

Practices for the Earth

Introduction

Most Buddhists instinctively feel that dharma is key to healing our relationship with the earth. However, it is not always clear just how this applies directly to our practice. Most traditional Buddhist practices common in the West seem to address the problem of samsara in a very general way. At the Kootenay Shambhala Centre we have been experimenting with programs that fine-tune this general approach to samsara into one that is more specifically directed towards our relationship to the earth and the problems that we currently face as a result of having lost our connection.

There are probably a couple of reasons for the more general approach of the Buddhism that we have come to know in the West. The first is that Buddhism arose in societies that were in a relatively stable relationship with their surroundings. Their populations were kept in check by infant mortality, disease, starvation and lack of compensating technology. Their relationship with their land was earthy and practical and embedded in the whole culture. That relationship was assumed and didn't need to be addressed explicitly.

The second reason for the lack of direct relationship between Western Buddhism and the earth probably relates to what was left behind in the countries of origin. People in most indigenous Buddhist cultures have relationships with local deities that are the embodiments of natural and elemental energies. In Tibet, there are numerous gods, demons, nature spirits and protectors who dwell in the landscape, in fire, in water and in the air. The Chinese have feng shui, the Japanese, kami. Tourists visiting Thailand notice spirit shrines heaped with offerings outside their upscale hotels.

When Buddhism crossed the oceans to the West, these deities didn't come along. Our inheritance is mostly the higher philosophical and meditative aspects of Buddhism. Some of us in the West even feel superior to those original Buddhist cultures because we think we have left all that seemingly superstitious religious baggage behind. We may intensely dislike ripping mountains apart for strip mines, but we don't think of it in terms of angering local deities. Few of us can even begin to imagine doing ceremonies and making offerings to appease those deities and the elemental forces they represent. The dominant monotheistic religion of the West long ago banished our nature gods and spirits.

The problem for us is that the rituals that were left behind when Buddhism crossed the oceans were vehicles to tune awareness. In such rituals, one's attention and awareness ride along with the liturgical word imagery and ritual actions to a place where attention is left resting in awareness of the natural elements, sensitive to their subtle shifts and messages.

In shedding the awareness of local deities, we have also shed an important means to connect with our surroundings.

Later, we'll look at the possibility of bringing some of these deities back into our Western consciousness in the form of dralas. First, though, it would be good to look at other ways of connecting to nature using traditional Buddhist practices that we already know. We'll look at the teachings that we have and shift their practice slightly from dealing with samsara in general to working more specifically with the central problem of our time—our relationship to the earth.

Most of the following topics were first explored during our Centre's "Touching the Earth" weekthun. Although they were presented in the context of a retreat, parts of what we presented could probably be adapted to a weeknight course format.

Our eight-day retreat was held at our retreat land, Senge Ling, in a screened pavilion open on all sides to the forest. This structure makes it possible to have a shrine and a strong practice container, and at the same time be directly connected to natural surroundings. Our pavilion has a floor and a permanent roof. Before we obtained our retreat land, however, we had semi-nomadic weekthuns in different locations using just a floor and tarps draped over wooden frames for a roof. These structures could be erected relatively quickly and were inexpensive. However because the tarps were flammable, we did not want to use such a structure for fire pujas, and so elected to make a permanent structure.

After the arrival day, the next two days of the weekthun were devoted to learning oryoki, meditation instruction, and settling into the practice. We followed the normal dathun schedule of 8-10 hours of meditation per day. We started the retreat with the close placement technique, and then as people settled, gave them the open meditation technique using the outbreath. Finally, we gave them the option of resting formlessly, using their sensory perceptions as messengers of wakefulness.

For the sake of clarity, I have italicized and indented sections that correspond roughly to the talks that I gave. Explanatory material that sets context is in plain text and not indented.

Talk I: Container Principle

This setting for this retreat is unique in that it is open to the forest, and the forest will be part of your meditation. Later in the retreat we will actually leave the shrine pavilion and go out into the forest. Obviously, you could do this anytime on your own outside of retreat. What will make this experience different is something called "container principle". The container is the sum of your meditative discipline and practice, the atmosphere that is created in

the shrine pavilion and on the retreat land itself, and the forms that we will introduce you to.

It is important for all of us that you individually do your best to observe the forms and the practice schedule. Good shamatha practice in the shrine room means that we can carry the effects of that practice out into the forest. It will make possible a fresh, deeper perspective that doesn't degenerate into ordinary habitual mind.

