownership of territory backed by a legalistic approach which ascribes all rights to the owner. Ownership both formally joins the owner to the land and actually separates them from the land since they are no longer simply participating with what they are a part of. Title deeds to land are actually title deeds to the concept of land as a commodity, as something that can be owned. The land itself is a flow of experience, appearances which have no inherent existence. Thus if I say, *"This is my land"*, the referent of my statement is my legal document of ownership. The land itself is ungraspable if we open to its appearance as it is. It may seem strange, but the land is not a thing, and nor are trees, fields of wheat and so on — all these identificatory terms are merely conventional and are not employed by cows, birds or snails.

Cultivation of the land generally reinforces the rights that come with ownership. The land can produce both crops for food and excess for trade. Grain can be stored and exchanged for other commodities. When money comes into play as a facilitator of trade, money can also be stored permitting both interest and a wider range of exchange possibilities. Now, investing for a profit can become more important than investing to have more food. The goal shifts from the concrete to the abstract, and this orientation also promotes a lack of attention to the side effects of the desire to maximise profits. The consequences of this are everywhere to be seen. Without being noticed there is a shift from cultivating for food as an end in itself to cultivation for profit, where food production is largely a means to an end.

A similar situation can occur with the development of civilization, offering powerful ways of cultivating the qualities that are valued. These could be education for its own sake, or for the sake of marketable skills, or for the sake of gaining power and wealth by accessing knowledge of market forces. The side effect of cultivating knowledge for its own sake is often poverty—as in the case of many painters, poets and Tibetan yogis. If one's activity is fulfilling, such poverty may be an acceptable consequence of choosing a good and deep life. The side effect of cultivating marketable skills is that you may not see how your skills are being made redundant until it is too late. The side effect of cultivating knowledge of market forces is a fascination with profit that makes one blind to the effect that one's delusions have on others.

Even if one's focus is largely on the cultivation of education for its own sake, one can focus on analysis of texts to the detriment of everything else. Ever-finer discriminations become valued and the focus on details makes them seem so real and important. You end up knowing a lot about history or science or Dharma but this knowledge may feed your ego in a way that privileges a sense of power over a sustaining mood of gratitude.

If your focus is Dharma, you might believe that you have buddha nature—the potential to become a fully enlightened Buddha. In order to bring this to fruition you have to discard all behaviour of body, voice and mind that is harmful and limiting, and adopt all the behaviour of body, voice and mind that is helpful and liberating. You might believe that you will not progress unless you cultivate yourself. Like a gardener, you must remove the stones, the clay and the weeds so that you can prepare a fertile soil within which your buddha nature can flourish. This is a delicate task and you are undertaking it in a world that is rough and full of violence and crude behaviour. Many obstacles will arise, both external, as in provocations from others, and internal, as in old habits suddenly re-emerging. The danger is that you become too sensitive to survive in the world and need the protection of a monastery.

But perhaps cultivation is not the only path. Perhaps there is a middle way between careful cultivation and uncouth karmic indulgence. If cultivation is merely a cover-up for deep seated disruptive tendencies, then no true liberation can be found. Perhaps we need to avoid both cultivation and chaotic self-privileging.

Some people believe that to achieve balance in the outer ecology we need to do something different, we need to rewild the over-cultivated. We can do this by having a plan of how to help the land return to its prior, less damaged state. We have messed up nature and it is up to us to put it right—so let's do rewilding, mobilising hope and dedicated activity.

However wild is wild. Can you make something which has been tamed and cultivated, wild? Whose definition of wild are you using? The very act of active rewilding is an intervention in which a human idea about how it could be is reinforced by a human idea about how it should be. To be truly wild the land would need to be left to itself for many generations in order that the creative disorder of free nature could once again start to manifest. In one use of the terms, 'forests' are planted, whereas 'woods' are found as they are as they are, ripened by the happenstance of circumstance. The concept-based interventions of human beings are of necessity full of artifice and contrivance. They express implicit values and assumptions about human supremacy and entitlement to decide the fate of trees, plants, cattle, fish and birds. If we are going to relinquish our need for control and open ourselves to participation in the vagaries of free flow we might feel a fear of chaos. It is as if *'I can only be in control or out of control'*. But perhaps we actually have very little control over events and now with climate change we have to face the hubris of our fantasies of control and the truth of the law of unintended consequences.

It is rare for human beings to be at home in the wild and to be able to adapt to that wildness rather than trying to impose a conceptual order. In the few areas left on earth where people who are simply and truly 'native to the soil' can still live without outside interference, there is still the harmony of truly wild nature and harmoniously adaptive human. There are people who by foraging, hunting and fishing can find sufficient, for they know that enough is enough and that if you know where to look in the wild new

resources are always manifesting with no need for accumulation. Their practice is to not de-wild but to trust the wild and not set it up as the enemy. Then what we call the 'wild' is not wild for them, but simply home, their rich and varied environment.

This approach can also be applied to the mind. Neither wild nor tame the mind is as it is. Mind is how we access inner and outer experience so it helps if we can abide in and with our mind whatever occurs. Resting in the middle way our mind is not too tight and not too loose. This balance is intrinsic yet if it is not awakened to, we, as individuals, are likely to be endlessly busy engaging in micro-management, trying to achieve the required balance. If the problem with our outer and inner imbalance is that it is caused by our own mental activity promoted by dualistic consciousness, then perhaps the answer lies in first easing ourselves free of this dualistic structure and its overreliance on concepts. The fear that if I relax I will vanish completely is grounded in the accurate perception that I, as ego-self, am a construct. However, the teachings of buddha dharma state that constructed identities all arise from unawareness of our true basis, our actual ground. If we relax out of the cover-up, which is our familiar identity, we will open to our unborn awareness and the empty openness of our true ground.

