

OUR VOW: The Great Protector

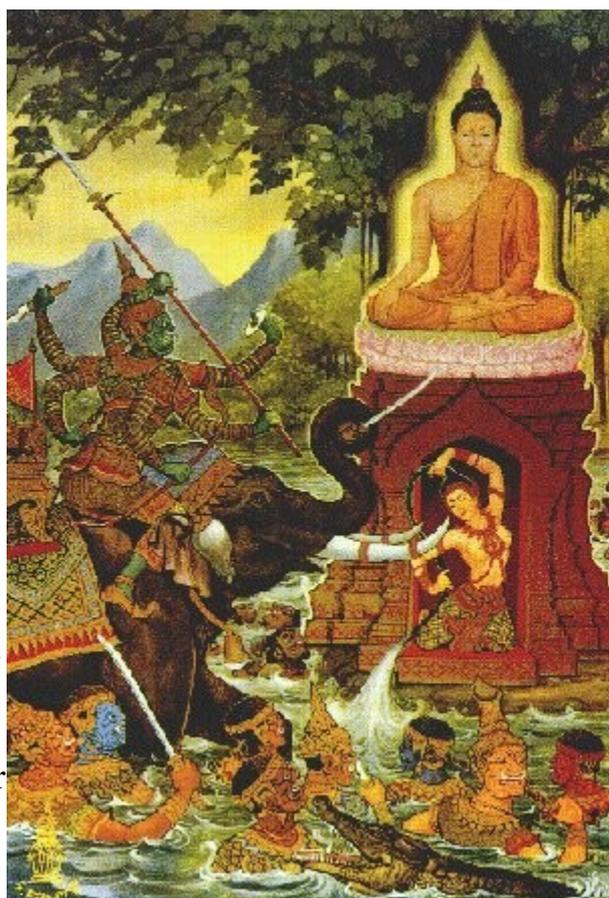
Reflections on The Earth Witness Posture

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Buddhist teaching, be it in words or images, offers us insights into the truth. It is there for us to reflect upon, digest, and through that, enable our own understanding to unfold. The Dharma is a living thing with a life of Its own, and encountering it will call forth different aspects of the teaching in different people at different times. No one has the one and only ‘right’ explanation. Indeed, it may mean one thing to us one day, another the next, and there is no need to limit it to a textbook definition. We can leave it to teach for Itself, calling forth whatever a person needs to see, or reflect upon, in that moment; it is all part of the kaleidoscopic nature of Buddhism. With that in mind I should begin by saying that I write about what arose whilst contemplating this great event from where I am now in training, and make no claims of having experienced all that Shakyamuni did on that night.

When sitting beneath the Bodhi tree (as shown here) on the eve of his Enlightenment, we are told that Shakyamuni was attacked by the hordes of Mara (all that can tempt, frighten or deter a person from training. The attack was complex, and may have come in many different ways, both internal and external. By this I mean from negative forces outside of Shakyamuni’s body and mind, as well as the arising of his own personal issues, but no one knows for sure. What we do know is that in the midst of it all he reached down and touched the earth with the fingers of his right hand. This gesture is usually described as Shakyamuni calling upon the earth to witness his vow to remain unmoved in his sitting place, letting nothing distract or deter him from his purpose, which was to make sense of having a human life, or, more specifically, to find the cause of suffering and what could be done about it.



Iconographic images depict how Mother Earth (help will come, the ground we walk upon knows us and wishes us to succeed) came forth and wrung a bountiful stream of water from her hair. When confronted with this flowing water (the pure essence of

life, which was able to flow so strongly due to his many years of committed and steadfast training) all that sought to attack, defeat or hinder Shakyamuni, be it internal or external, was washed away. This could also be a description of the lines from The Scripture of Great Wisdom that say, “ When we are truly one with wisdom great, the obstacles dissolve.”²

In Buddhism, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are referred to as the Triple Treasure and these help us to realise and fulfil the other triple treasure, which is a human life, the practice and our vow to train.