When we do go out into the forest, there will small touches of discipline to help you maintain the container. What is being contained is discursive mind, so that your natural awareness can be open, relaxed and spacious. What happens when one creates forms such as meditation schedules, oryoki, chants, shrine room decorum is that discursive mind is shaped by the forms. First of all, it takes mindfulness and awareness to maintain the forms. And, secondly, the forms play jokes on you: every time you stumble with a form there is an explosion of awareness. It's important to have a sense of humor about this and not be threatened by the nakedness of the moment. No matter how experienced a meditator you are, the forms will play jokes on you. They are there to provoke awareness.

The forms will allow us to explore our connection to the natural world in ways that would otherwise not be possible. Without the forms, there is no difference between a retreat and ordinary life. To the extent that we are able to use the forms, we will be able to go deeper into our perceptions and relationship with nature, much beyond what you would be able to experience during an ordinary camping trip. This is a group journey and it is important for everyone that people stick to the schedule and the discipline. To do otherwise breaks the group up into individuals, each on their own trip. It provokes discursiveness in others and makes it difficult to give subtle teachings.

If you have trouble with the forms, remember that the staff is here to make things work for you. If you have problems with the schedule or anything else, please talk to one of the staff, and we will work with your concerns. Since we are going on this journey as a group, staff and students, communication is essential.

Talk II: The Root of the Ecological Problems: Duality Itself

To most people, discussions about duality and non-duality would probably seem like an abstract way to approach ecological problems. However,

Buddhism is unique in that it offers a complete, sophisticated and thorough analysis of why our ecological problems have arisen in the first place.

The teachings of the Mahayana and Vajrayana describe basic mind as being like space, able to contain the experiences of all phenomena. This basic mind is empty and without boundary, but it is also capable of manifesting energies and phenomena as a kind of play. One of the possibilities that can arise in this play of energy is the thought of a self. Trungpa Rinpoche describes what happens next: it is as though a grain of sand in a vast sandy desert has “stuck its neck out and begun to look around. We are that grain of sand, coming to the conclusion of our separateness.”

Duality has occurred, and from that, separation from nature. Once we become separate, it becomes necessary to secure the flimsy notion of self from the vastness and flux of change. We ignore the vastness and solidify ourselves against impermanence. We begin to think that we are separate from nature and not subject to its laws. We embrace materialism because, like matter, it offers the illusion of stability. We develop a cocoon of comforts, and sack the earth for its energy and resources in order to maintain that cocoon. From that initial separation of self and nature comes ecological disaster.

One might be tempted to relegate the realization of egoless non-duality to the realm of the theoretical. Possibly it would be attainable by a small elite—hermit-like people who cannot help the current situation. However, it’s important to reflect on what the world would be without people like the Karmapa, the Dalai Lama, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and non-Buddhists like Nelson Mandela, Bishop Tutu and others. Such people command enormous influence. Even a slight realization of non-ego, non-dual nature is sensed by others and respected as wisdom. When people sense that someone has wisdom, they tend to listen.

There have been societies on earth where such wisdom was explicitly venerated and regarded as a national treasure greater and more important than worldly wealth or power. Indeed, without help from wisdom holders, it may be doubtful that the currently dominant world culture can lift itself out of conflicting emotions and primitive beliefs to confront the problems facing us.

There are several ways to approach the problem of duality: one can do so through compassion, through contemplation of interdependence, or through meditative insight. We won’t have time to go into all of these thoroughly, but we’ll approach it first through interdependence and dependent origination, technical terms that are rendered nicely by Thich Nhat Hanh as “interbeing”.

The view of interbeing contrasts with our normal view of ourselves as separate from nature. This tendency towards separation is deeply rooted in Western religious and cultural beliefs: one such idea is that man alone, of all creatures, was created in God's image and given stewardship over creation.

Interbeing, or interdependence, also stands in contrast to the kind of linear causality laid out in the Judeo-Christian tradition. There, the world originated from a single cause—God. Westerners have applied this notion of singular causality in our scientific laboratories and factories with resounding success. In these venues, we artificially control the shifting causal conditions of nature so that just one cause follows another in a planned, methodical sequence. This approach has resulted in the immense technological prowess that we now enjoy and, at the same time, suffer from. It has given us an unparalleled sense of power and control over nature—and a sense of being godlike, special and distinct from the rest of nature.

