

Earth Day and the Art of Living

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April 25, 2021

Keywords: Earth-touching *mudrā*, Māra, paṭicca samuppāda, kalyāṇa, Buddha's enlightenment, art of living, generosity, liberation, bodhi tree, karma

So this is the Sunday after Earth Day. Some of us sometimes will commemorate Earth Day, not on the twenty-second of April, but on the Sunday following it or close to it. I certainly would love to speak a little bit about this home that we live with, this home that we share, and the care of it. As many of you know, the prefix eco—e-c-o, like ecology—means in Greek “home.” So ecology is the study of our home. I just finished two days yesterday, two days of the training that I teach at Kotichaon Buddhist Eco Chaplaincy, the spiritual care in relationship to our home that we live in, this home that we all share together.

Now, you know, when people live together in a home—roommates, family—there's a whole different relationship we have to the mutuality of that home space, and the mutual care of it, and keeping it clean, or creating an environment that's nice for everyone there, caring for the people under the same roof. So we share this global home that we call the earth. In the way that I like to see things in words, it's an ancient game that Buddhist teachers back even in ancient India loved to take Indian words and to kind of—not exactly etymology—but to tease apart things from the word. It turns out that the word earth and the word art both overlap with the letters r-t, art and earth, and maybe the meeting place of our hearts. This earth is in the art of living, and this expression, the art of living, offers a kind of, I think, a rich series of connotations that life can be a form of art, more than it is work, more than it is a duty or a burden. Art is something that we offer our hearts to, our care, our creativity, our attention to detail.

So this earth of ours—do we live on it with the art of living? One of the most powerful images coming out of Buddhism, of our relationship to the earth, is the image here on the Buddha, and on an altar has what's called the earth-touching *mudrā*. I guess I'm blocking a little bit with my shoulder, but if I lean a little bit to the side, I think maybe you can see that the Buddha's right hand is reaching down over his knee, and his fingers are just about to touch the

earth. Or maybe he has just touched the earth, and he is pulling it away. I can see the delicacy, the simplicity, the very relaxed way in which that hand is draped over the knee, and it's a relaxed kind of going forward to touch. It's not grabbing the earth or attacking the earth; it's a light touch. Just the tips of the finger are going to come down and touch the earth.

I can't help but think of the image in the Sistine Chapel where Michelangelo has painted the touch of God on the fingers of Adam, and Adam is just coming alive, being touched by God. There also we have a light touch that's gentle. To live touching the earth, to live lightly on the earth—a light touch. In how we live our lives, the Buddha—there's a wonderful verse where the Buddha says that, like a bee collects pollen from the flower without harming the flower, so a wise person walks through life without harming anyone or anything. Certainly, we get our food, our water, we get our things, take care of us, what sustains us from the earth, but to do so in a way that is a light touch that doesn't harm the very thing that is sustaining us, like a bee. So here the Buddha is touching the earth lightly.

The story of this is part of the mythology of Buddhism. You don't find this story in the earliest layers of the Buddhist records from the Buddha's life, but maybe five hundred years later, after the Buddha, you find this story that is really colourful. I think of it as, you know, this is a time in the ancient world where there was no technical or movies, there were no color photos, and it was very much an oral culture. So it was orality that would paint these dramatic pictures that were evocative. In its imagery, maybe not just for entertainment's sake, but also to evoke the emotions, to evoke a sense of awe at this life we live. The story goes that the Buddha was sitting on the ground, and the statue we have behind us—it's not sitting really on a pedestal—is meant to be sitting on the ground, on the earth.

At night, in the evening before his enlightenment, he was sitting there in his quest for awakening, for freedom, for freedom from suffering, to really get to the bottom of what suffering is, and to find a way not to suffer. That's considered to be one of the great noble quests: to bring suffering to an end, not as a fantasy or a fable, but as a real possibility for human beings. That was his dedication. In this fable, this myth, as the Buddha said, there are a lot of things, lots of forces that want to prevent the Buddha from becoming free of suffering, discovering this peace, and stepping away from the attachments, addictions, hostilities of the heart that have such a strong compulsive pull and demand on our attention. These are represented by *Māra* and *Māra's* armies. *Māra* came with descriptions that are, you know, like Lord of the Rings, with huge evil forces marching across the plains, with all kinds of ogres and orcs, and all kinds of awful creatures, and huge elephants that must have been like the Bradley tanks of the ancient world—fighting elephants—and came marching to chase the Buddha away, to

destroy the Buddha, to prevent him from becoming enlightened.