In touching the ground, Shakyamuni stood firm and true within the heart of his vow, confirming his resolve to follow that inner call and find the cause of suffering. That ‘touch’ can be seen as him releasing himself into the living flow of meditation. In the depth of that abiding, the shadow of self (all that is transient within a person) dissolved into the pure essence of what he was, is and always will be, because the ‘ground’ that he touched was the fathomless, indescribable, Source of all Existence. As he did so the vow rose up, filling him from within with Its life, enabling his mind to be as clear water, freed of any confusion, flowing in all directions. Within that flowing was revealed the meaning of his human existence and therefore of all existence, for you cannot see your own true nature without seeing the essence of all that exists, for they are the same.³

There is a saying in Buddhism, ‘what was your face before you were born?’ The vow is within that ‘face’, it came into this world with us and it dwells within, like an inner light, making itself known in many little (or not so little) ways throughout our life.⁴ Within the vow is our reason for being born, how to resolve our karma and the beckoning hand that guides, calls, points the way and gives us assurance that we are going in the right direction.

The vow, or wish to train, is not an idea or concept, it is not something we think about and devise, like a New Year resolution, then decide to implement. It comes from the great mystery of the sitting place, flowing into us at our conception. The scriptures speak of realising (rather than self-creating) the Truth, and, in the same way, we ‘realise’ rather than create, our wish to train. We can decide to turn away from and ignore the vow, the call to Enlightenment, but we are not its creator, and clearly page understanding this will help us in our training, because it emphasises how much we need what meditation brings. The vow is the great ‘transcender’. It unfolds within, and through, a human life of training, inspiring and enabling ordinary flesh and blood frailty to reveal its essence, which manifests through how we are, and how we do what we do.

With this touch he showed us that our human ability to choose, to turn to the Master in the Heart, is beyond value. When we listen deeply, so that the quality of our listening silently calls to the vow, when we turn to it, and place its guidance, its teaching, above all else, then we will be supported and nourished from within. That nourishment will sustain us through many long and difficult days. Step by step, it will give us what we need to complete our journey, because from within the unfolding of the vow the steps that we need to take will make themselves known to us.

Within this is the heart and meaning of bowing and of training. Here, that night beneath the Bodhi tree, so much of our practice was born. Sitting with all that arises; entrusting oneself to the clear flow of meditation, knowing that we need what only it can bring; not doubting oneself or turning away; taking Refuge in, and being guided by, the inner call of the Great Mystery; renouncing the world; showing gratitude, and the highest Precept of all, trusting what is good to do in the present moment. This account of the Buddha beneath the Bodhi tree also indicates how much effort and dedication will be needed on our spiritual journey. We will be pushed to, and beyond our limit, not just once, but again and again; until there are no limitations left that can hold us back. Much will be asked of us if we are to enable ourselves to be taken beyond ideas and strategies; if we are to be awakened as He was that night.

There is something else here that is deeply touching and a lesson for us all; it is the purity of his wish to find the Truth. Shakyamuni was alone, no one was watching him or knew what he was faced with. He was not trying to impress anyone, he did not make this supreme effort, this unrestricted giving, so he could become famous or considered to be wise and respected. He did not do it so he could have status, power, security or wealth. He did it because it was the right thing to do, it was what his life was for. He gave all that he had to give, and placed finding and serving the Truth, by becoming a living expression of it, above all else. He entrusted himself to the place where the vow comes from and the quality of his responding called forth the teaching that would transform his life. Again and again, over many years, he brought the choices he made into harmony with the will to Enlightenment that flowed forth from his vow, until they became indistinguishable from one another.

In Buddhism we traditionally give with the right hand and receive through the left hand. By touching the earth with his right hand it can be seen as the Buddha giving himself, in the form of unlimited commitment. “No matter whether I live or die, I WILL NOT BE MOVED, nothing can, or will, deter me from my purpose. I plight my troth to thee.” No matter how great the fear or desire that may be coursing through us, even though we tremble and quake with it, the vow within holds us, firm and true, within the heart of the sitting place. With all that he was, with his very life, Shakyamuni was saying that whatever this quest asked of him, he could and would do it. When human confidence is freed from any taint of coarseness, assertiveness or ego, it is harnessed by the vow and converted into the purity of faith. Trust deepens; as clear water rises up from a well, and cannot be held back, so the vow flows forth, filling us with Its meaning. In training we become as a pipe, a vessel within which whatever troubles or confuses us can rise up and have its need met by the flow of meditation. Sitting still in trust, we enable this meeting to take place, as our body and mind become a vessel of conversion and of compassion.