In contrast to the notion of singular causality, interbeing suggests that there are millions of causes for the tomatoes that we will eat for lunch. There are the myriad influences in the farmer's life that inspired him to farm and created the motivation to plant the seeds at a particular spot. There was also the sunlight, the rain, everything that created the soil, and so on. Each of these causes had causes in turn, and these causes had causes, extending back to the beginning of the universe. So the tomatoes that we will eat for lunch are directly connected to the whole universe. They are the result of many conditions temporarily coming together at a particular time and place.

Likewise, our bodies are a manifestation of many supporting conditions. Our bodies are also just one of the conditions for other existences: microbes, and countless other beings that are effected by what we do during our short time on this earth. The same applies to the thinking mind. Our thoughts, identity and sense of self are the result of myriads of personal experiences and cultural influences. The sense of a self with separate, lasting individuality is the result of placing a conceptual boundary that artificially isolates a single portion of what is actually an interconnected web. All of us are temporary manifestations of circumstances that have come together to produce the appearance of a person.

In classical Buddhism, dependent origination is usually used to drive home the point of impermanence. Sometimes it is used to demonstrate emptiness: nothing truly exists separate from its surrounding and preceding conditions. Would, for instance, a Martian see trees simply as extensions of one entity, the earth, or as separate entities existing on the earth? Conceptual mind separates and gives names. Thus, apparent entities are merely myriads of circumstances coming together to create a temporary appearance to our

conceptual mind. Our separateness, from the point of view of interbeing, is an illusion.

One of the most powerful methods of the Buddhist tradition is the practice of contemplation. Sometimes this takes place informally through repeated exposure to ideas found in material that one is studying. In our retreat, we did this formally, as a kind of meditation on meaning.

Our formal contemplations sessions lasted for about five minutes in the context of a longer session of shamatha meditation on the breath. We instructed students that, when the mind wanders from the meaning of the words in the contemplation, they could return to that meaning in the same way that they would return to the breath as a reference point for present awareness in normal shamatha meditation. We had the umdze read the contemplation out loud, then the whole group read it together, and finally the umdze read it again, allowing a minute or two between each reading. Sometimes the umdze would read the contemplation with pauses between each word or phrase, so that the full implications of each word sink in.

For most of the retreat, we followed each walking meditation with five minutes of bodhicitta practice, and then later inserted a contemplation at some point during the sitting and before the next walking period. Because we also began each session with a bodhicitta practice, that meant that students experienced two contemplations during each sitting period. Such contemplations are a way to fuse the meaning of an idea with one's being in a much more profound way than just reading or hearing something casually.

Here are some contemplations that relate to interbeing:

According to the teachings of the buddha, your body is not yours. Your body belongs to your ancestors, your parents and future generations. It also belongs to society and to all the other living beings. All of them have come together—the trees, the clouds, the soil, everything, to bring about the presence of this body. —Thich Nhat Hanh

The food we eat can reveal the interconnectedness of the universe, the earth, all living beings, and ourselves. Each bite of vegetable, each drop of soy sauce, each piece of tofu contains the life of the sun and of the earth. We can taste the whole universe in a piece of bread. —Thich Nhat Hanh

Everything depends on circumstance. —Patrul Rinpoche

Talk III: The Senses: Our Gateways to the Natural World

When we do shamatha, we usually do it with the breath as the principle reference point for mindfulness. In this case, we are working with the sense of bodily touch—feeling our lungs expand and the air moving in and out of the breathing passages. Walking meditation is also done with the sense of touch—the touch of our feet on the ground. However shamatha also has a broader meaning. It refers to using any object as a reference point for mindfulness. These other objects of shamatha could be connected to any of our senses, including the mind consciousness in the case of visualization practice.

There are good reasons for using the physical senses as a base for shamatha: one is that they are non-conceptual. Concepts or sequences of thoughts tend to lead one into another, creating stories that we get lost in. Sensation, on the other hand, can be just sensation. Furthermore, sensations are messengers of wakefulness. They occur in the present, and introduce the present to us. It is true that we can have thoughts about our sensations, but they are of a different nature than the sensations themselves.