In samsara we cover ourselves up in the make-believe disguise of our identity. Moreover, we cover up the truth of our situation with our endless assumptions and interpretations which resist true enquiry. These two cover-ups arise from our fundamental ignorance, the unawareness of the openness of our actual ground. Openness is not seen when we pretend that we live in a world of entities as a person having inherent existence.

The ever-fresh openness that is our basis and source is always available if only we open fully to it by letting go of the imaginings with which we construct our familiar world. Finding ourselves to be unaware of our unborn openness and of the unborn ungraspable nature of all that appears within it, we take ourselves so seriously as we seek to maintain the integrity of our selves while utilising so much of what we take to be the other. The embodied ego-self is endlessly replenishing itself from the environment while claiming to be autonomous. The illusory ego-self pays a huge price to maintain its delusion of separate inherent existence. It becomes the watchful gardener, alert to the corruption of her plan. Relying on the tools of conceptualisation, she seeks control through weeding out the not wanted, and planting the fast-fading flowers that are desired.

The burden of the delusion of a self-existing self brings further limitations such as the fetter of duality and the ongoing toil of naming and interpreting. In particular, the self as an isolate is faced with inescapable choices as it faces the flow of unpredictable events. Adopting and rejecting, striving and regretting—there is no rest for the ego. Lost in a fantasy of linear progression, the ego-self finds it difficult to understand the circular nature of samsaric experience. Moving from moment to moment, year to year, life to life, the ego has few moments of rest. Even when exhausted by the endless journey, the hope of reaching an imagined goal keeps it going. The door to liberation is close yet unseen. The actual nature of the ego-self is movement, not stability. The claim of existence and autonomy is a pretence—all the constituents of who we take ourselves to be are moving. True stillness, relaxed abiding, comes with awareness of the ground. This stillness integrates all movement for movement is actually unborn, as is its ground. But for as long as this is not seen, no amount of cultivation will bring true peace and compassionate availability.

It is vital to see that the ground is infinite hospitality. The crop is all that arises, just as it is. The gardener is retired. The fruit is enjoyment of each uncultivated fresh, raw moment. As we release ourselves from the restrictions of reifying and judgement, aesthetic appreciation becomes our mode of participation. To open to this as it is, is to shift from both cultivation and 'let's do re-wilding' to 'let the wild be as it is'. The mind itself, the true nature of our everyday mind, is unborn. It is not a thing. It is the presence of the ground. It is empty, clear and responsive. It manifests as free flow, coming as it comes. In all its aspects, it is non-dual with emptiness. It is uncreated and uncontrived. It is neither wild nor tamed, but simply as it is. Therefore it requires neither taming cultivation nor active re-wilding. The key point is to shift from being discerning regarding the content of the mind to being discerning regarding the nature of the mind and the nature of all that occurs. The former approach is dualistic, the latter reveals intrinsic non-duality.

By relaxing into unchanging openness all that occurs is integral with unborn awareness. There is no division of self and other, just the all-at-oneness of the whole field of bright luminosity, of appearances untrammelled by conceptual interpretation. 'Wild' and 'not wild' are ideas; the actual is unborn illusion that no concept can catch. The mind itself, our own mind itself as it is in itself, is intrinsically free. The non-dual environment of our mind as it truly is, is called the dharmadhatu, the space within which illusory appearances arise and vanish. Both our awareness and this spacious potential are intrinsically empty of reification, of entities, of identities. There is no gap or barrier between awareness and the arising and passing of each and every experience. This fertility of the ground needs no farmer or gardener — it comes as it comes, and yet nothing comes or goes. This is our non-dual freedom.

If we open to the ever-open ground then the path is achieved instantly. If we focus on the turbulent content of the mind and try to tame it then we have to follow the stages of the path and learn to deal with all the obstacles that can arise. The one who sets out on the path is the ego and it is rare for the ego to be without ambivalence. Therefore simply let be and you will find freedom in the ever-free open. Open to the open and relinquish the notion of being in charge. Relax and release all attachments and investments. As openness, open to whatever occurs. Without a need to intervene in how the mind manifests, you will find that participation occurs in the manner of a dream. All that occurs is the radiance of the ground. That is its actuality—so it needs no reification, adjustment or improvement. The intrinsic purity of the ground manifests as effortless, instant, all-at-oneness. So do not sully this with reliance on binaries such as good/bad, flower/weed, native species/not native species. All such categorisations are artificial, relying on concepts arising from unawareness. Open to all, maintain inclusivity, abide without bias and do not enter into judgement.

If the unborn imaging of the mind is mistaken for actual entities, then the simplicity of 'as is' is disguised by the 'as if' of fabrications that are taken to be inherently existent. It is vital to relax. Tension in body, voice or mind will lead to a sense of affirmation of a separate self as the experiencer. This self is merely a false identification, a mis-taking of the unborn as if it were born, a mis-taking of illusion as if it were actual. By releasing the last vestiges of pseudo-entities and dualistic reliance on them, there is no site of ego agency and so the non-duality of emptiness and appearance is our naked presence.

In brief, if the self is following the path then the journey is long and one requires great vigilance and determination to tame and cultivate the happenstance of the mind. If our actual freedom, the openness of the ground, is opened to then the unchanging ever-changing here and now requires no cultivation.

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