When we entrust ourselves to the pilgrimage of our life, as one would cast off in a boat with no oar or rudder, to cross a vast and uncharted sea, there is a knowing in the living pulse of our mind, in the physical fabric of our bodies, that faith will take us where we need to go. That knowing fills us with a quiet sense of wonder. We see that

the unfolding of the vow brings a quality of being that we had lost sight of for so long, as Its insights illumine our mind, opening up new vistas. Commitment deepens and the wish to not continue the transient self, to not live in the shadow world of changing emotions and mental habit patterns, becomes uppermost in our minds. Like a mighty dragon in the depths of the earth, our vow stirs, we feel Its great strength and sense that it has been waiting for us to be ready, so that it can rise up in all Its fullness. Sitting in our little boat we joyfully cry out, “Speak, speak, give me direction.”⁵ knowing that It will and that we are in safe hands.

Whilst Shakyamuni’s right hand touched the earth, his left hand (through which we receive), was laid upon his lap, open and at rest in meditation. He was both offering himself and receiving what flowed back from the Source, as a result of that giving, at the same time. When we recognise the limited nature of our present understanding of life, and that recognition coincides with a great longing to fulfil ones purpose, these two merge, and from that merging comes a renunciation of the world; the world of the mind that he had forged and lived by and could take him no further. Its time was over. This feeling that we have come to the end of all that we know, makes us more inclined to sit in simple faith and trust, enabling the mind to be as it was before we imposed our own ways upon it. The vow and all it contains—and makes possible—is set free and our ordinary human mind, now unrestricted, is ready and able to receive it; with this rising and receiving, this merging, comes an awakening, a transformation. As the meditation draws us ever deeper our physical form cannot hold us, our thoughts do not define us. That night he showed us the full magnificence of what it means to take Refuge. He showed us the meaning, and the result, of true gratitude.

This left hand is relaxed and at ease upon his lap, reflecting how his mind was at ease within trust. It takes many years of dedicated endeavour before someone runs out of any option other than to offer themselves in full trusting surrender, so that they can be transformed by what flows forth within meditation. It is not just a matter of wanting it, we have to undertake the training that will enable us to be capable of receiving it. Every action has a consequence and here we have the result of many decades of committed training: by keeping going when it was hard to do so or when we don’t want to; being still with emotions and facing fears; giving oneself over and over again, decade after decade, to the Refuge—which can also be called the renewing of our vows—through and within our daily actions, as we seek genuine understanding and insight, rather than settling for a mind that is dulled and stunted by what it thinks it knows; taming anger, subduing greed, resolutely clarifying confusion and mistaken perceptions; always being willing to admit to a mistake and learning from it, rather than seeking avoidance or hiding from reality behind excuses; offering the mind over and over again to be clarified and enlightened by the Truth (please teach me); showing, through our thoughts, speech and actions, the resolve and heartfelt longing to be awakened by the Great Mystery that flows through us; welcoming anything that the meditation, or others, wish to draw to our attention. All of these choices, these actions, have a consequence and the merit (result) of that consequence is there to

help, or ‘speak’ for us when we need it, as shown by the water that flowed from the earth.

Shakyamuni sat in the place that fills all things and its completeness sustained him. He was not pulled off centre by what was going on around or within him. It can be hard to stay within the ‘pure place’ of meditation if we feel threatened or when others are giving vent to aggression or any unbridled negativity is arising. Encountering someone who can live from that still centre, no matter what is going on, can subdue a savage instinct, a cruel intention. We meet people who train so deeply that the way they are touches our hearts, making us want to be a better person. I know I have. When Shakyamuni touched the earth his individual life faded into the light of truth that is all life. We, and all things, animate and inanimate, are connected, and the awakening of one calls to that which waits to be awakened within another. In response their (as yet) undiscovered vow stirs, as their potential begins to make itself known, by drawing aspects of themselves, that may be hard to look at, to their attention. This ‘call’ can come in different ways, some less obvious, and less comfortable, than others. At first it may not be welcomed and the one in whom it stirs may even resent, or wish to avoid it, but however it comes, even if someone resists or runs in fear, it still brings a great opportunity to change one’s life for the better.