The purpose of shamatha is to calm the mind. When the mind is finally settled on an object, then that object can be released as a focus. It has done its job. The mind can now rest in wakefulness, noticing thoughts and sensations as they happen, without commenting on them. When doing normal shamatha, we rely on the repetitive pattern of the breath—it is always there. When we release the breath as object of focus, we no longer have a repetitive pattern to remind us, so extra watchfulness is required to make sure that we are not caught in subtle, subconscious patterns of thought. The general sense of objectless shamatha is one of relaxed openness and heightened, alert awareness. When that becomes vague, then one returns to shamatha with an object. There are good reasons why our teachers have chosen the breath as the principle object for shamatha, and that is probably where you will spend most of your meditation time.

Shamatha is ultimately defined as resting the mind in the nature of its own awareness. When we have been meditating intensively, we can carry our stability out into the world for a while. If we place our mind in a container of wakefulness, with a touch of discipline, we can extend that wakefulness. The

right amount of relaxed openness can take place, and the senses can inspire us with their wakeful messages.

Twice a day we will do walking meditation using different senses as the reference point. This will give you a chance to deepen and intensify your sensory connection to the natural world. We will do this quite formally—walking slowly, hands folded over each other in the walking mudra, with enough separation between people (about 20 feet) so that you are not too conscious of the person ahead of you. The pace of the walking should be slow, but not too slow. If your mind wanders or becomes attached to something, you should return to the particular sense that you are using as the object of mindfulness and awareness, just as you would normally use the breath or the sensations of the feet touching the floor in walking meditation.

On successive days we will work with touch, sound, smell and sight. You can explore taste during oryoki practice. Today we will start with touch. Touch will include all the touch senses—the air on your skin, heat and coolness as you move from sunlight into shade, the different textures of the earth as you move along, the internal feel of your body moving and so on.

When the people get back to the shrine room, you can remain standing until the last person has entered. Some people have a tendency to linger in places that are personally enjoyable, so it is important to emphasize that this is a group practice and it's important to keep the discipline of the container when we try to extend our practice outside the shrine pavilion. You can go back to places that personally draw you during the breaks.

One of the most surprising senses is smell—a sense that we usually ignore. If we pay attention to it in a meditative state, it begins to jump out at us as we pass through different parts of the forest. Suddenly we can appreciate the intense olfactory world of animals. Sight is a strong sense that tends to immediately trigger concepts. To counter this, students can use non-habitual modes such as being aware of peripheral vision, or of what we see as merely images constructed within the mind from sensory data. We did sight later in the week, since it is such a strong sense and provokes so many conceptual associations. Taste was done at meal time.

One of the principle lessons that students take away from these walks is that perceptions are rich in wakefulness. Most students report that their meditation is greatly enhanced during these excursions into the forest. When they return to the shrine pavilion, they continue to notice the wakefulness that comes with perception. The sounds of the forest carry their own invitation to be present.

Talk IV: Making a Heart Connection to the All Living Beings

It is one thing to appreciate intellectually that we are connected to the rest of the universe, and it is another to feel it in the heart. Bodhicitta practices are a way to make a deeper, more heartfelt and emotional connection. When we do tonglen or bodhicitta practices, we usually do it for human beings like ourselves. But if we look closely at the language that describes these practices, they relate to sentient beings—beings that have some degree of awareness and can feel pain and perhaps happiness.

If we look at the animal world, we find suffering everywhere—many animals are capable of producing hundreds of offspring over their lifetimes, and almost all will die before reproducing. We know that because their populations remain more or less in a steady state with their food resources. For animals, there is the fear of being eaten and the fear of starvation. There is also the fact that we treat millions of domesticated farm animals as objects—they are simply meat factories.

Empathetic connection, compassion, happens naturally when a mind unimpeded by concepts contacts another being. Fortunately, those of us who are still obscured by concepts can purposely train in empathetic connection through relative bodhicitta practices. These practices enable us to slowly increase our felt connection to other beings. With tonglen, we meditate that we are breathing in the suffering and anxiety of others, and breathing out happiness and peace.

When doing bodhicitta contemplations as opposed to tonglen, we use thoughts to direct our awareness towards others. We can extend these practices to all of our fellow beings—animals, birds, reptiles, insects, and beings in unseen realms. In these realms, the suffering can be intense, so there is plenty for the aspiring bodhisattva to work with.

After each walking meditation, students could choose contemplations such as the ones below, practice tonglen for five minutes, or simply spend that feeling their connectedness to the animals, birds and insects of the forest.

