

## **Sacred Space of Vajrasattva**

### **Buddha and Nature inseparable**

When something held to be precious has been undermined, sometimes people say 'Is nothing sacred'? The notion of what we find sacred is interesting, and we could also ask the question more generally. Is anything in our lives sacred – are there things, activities, thoughts even, that we regard as somehow sacred. The Latin adjective *sacer* is pagan, pre-Christian. Perhaps some relationships are sacred in some way, perhaps to a spiritual friend or teacher. There is something exceedingly precious there that can provide a door to awakening. We don't want to only think of it as an ordinary relationship. It has an ordinary side - but it also has this 'spiritual' side or sacred side. We can have the same sense of the sacred with certain objects, perhaps special books or ritual objects. We can have the same sense with a place. Perhaps even certain times, times of day, even certain days of the week. Buddhist practice makes us more aware of this dimension of things, the sense that there are certain doorways to the unconditioned, to the ultimate reality – to the Buddha.

It is not a trick of fancy. When we experience this, it is a tangible sense. When we experience the touch of the sacred dimension of life, there is a subtle thrill: we can feel fear, we can feel joy and wonder. It can also be too much,; it is also something we can withdraw from. We can feel that it is a delusion of some kind. And indeed, I think it is possible to have delusions about the sense of the sacred, and to pretend to ourselves that we experience it when we do not. It is also possible to have the delusion that it is all just our fancy, all just a made-up fantasy. But it is also possible to have the delusion that everything is ordinary, mundane, without significance.

This is not the Buddhist view. Buddhist practice, through awakening the individual, awakens the world. The sacred, you could say, is just another way of talking about deep mindfulness. Another, perhaps would be Vajra: the direct truth of things. The Vajra world.

Certainly, Vajrasattva practice is a way to induce a sense of the sacred. Because contained in the perception of the sacred there is also the feeling that sacred space is something that we have lost, and that we need to regain. All spiritual practice helps us regain it. The Vajrasattva practice makes all this extremely explicit.

## **Human Nature**

In the Vajrasattva sadhana the drama of the unfolding practice contains the feeling of being disconnected from our real nature, the process first of connection and then gradual reintegration with our real nature, then finally a celebration of the eternal unity that all beings have with that true, Vajra nature. Vajrasattva meditation is a mula yoga, one of several. *Mūla* means a root. These mula yogas are designed to

connect us to the root of our feeling of going for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. That's why they are emphasised at ordination. When we connect to that root, we feel the nourishment it brings.

What is this root, what is this basic Vajra nature? It is simply our nature as humans – actually, even simply as living beings, but especially as human beings endowed with amazing faculties and opportunities – which makes Awakening possible. It's our birthright if you like. Awakening is what we are all about. Our lives make no real sense without awakening; awakening is the core of our life and when we connect with that root, that truth, we are nourished in a way like no other. That is why Perfect Wisdom, Prajna, is sometimes called the Great Mother, or the Mother of all the Buddhas. She nourishes, and gives life, to all Bodhisattvas striving for wisdom and compassion. So certainly, when we touch that essential core of awakening, we re-find the sense of the sacred.

Vajrasattva is a purificatory practice in which we accept and meet, fully own responsibility for, the poison, the darkness and ignorance, the imperfection in our life stream, and we see that darkness in the light of our real nature. In that light, our imperfections are seen as just extras, not the real thing. They are added on, we have added them on, they are not necessary at all. We do not have to associate with them. The real thing is our Vajra nature. That cannot be corrupted, cannot be lost or disconnected from. We just need to realise that and accept it. We might feel impure and inadequate in relation to Enlightenment, but that is not necessary, really and truly we can let that wrong view go. That process of moving away from the delusion of disconnection into awakening involves a process of purification of our view which goes very deep and which is physical as well as emotional and mental. And which results in great confidence, great faith, great self-assurance, Mahā Sradha.

## **Nature and Enlightenment**

The Elements connect us to this same process of purification. They do this through the natural world. The natural world, the world of nature, is not different from our own nature. We are part of nature, all part of the same process of becoming. And also, we are all part of the same process, potentially, of awakening. Awakening is not something unnatural. It is not 'against nature' or any such idea. In the Buddhist viewpoint nature is not lower, like our lower nature, this is an idea that seems to have become associated with some religions, perhaps as a response to the same forces in medieval times that eventually seeded modern science. Society as a whole seems over that idea nowadays. We no longer see nature as something that needs to be overcome before we can awaken. I think we see it the other way around: that nature needs to be embraced as part of the process of awakening. This is certainly where Buddhism meets natural, pagan values. We need to accept our real nature, to enjoy and finally realise nature in its fullness, free from grasping and aversion. Buddhist doctrines like the positive dependent arising, and the Dharma Niyama, show that nature can operate in the realm of awakening, that awakening unfolds in the individual according to natural laws in the universe.