It is often the dread of looking within, the lure of distraction, or self-doubt that stops a person from training as deeply as they could. When we sense the tenderness of what flows within one who lives from the purity of faith, we may be inspired and reassured enough to dare to believe that we too can change; that we can let ourselves open up and allow what lies hidden within to step into the light, but not everyone is able to respond in this, more positive, way. On this occasion, as negative forces attacked Shakyamuni, they were faced with the full glory of Buddha. Like a jewelled mirror this reflected back to them the Truth, and it is the truth that those caught in delusion fear so much. Perhaps they saw the extent of their hatred and confusion, perhaps they saw what they had allowed themselves to become, through the choices they had made, and it shocked and terrified them. In the Avalokiteshwara Scripture it accurately describes how, when troubled beings encounter “...holy power—they will be turned away with shrieks of fear.”⁶ This is because of their judgement of themselves. I have seen this happen, maybe not with audible shrieks, but many a trainee has been driven to turn, or even run away, because they could not face looking at what lies within them; they could not receive the Truth that the call of the vow offered, giving clear direction by highlighting a need for reflection and change. If we can see that prompting as a gift it becomes a wake-up call, “*what am I doing, I don’t want to be this way.*” Hard though it may be to say, “I have been wrong about a lot of things, I cannot stand to be the way I am any longer, please help me”, when we can do this it opens the gates, it makes change for the better not only possible, but already under way, and the pure clear water is flowing from the earth.

Traditionally, in iconography, we know that the hordes of Mara consisted of, among other things, warriors, a mad elephant, wild animals and Mara’s daughters.

Iconography gives us an image that emphasises the force of all that arose at this time, and is likely to arise (in one way or another) for anyone who steps out onto the path of Awakening. This is because whatever is unresolved within us will, sooner or later, have to be faced, and the deeper we go the more challenging it will become. It makes clear the courage, determination and faith needed to hold fast when so much is at stake.

This colourful image should not be thought of as fantastical. It shows creatures that represent confused and negative activity that we, and all beings who have ever lived encounter, within and/or around us, in our everyday world. The pictorial style may be historical, but the content is always current, no matter in what age or culture a being lives.

The Warriors make me think of old habit patterns, such as stubbornness, cynicism, coarse speech, misconceptions, deceitfulness, the urge to lash out, and any form of forceful resistance or insistence. Ways we can use our mind that rampage and march on, creating havoc, attacking the trusting mind, pulling it away from its natural source. This 'army' will leave a wake of mental coarseness that dulls our awareness, preventing us from being able to see how destructive those habit patterns are. They deprive us of clear-sighted vision, and the peace of mind that brings, by making us prey to repeating those patterns in self-destructive cycles.

Wild animals could be the emotions, pulling us this way and that, or forceful opinions that harden the mind and drive wedges between self and other, or anything that is out of control, like fear or anger, that is the result of not seeing clearly and which drives and controls us, such as lust for power, greed and hate.

A wild animal can lay hidden, waiting to pounce on its prey, then holding on at all costs. We can use our mind in this way, refusing to let go, insisting that we are 'right' and increasing our ability to suffer by thinking that an opinion, or point of view, is more important than abiding within the enclosure of the sitting place.

The daughters of Mara (which would have been sons had Shakyamuni been female) are varying forms of desire, delusive pleasure and discontent. These can manifest in many different ways, some very subtle, that give birth to more confusion and the continuation of bewildered distress. This can manifest as a restlessness, always looking for something else, trying to find a refuge in areas where there is none. These daughters sought to seduce Shakyamuni away from the main road of training. "Look what you could have, why struggle on, why not return to the palace where a life of comfort, pleasure and gratification awaits? You could have people to cater for all your needs, wealth and power." Shakyamuni knew that this was not right for him and their appearance strengthened his vow and helped to clarify his purpose.

It is said that the only weapon a monk may carry is the Truth; this is a weapon of protection, not of attack. Clear insight protects us from making regrettable choices by believing that something is true when it is not true. Truth inspires patience because we would rather wait for what is real to make itself known to us than grab at mental

fabrication. It gives us the courage to know we can hold fast and look, instead of running in fear; it shows us what we can change and what we cannot. It is the voice of the Precepts showing us the best that can be done in the moment; an enabler that brings the gift of enlightening insight. By taking refuge in Truth, Shakyamuni was protected from any spiritual harm by not being drawn into, or manipulated by, the unresolved confusion (suffering) of either himself or others.

