

Awakening to Our Nature, in Nature

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“We are here to overcome the illusion of our separation.”

-- Thich Nhat Hanh

According to the traditional story, the future Buddha was born in a forest grove, left home to practice in nature, awakened under a tree, lived and taught in nature, and passed away between two trees. When Mara questioned his enlightenment, the Buddha touched the earth as witness to his realization.

Today most of us meditate in homes and retreat centers, separated from the joys and irritations of the natural world by solid floors and right-angled walls. This is certainly more convenient and comfortable, but has something been lost?

Spending time in the natural world provides inescapable lessons in the three basic facts of existence: dissatisfaction, impermanence, and insubstantiality. It is almost always too hot or cold, too wet or windy, not to mention insects and animals. Without indoor temperature control and lighting, the transience of conditions become much more apparent. And the interdependence of ecosystems demonstrates how the world is not a collection of separate things but a confluence of natural processes that includes us.

The ecological and climate crises we face now go beyond the ordinary personal suffering that Buddhism has usually been concerned with. Traditional Buddhist teachings help us to wake up individually and experience our non-separation from the world. Today we must ask whether those teachings also apply to group delusions of a collective self. Isn't our ecological predicament a larger version of the perennial individual predicament: the notion that we the human “inside” are separate from the natural world “outside”?

The practical issue then becomes whether we can use our spiritual practice to investigate the root causes of our present situation. On one level we have a civilization that has institutionalized greed and exploitation, deferring the environmental costs of fossil fuels and the unrestrained growth of population and consumption to the future – a future that is starting to be *now*. On another level, we have human hearts and minds that have difficulty restraining the drive for immediate gratification and pleasure, regardless of the harmful consequences to ourselves and to others.

A powerful avenue for investigating our personal and collective separation is being in the natural world for periods of intensive practice. With time and deep,

mindful observation we can realize that in order to live in non-separation we must give up the illusion of being above or beyond nature—the illusion of control that technology and society have so deeply ingrained in us.

Being in the elements, exposed and present, can be uplifting and inspiring, but it can also be scary, uncomfortable, intense, and disorienting, before it is ultimately liberating. It is one thing to wax poetic about the beauty of nature, another to be deeply feeling moment by moment the effects on mind and body of cold, heat, wind, water, sun, solitude, and the fears these can engender. Yet if we turn towards our experience with loving awareness, it can bring us to our true home, opening us to the power of absolute truth and love; and helping us realize our deepest connection and oneness with all.

Since the natural world is unable to protect itself from our formidable technologies, the ultimate question is if and when we will realize our non-duality with it, to love it and be loved by it, and in that way come to embrace responsibility for the well-being of the whole biosphere, which is our only assured path of survival.

The hope for this is what motivates our offerings here.