Bodhicitta Contemplations for Other Sentient Beings

May all sentient beings enjoy happiness and the root of happiness;

May they free from suffering and the root of suffering.

May they not be separated from the great happiness devoid of suffering.

May they dwell in the great equanimity that is free from passion, aggression and ignorance.

*The world is healed or harmed each instant
In the stillness of our hearts.
Whether we struggle or rejoice, this is so.
People of Ling, this is our power and the power of all.
We must open the true kingdom in our hearts.
—Gesar of Ling*

Talk V: The Eco-dharma of Emptiness

It is questionable whether at any given moment we are experiencing the world or just experiencing our concepts about it. For instance, when one is about to enter the shrine pavilion, one automatically assumes that the floor ahead is solid and will hold one up. This is not inherent in the mere visual image that one sees. It has to do with subtle thoughts, associations and memories. Although these assumptions are useful in terms of ordinary daily functioning, they also tend to stand in for reality and make it dull. One sees one's concepts, not the floor, and consequently one ignores one's perceptions and does not really appreciate or investigate the nature of what one is seeing.

When one walks through a forest, in order to see the forest, it is helpful to loosen the mind from its unconscious conceptual overlays. When this happens, one begins to open to the unexpected. This might make your experience of the forest feel groundless, perhaps scary and intensely wakeful. At the same time, a door is opened to being pleasantly surprised at the inherently magical nature of the forest.

In order to illustrate the emptiness nature of things, we placed a couple of split rounds of firewood in the centre of the circle of practitioners. We then asked the students what was added by conceptual mind to the mere images that appeared to their eye consciousnesses. In the discussion that followed we listed conceptually-based comparisons and projections such as large and small, relative shape, roughness and smoothness, and labeling of shading and color. Students also listed function (firewood), species, history, regret that a tree was cut for firewood and monetary worth.

Emptiness can be difficult for some students to appreciate in a practical, experiential way as opposed to just an intellectual understanding. One way to go further in this exploration is to have students follow up the previous exercise by finding a tree in the forest, touching it, and trying to experience the tree in its own right as “bare perception”, exclusive of their concepts about it.

At our Centre we have been teaching courses on emptiness off and on for many years. Do the students or even the teachers live in that realization? No. However, what seems to stick is a realization that reality is not what we think it is. That's significant. That is what opens the mind and creates possibilities for the world to speak to us. From the standpoint of eco-dharma, that's really important.

Contemplation: *Regard all dharmas as dreams.* — Atisha

Talk VI: Drala—Working With Presence

The English word “emptiness” implies absence, but this misses the full meaning behind the concepts that were translated that way. Within emptiness is full presence and vastness. Trungpa Rinpoche talks about vastness and unlimited depths of perception that have the power to penetrate our habitual discursiveness. This power is called drala. Sometimes we discover drala accidentally in the natural world: something stops our mind, and we are just there with that object, in nowness. It could be as large as a mountain or as small as a dewdrop. We could be standing on top of a mountain, or on a deep carpet of moss in the forest valley.

Drala is not just something that happens to us: it can be invoked. Indigenous people have many ceremonies to invoke drala. In these ceremonies, one enters into a ritual. One's mind is carried on a journey using word imagery and ritual actions. The liturgies create a story about reality. At the end of the ritual one's awareness is pointed to an alternate, open kind of experience. Sometimes these ceremonies involve smoke from juniper, sage, sweet grass or cedar. Trungpa Rinpoche also taught us to invoke drala in the way we dress, in the pins and jewelry that we wear, and in how we take care of our living situation. Indeed, most indigenous cultures have power objects that help to connect them to deities or unseen energies in the natural world.

Drala could either be explained psychologically as an uncovering of perception, or as a kind of external power that is attracted into a place or a thing through appropriate actions. Either way, there is a quality of vastness. Psychologically, we could reason that vastness ultimately underlies everything we experience, but certain individual experiences or perceptions seem to be the keys to unlocking that vastness.

We sometimes envy indigenous people for their ceremonies that connect them to elemental forces and to the unseen world. The experience of drala is a way for us to do that in the context of Shambhala teachings. From the psychological perspective, we could say that we are unlocking the depths of

perception in our own minds. From an external perspective, we could say that we have invited unseen forces in the world, and they have come.