The drama of the stories is worthy of something like Lord of the Rings. They throw every possible weapon they have at the Buddha: arrows and javelins and sharp-edged discs. The Buddha, as you see in the statue, is unmoved and relaxed, and breathes at ease, and doesn't react or flinch in any kind of way. In fact, all the arrows and spears, as they go flying through the air at the Buddha—tens of thousands of them, the air is buzzing and howling with all these armies and dragons and things that are just attacking the Buddha—all the weapons turn into flowers, and the flowers land on the ground. After a while, *Māra* realizes that violence is not going to dissuade the Buddha from his calm, his peaceful endeavor, his calm discovery of where freedom from suffering is. *Māra* comes with his last weapon, and that is to sow doubt in the mind of the Buddha, to challenge him, or to claim to him: You have no right to become awakened. You have no right to attain this highest capacity of human peace that a human being can experience.

This idea: You have no right. I interpret all this as being all psychological forces inside the Buddha himself that are casting all the forces they can to prevent him from letting go of how he usually has been—the attachments that don't want to be let go of—and his self-worth, has huge doubts whether it's appropriate for him to become awakened. Isn't awakening and freedom from suffering kind of—isn't it kind of abandoning people? Isn't it a kind of, you know, attaining something profound and beautiful for oneself? Is that okay to do when everyone else is suffering? There are all kinds of doubts that can come up. So one of the things that *Māra* says, trying to sow doubts in the Buddha's mind, is that you have not benefited people enough to deserve being awakened. You have not practised enough generosity. You haven't given enough to people in the world. Without having lived for the benefit of others, it's not appropriate for you to become awake.

The Buddha says, Well, then I'll bring a witness who can bear witness to all that I've done to support this world, all the generosity that I've done back over the many lifetimes I've lived. In Italy, he said, I'll call upon the earth as my witness. Here we have this provocative idea that the earth that's been around for so long is the witness that keeps the record of what we have done. I grew up on the coast of Italy, and it was remarkable to see—it's kind of beautiful at first seeing the islands around where I lived, and then to realize that they were completely denuded of soil, mostly bare rock, because they'd been over-farmed with grapes and olives two thousand years ago in the Roman times, and all the soil had washed away in the over-farming of them, and nothing was left. They'd cut the trees and they'd farmed. So the record is still there, and the record of what humanity is doing to this planet—the earth remembers

here. What do we carry with us? But the earth remembers also the good.

So the Buddha asks the earth to bear witness to all the generosity and all the benefit he'd brought people over his lifetimes, and to assert his right to let go of his clinging, his attachment, to become free, to experience the happiness of liberation. That's when he reaches down, is going to touch the earth, to ask the earth to be that witness. I love this—that he doesn't assert his right for awakening, he doesn't rely on his own feeling that, Yes, it's okay for me to become free, that he's calling on something that's larger than himself or beyond himself, for the support, for the validation, for the encouragement. Yes, it's OK. If we see ourselves as part of the natural world, part of the earth, we are the earth because we're part of the earth. We are made up of a hundred percent recycled material that has been part of the earth for eons, for a long time. In a sense, we arise out of the earth, and as part of the earth, and we are the earth that can see itself. We're the earth that can hear itself, or the earth that can taste itself and walk on itself.

So here the Buddha is touching the earth—a slight touch of the earth—and then the earth, in reply to bear witness to his right to be awakened and all the generosity and good he does, the earth has an earthquake. Then the legions of *Māra*'s armies realize that the Buddha has indeed the right to be awakened, and they get frightened, and now they run away in all directions. The text says no two of them go in the same direction or the same path, and now they run away. Then the vacuum that's created—all these deities come to create light and celebration. The Buddha just sits there. As he is sitting there—ah yes, sitting under the bodhi leaf tree, the bodhi tree—and as he is sitting there, a few leaves from the bodhi tree gently fall from the tree and land on his robe, land on his lap. There's no explanation about what this is about, but it's a beautiful imagery. Again, the Buddha's in nature, sitting at the base of a tree, and now this gentle movement of a leaf of this bodhi tree, that leaf that looks coincidentally a little bit heart-like, comes down and lands on the Buddha and sits there. I take it as being a little bit, again, this intimacy with nature, of the natural world.