Think for a moment about the scope and range of our relationship with nature. If you think about it, nature is for a start our own brain, body and senses. And also those of others. It is everything in the outside world, everything – all the forces of physics, chemistry, and biology. Externally, it is all of that. It is the fact of gravity.. It is the weather. Internally, it is also hatred, anger, desire, and love. This is all nature, naturalness. There is nothing else. Instead of using the word 'nature' we can just as well talk about 'reality'. However it is noticeable that when we do start viewing everything as 'reality' we arrive somehow in a more conceptual and abstract framework. Whereas to talk of 'nature' places our world in terms almost immediately of sacred space. Perhaps that is because the forces at play are vastly greater than ourselves. Nature is awe inspiring.

So our attitude towards nature is of crucial importance. Our relationship with the natural world may be governed by a view that nature is somehow lower, or it may not. But even apart from that, in day to day life do we even experience what is happening as the natural world? The exchanges we have with the elemental reality we inhabit, with the hardness and wetness and hotness and movement and space, are all so bound up with our samskaras. We spend our time not in a sacred space of nature but in reacting with our likes, dislikes and tricky agendas. This sensation I like, that one I do not ever like. Objects like that are disagreeable, lovely, nauseating, nice. We are so busy reacting at a microscopic level to simple sensations that we almost never experience nature as it actually is. As sacred space. But when we make the effort to relax, again our world becomes sacred, full of significance. It's suddenly a pure land, which is another way of talking about this; the world becomes an ideal environment for personal growth.

So, Dharma practice purifies our wrong habitual view of the world as something mundane and instead introduces it again and again as a dharma realm, in which everything that lives is holy and every act is spiritually significant.

## **The Elements**

The five or six elements provide an immediate connection with this process of moving from the mundane world into seeing things afresh, as sacred. As simple. Meditation is important for this, it's not easy to have this experience unless you can be comfortable with simplicity, and it can take quite some application to meditation practice to get beyond the mind that is aching to be distracted, that is uncomfortable unless it can just think at will, like a restless animal. But as you all know, there does come a point where the mind changes, it becomes easier to be simple, and it's then that the elements practice begins to give its rewards.

The elements meditation is really simply to be with each element, with the experience we have at the time of the earth quality. Just as for example this is revealed by the breath. In anapanasati, mindfulness of breathing, there is a softness of the breath, the changing displacement of air and flow that is brushing against a quality that resists it, that is the earth element. So the resistant quality gets less resistant, it relaxes, the whole body relaxes and calms, until the point

where even the breath itself starts to relax and slow and become more and more subtle. Sometimes you go through a period where the breath seems unfindable. This is the element of earth. It is just like that. And that is all in a way, so simple. Yet we do notice various reactions, various likes dislikes, preferences, pleasures, discomforts. This is all part of learning to be with the earth element. And we learn to let these reactions go because actually they are preventing us being simply with the earth quality.

As we see more elementally, this reveals I think a different perspective on life, and also a different perspective on the city. Perhaps a more animistic one. The four great material elements of earth, water, fire and air are known as the Mahābhūta(s) which means 'great spirit.' Or great illusion. This points to the fact that the elements like everything else are empty of inherent nature. That is their nature. This is another important aspect of naturalness and unnaturalness, the resolution represented by Vajrasattva and the elements, from the state of ignorance or unnaturalness to a state of wisdom or the natural state. Emptiness is part of nature too. The natural world is also empty of inherent existence. It is never what it seems. It is totally determined by our perceptions of it, and our expectations of what it is. Just as the world can be mundane and boring, or elemental, full of significance and spiritual potential. So this is also what the Mahabhutas represent – the power and universality of the four great elements that make up our world, and sunyata, so-called 'emptiness'.

## **The Spirits of the City**

These are the great spirits of the city. There is something here that is unknown. But there is more because this also contributes to atmosphere. And are there not spirits in the city who are actual beings, living entities? Well OK...but right from the start Buddhism challenges the whole notion of what is a person, what is a being. It makes us wonder what it is we are. It makes us realise that the notion of being is confected, put together, constructed on top of the simple information given by the six senses. Yet from the point of view of ordinary reality, relative reality, we do experience the world as populated by other living beings, and the city is full of them. We tend to think of it as an entirely human environment but there are also many non-human life forms here in the city as well. Human beings have been moving to cities since the 27<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but actually – so have animals. Where we go they go. Part 6 of the current BBC series Planet Earth 2 is all about how animals are also moving to cities. It is warmer and there is more food. The populations of Peregrine Falcons and Leopards in New York City and Mumbai are greater than they are in the wild, and this is the case for many other species. David Attenborough suggests that cities could be designed much more to accommodate wild animals, birds and other creatures that are our brothers and sisters. And if you look around actually you see many species thriving in the city.

We tend to think of city life as dead and cut off from nature. I think that says more about our view of ourselves. Because there are in fact many spirits here, many kinds of beings all interacting. And there is just one more final aspect that I want to mention which is the spirit of place. There are certain places that inspire particular

atmospheres. Graveyards, some Monuments, River banks and precipices. What we have in the city is concentrated human history. The spirit of place builds up based on what has happened here. So when we call out in a friendly way to the local spirits to protect our practice, this is what we are doing.

We are connecting with the great spirits who have always been here. These spirits are essentially no different from our own. They are unawakened, conditioned by history, attachment to the past. Yet to connect to them is to embrace the reality that with the right view of things can become an awakened world.