Many of us Westerners look down on the notion of unseen forces or beings—it smacks to us of religion and superstition. For cultural reasons, the psychological explanation feels more “scientific” to us. If we can’t see, hear, feel taste or touch it, it must live in our imagination. From a non-dual perspective, recognizing the images of the apparently external world are actually images in our mind, the distinction between psychological and external interpretations fall away. However, since our day-to-day experience and language are dualistic, we have to choose one side or the other when we express ourselves.

Most world cultures besides our own experience drala as “other”. In fact, taking the outer perspective makes drala more workable and approachable because it opens the door to rituals that draw out the inherent magic of the world. These rituals can also open us to possibilities unknown by our ordinary senses.

Whether we take the inner or outer approach, the experience of drala comes with an intuitive sense of the inherent sacredness and magic of the world. Since our Shambhala sangha has a particularly strong relationship with drala, it is this path and this language that we can offer to others in the West.

We can discover drala by paying attention to the wakefulness of perceptions coming from the natural world. Places where we practice awareness and contemplate emptiness can become saturated with the power of drala. They become power spots for us, sacred and magical.

Here are a couple of contemplations that relate to drala:

Any perception can connect us to reality properly and fully. What we see doesn’t have to be pretty, particularly; we can appreciate anything that exists. There is some principle of magic in everything, some living quality. Something living, something real, is taking place in everything. —Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche from Shambhala, The Sacred Path of the Warrior.

*A mind that knows its own depth can see the brilliant, elemental magic of the world.
—Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche*

Talk VII: Introduction to the Lhasang

At our retreat, we followed the talk on drala with the “Long Werma Lhasang Called the Warrior Song of Drala”.

Lhasangs are traditional ceremonies, part of the secular culture of Tibet. Similar ceremonies exist in many indigenous societies. They purify and invoke the sacredness of the environment. They bring down blessings that overcome our habitual thought patterns. They invoke our life energy, so that mind becomes synchronized with body and with the environment. Therefore, we can appreciate the inherent magic of existence, on the spot.

The language of the lhasang is not particularly Buddhist. It is the language of horse culture on the Tibetan plateau. It is the imagery of Tibetan warriors and it is the imagery of war. Nevertheless, this ceremony was written by a Buddhist scholar and meditation master, Mipham the Great. Our own Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche is a reincarnation of this man. Mipham the Great lived from 1846 to 1912 in Eastern Tibet, an area known for fierce warriors and brigands, and at the same time, for Tibet’s most highly realized ati practitioners. Mipham took the secular language of his times and used it as a metaphor for Shambhala Warriorship: leaning into our experience without fear or hesitation, invoking synchronicity and lungta and the magical world of drala.

You can let your mind ride along with the words into the mental landscape and the presences that are being invoked. Afterwards, just let your experience be whatever it is. When the lhasang is over, you can go for a walk. Take twenty minutes and return when the calling gong sounds. You can allow yourself to not have a purpose or destination—just pay attention to the sights, sounds and smells and let them draw you wherever they will.

Afterthoughts

I. Creating a Foundation

It goes without saying that Buddhists need to reduce their carbon footprint, compost, recycle, travel more wisely, and put in compact fluorescent light bulbs. This is not particularly Buddhist: everyone needs to do it. What we as Buddhists can uniquely offer to the rest of the world is an inner, spiritual perspective on healing our relationship to the natural world. We have discussed some of the Mahayana and Shambhala practices that could help ourselves and others to do that. There is a further step that is needed, and that step is rooted in the Hinayana teachings, the original foundation for all Buddhist practice.

All of us hope that renewable energy will still enable us to travel, enjoy our present level of comforts and eat cheap bananas from Central America. The unspoken and unwelcome message of climate change is that our grandchildren may not find this possible, either because of effects of climate change itself, or the measures necessary to avoid it. Climate change activists often avoid talking about this because deprivation is not a good selling point. However, there is positive way to approach this issue using the view and ethics of the Hinayana.

In the Hinayana, there is an ethic that supports living lightly on the earth—developing renunciation for activities that are harmful to others and distracting for ourselves. A good hinayanist knows how to transmute boredom into spaciousness in sitting practice. Such a person has their desires under control, and does not complicate their lives with too many possessions or pointless activities. Such a person does not indulge in a consumer lifestyle, and appreciates the goodness of simplicity. As the Vidyadhara once said, such practitioners are “toilet trained”. They do not leave messes as a result of their neurosis.