Then, only then, does the Buddha see deeply into the nature of this world. He sees something about the interconnected nature of this world—*paṭicca samuppāda* is the Pāli word for this. In doing so, he becomes liberated and free. In this technical mythology, the whole universe gets lit up and light—even the dark crevices of the universe light up with the Buddha's enlightenment. Then he gets up. Eventually he walks a long distance across northern India to find people that he can begin teaching, to find people he thinks are ready for his teachings, now that he is awakened. So his awakening is not the end of the story, but in a sense, it's the beginning of the story. In this ancient text that talks about this, it's actually made up in three

large chapters, and the third chapter begins with after his awakening. It's a new chapter in this Buddha's life, when he goes out to be of service and to serve and to help the world.

So we have this wonderful myth that is evoking our connection to the earth as part of practice, as part of the natural, and the idea of the Buddha sitting under the Buddha tree, sitting on the earth, touching the earth, being caressed by the leaf that falls down. It's also said in this mythical story that with his awakening, the flowers bloom, and the other trees around, and those flowers begin kind of falling, petals start falling as well. The art of living, an art of caring, living in such a way that we live beautifully—it's one of the associations I have with art. Certainly not all art is meant to be this way. But when I think of the art of living, I think of living beautifully, living with a beauty, living with an ease, living with a creative source from within that is not burdened by distress, not caught in hostility and aversion, not caught up in self-condemnation and feelings of guilt, not caught up in a giving up, despairingly giving up. Rather, one that feels the natural aliveness in lived life, that wants to meet life, wants to be connected, that when it's intimate and connected to what we love the most, then we'll treat it like a bee taking pollen from a flower without harming the flower.

To sit and sit or meditate and become free and then have access to an intimacy, or a closeness, or a love for what we see and what we do. In the story of the Buddha's enlightenment, this mythology, the whole universe gets transformed with his enlightenment. As I said, flowers and also fruit bloom out of season, music starts being played in the skies, light spreads throughout the universe. Beautiful things happen. For me, this is a metaphor for how we see the world when we become free, when we settle and become intimate and present and clear, and we've cleared away the distractions and preoccupations and fears and worries that we live under. The eyes with which we see the world change, and it isn't that the world has changed, and it's not to be Pollyannaish about what goes on—suffering in the world at all. But the eyes see the world tenderly. The eyes see the world and see beauty and see love or see sweetness. In this mythology, it says all the oceans of the world turn into sweet water when the Buddha becomes enlightened. It's as if everything changes, and there's beauty in this world.

So to live beautifully. One of the ways that's lost often in English translation of the Buddhist teachings is the Buddha talked about beautiful karma, beautiful actions in the world, and the word he uses is *kalyāṇa*. Sometimes it's translated as good karma, and then there's bad karma. But in many teachings, the Buddha doesn't use the word good, but uses the word beautiful, so that our actions, how we live our life, has a beauty to it, and a gentleness or tenderness to it. Part of that is to live beautifully in relationship to this home that we have,

the earth, and to care for, to love it, and the art of living, and the art of caring for this world. To make that be really not a subsidiary thing that we do, a sideshow for us, but to really live in a way that we care for this world, the people of our lives, the environment we live in, the planet we live in, so that it becomes—it's not a duty and it's not a burden. It's not like we make ourselves now so much more busy, but rather it becomes an innate expression of our love, our creativity, the artfulness from which we are living our lives.

This is why we practise. We practise every day. We practise all the time, not because it's a duty, not because it's an escape, but rather because it allows the best of who we are, the most beautiful qualities of who we are, and the richest ways in which we can see the world and hear the world become natural for us, become where we live from. We live from freedom. We live from ease. We live from peace. We don't live from hurry. We don't live from greed and wanting and filling our plate and attacking. We live with a light touch, and the earth will bear witness. The earth remembers and the earth hears. One friend of mine says, It's because the word earth begins with ear, with ear, that we know that the earth is listening. The earth is listening to us, watching us, and certainly caring for us. It keeps her record, and perhaps when you are ready for your enlightenment, you can call upon the earth to bear witness to your right to becoming free. I think the earth will support us if we care for this earth that we live on. May we care for it together as if it is our home, because it is our home on this Earth Day, Earth Week of twenty twenty-one. Thank you.