The Truth should not be seen as a concept or as a specific in-sight; it is not something we 'have'. We 'carry' it by living from meditation, by training ourselves so that body and mind can become a vessel through which the pure essence of life (Truth) can flow in an unhindered way, enabling Its life to become our life. This changes our understanding of what it is to have a human life, and that is also part of our protection. We see that the vessel (our physical body) is part of, and not separate from, that flowing. Its form is tangible and transient, at the same time. Understanding this quiets the mind and increases trust in the practice, as the gift of a human life brings new meaning and purpose to our reason for existing. As water washes out a stain so the flowing of Truth enables the need for self-identity to fade. This increases an inner sense of completeness and contentment, which is also a protection, especially against worry, anxiety and any thoughts of failure.

Ultimately Mara and his attendants, who represent all that can destroy the spiritual life, can be seen, not as evil, but as the tester; that which probes and presents a person with anything that remains unresolved within them; any thought, feeling, fear, desire or confusion that may tempt them to doubt or turn away from training, or distract them from their purpose. Can we be tempted to turn away from our quest? Will we take what seems to be the easy option, even though it is the wrong one for us? Will we run in fear by seeking distraction or escape instead of looking squarely at what lies within us? Are we willing to be tested by life, seeing Mara as one who shows us where there are hidden pockets of confusion (karma) needing to be resolved, or do we resent this gift of being shown our blind spots; this opportunity to leave no stone unturned? Will we opt for avoidance and complacency, or will we make the footsteps of the Master our own? Mara and the whole of the Buddhist way are there to help us make the right choices, clarify the way forward and to complete the spiritual work of this lifetime.

I think of a man alone, sitting beneath a tree, having left behind all that he had, because of an inner call to seek for the meaning of life. He had lived for many years with nothing but the robe on his back and little to eat. This pilgrimage, this seeking for Enlightenment, for the clarity of true insight into the source of one's human existence, and what to do with the life that has been given, is the greatest journey a person can make.

We can only 'know' our completeness by becoming it, whilst it remains an idea or a concept it is still a potential that has yet to be realised. At Buddha's Enlightenment we celebrate the fulfilling of a vow, the making real of that human potential, not just on one night, but by the way in which he lived for the rest of his life. What one

person did, all beings can do. Remember that the Buddha was not a god but an ordinary man who listened deeply, trusted his instincts and let the vow call him forth, giving up all that he had to seek for the Truth. The Shushogi warns us not to leave our life “exposed to changeableness”⁷ by placing too much importance upon all that is transient, whilst neglecting ‘the important thing’. We give up the shadow world (all that is subject to change) “...our birthright to restore.”⁸ Shakyamuni, and all the true masters after him, showed us both what is required of us and what is possible. For that we offer a ceremony of gratitude. Whilst it is good to do this we must remember that it is by the everyday activity of ‘always becoming’ the living embodiment of that inner flowing that we make real our offerings and show gratitude.

HOMAGE TO THE BUDDHA
HOMAGE TO THE DHARMA
HOMAGE TO THE SANGHA

Notes

1. Mara is death to the spiritual life. He makes the mundane seem alluring, the negative appear attractive. His weapons are fear and desire, which can control and manipulate people. Wherever there is grasping, there is Mara.
2. The Scripture of Great Wisdom, The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.73.
3. Later that night, after his Enlightenment, he said, “I was, am and will be Enlightened instantaneously simultaneously with the universe.” which is another way of acknowledging that sameness, that Truth. From Zen is Eternal Life, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1999) p.7. First edition
4. The Four Sights: Whilst on an outing from the palace, the young Shakyamuni saw a very old person, a sick person and a corpse, all for the first time. He then saw a Holy man, and these four sights were the catalyst that awoke his vow to train; his wish to find the cause of the human condition, and what could be done about it.
5. The Litany of The Great Compassionate One, The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.78.
6. The Scripture of Avalokiteshwara, The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.48.
7. Shushōgi, Zen is Eternal Life, first edition (Shasta Abbey Press, 1976.) p.155.
8. Awake, All Buddhist People, a Wesak Invocation in The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.239.