Anyone who has traveled to poor countries knows that it is possible to live simply but happily, perhaps more happily than we do now. The Hinayana teachings provide an ethical foundation for doing this.

II. Exorcising Obstacles

Recently members of our Centre participated in a pre-Copenhagen global action organized by the “350” organization to bring awareness to climate change and the desirability of keeping our CO₂ concentrations below 350 parts per million. We put together some traditional Buddhist chants to dispel obstacles and opened the event to the public. People who attended the event found the practice quite powerful. Since the chants would not be

familiar to the general public, I have included what I remember of the commentary that I gave to the practice. The chants involved were the *Heart Sutra*, the *Exorcism* chant, the *Mamo* chant and the *Aspiration for the Earth* by HH Karmapa. Except for the *Aspiration for the Earth* Chant, which I have included below, all the chants can be found in the Daily Chant book. We did the Heart Sutra with the drum, continuing through 350 repetitions of OM GATE GATE PARAGATE PARASAMGATE BODHI SVAHA. The drumming combined with the mantra was exceptionally powerful.

Overview for Those Attending

We will be doing three chanting practices: one that relates to clearing obstacles, one about how we can relate to the sense of looming threats, and one that expresses our aspiration that the earth could be experienced as pure and sacred. I will give a short introduction to each chant before we do it.

The Heart Sutra

We will start with the Heart sutra, which can be done to dispel obstacles in the form of solidified concepts that substitute for direct experience of reality. These can be very subtle and pervasive. We all have these on a subconscious level. For instance when you entered the shrine room you had a visual image of the floor. There is nothing inherent in that mere image that tells you that it is a “floor”, and that it is solid and will hold you up. We have countless associations, memories and concepts that substitute for actually experiencing the floor fully. When we try to come to decisions as a society, we find that everyone’s substitutions are different. The Heart Sutra is about emptiness, but this kind of emptiness is not a nothing: it is reality just as it is. Obviously, we are working with our selves here, but since we are connected to the world in ways that we can’t even express, perhaps it will have some effect.

The Exorcism Chant

We will now insert a chant that exorcises the maras. After that chant we will return to the Heart Sutra and finish it. Maras are concepts and emotions that seduce us and prevent us from facing reality. They include desire that results in over-consumption, desire to find refuge from uncertainty and change by means of fixed concepts, concepts of self that promote rigidity and the seduction of personal pleasure while ignoring the suffering of others. When you get to the underlined letters in the last sentences of the first paragraph, you should clap strongly at the beginning letters of the words that are underlined. The explosiveness of the claps provokes a startle response that clears thoughts.

*.....and so may I **ex**orcise the evil maras and all others who incite discord. May they be **ann**ihilated. May they be **pac**ified.....,*

The Mamo Chant

Sometimes the karmic consequences of our actions as a culture or a species become so overwhelming that they seem to take on a life of their own. There is a sense of looming disasters. Mamos could be considered the symbolic agents of karmic retribution. Their response can be quite out of proportion to the provocation. They become enraged when people lose touch with the sacredness of their own being and the earth in general. Their severe bitchiness reminds us to have sacred view, or else. We can regard mamos as external beings, or as aspects of our own minds. It is generally better not to separate them from our own minds. The chant concludes with the Vajrasattva mantra of purification. When we do this mantra, we should reflect on our own pure being, and on our aspiration that we do this practice out of pure motivation.

The Aspiration

We conclude with the “Aspiration for the World” by His Holiness Karmapa. Karmapa is the head of the Kagyu lineage, and probably the second most respected person in Tibetan Buddhism after the Dalai Lama. He is in his twenties, and already has a powerful presence and effect on those who hear him. His activities are increasingly directed towards changing our relationship to the earth.

Aspiration for the World

World, we live and die on your lap,
On you we experience all our woes and joys.
You are our ancestral home of old.
Forever we cherish and adore you.
We wish to transform you into the pure realm of our dreams.
We wish to transform you into a land for all creatures,
Equal for all and free of prejudice.
We wish to transform you into a loving, warm and gentle goddess.
Our hope in you is so ever resolute.
So please be the ground on which we all may live
So all these wishes may come true,
So all these wishes may come true.
Do not show us the dark side of your character,
Where nature's calamities reign.
In every section of our world's land
May there thrive a fertile field of peace and joy,
Rich with the leaves and fruits of happiness,
Filled with the many sweet scents of freedom.
May we fulfill our countless and boundless wishes.