



buddhafield: a new going forth
by kamalashila

For a while there's been a wilder, more colourful shape at the edge of the Triratna Mandala. It's called 'Buddhafield'. In Mahayana scripture the word *buddhaksetra*, which literally translates as 'Buddha-field', indicates 'the field of influence of a Buddha'. Our Buddhafield obviously refers to that as well, yet the name also suggests actual fields - I mean green ones - and so far, mostly English ones too, though the phenomenon is spreading, with new developments springing up in Holland, New Zealand, and quite possibly all over the place. Buddhafield is the **Triratna Buddhist Community** as lived in the great outdoors, amongst the elements. It consists of practitioners who, from freezing January through to the end of autumn, conduct Dharma activities on the land.

It's a way of practising Buddhism that has a noble precedent: the Buddha himself lived and taught on the land. For most of his long life, he wandered here and there at the edge of society, **meditating**, reflecting, and communicating his Enlightenment. Even during the monsoon rains, the period *for* intense meditation retreat, his community didn't shelter in conventional buildings but meditated in leaf huts or caves. Likewise those attending a Buddhafield retreat meditate in tents, yurts, benders, geodesic domes, under the open sky and under trees.

The Buddha's simple outdoor life inspires this; another less austere influence is hippy culture. Buddhafield started in the early 1990s when a few Order members took meditation to alternative festivals like Glastonbury. Hundreds of such gatherings happen each year in the UK, **catering for hundreds of thousands of people** of all ages. Many of them see the faults of consumer society in a way that resonates with Buddhism's inherent radicalism. Consumerism contains, at its heart, the mental poison of selfish greed. Both old and **young people**, noticing this, become disillusioned with their society, and look out for alternatives. Perhaps this seeds a certain nostalgia for the culture of the '60s and '70s - the era of Triratna's birth.

Triratna certainly emerged from a similar resistance to consumer society. It was founded in 1967 on the vision of Buddhism as a more civilised basis for society, as a positive way out of the cyclic trap of need and greed. Buddhafield can be seen as a renaissance of a more 'political' Buddhist vision. For decades many of us have been building a Buddhist culture, evolving new structures for living, and using them to live happier, more insightful lives. However, for newer people Triratna's established centres and confident, middle-aged populace probably doesn't look very radical. Hence this new rebirth. Such new forms of Dharma have been emerging from Buddhist tradition

since Sakyamuni's day, and 'any Buddhist movement that is spiritually alive will find itself always being remade.

Nowadays, Buddhafield continues to take the Dharma to the great alternative gatherings like Glastonbury. Along with its own annual Festival, Buddhafield's Cafe, a right livelihood enterprise with at times up to a hundred staff, supports all Buddhafield's Dharma activities as well as its fleet of vehicles and cargo of special equipment.

Every year, the five-day Buddhafield Festival attracts thousands of people to a large field in the west of England 'to explore Buddhism, meditation, theatre, music, eco-activism, alternative living, healing arts, shamanism, ritual, and play'. And there is a marked emphasis on the latter. Two hundred children swing, bounce endlessly on trampolines, and roll around, twenty at a time, over and under an inflated beach ball the size of a small house. Clowns, jugglers, and a carthorse with cart career around, vying for everyone's attention. In various tents adults are massaged, healed, and challenged to partake in debates of anarchic, Buddhist, or anarcho-Buddhist interest. Beneath one of the huge trees is held a huge ritual, or an evening performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. During the day, drumming sessions throb hour after hour, and at night bands and deejays inspire wave after wave of ecstatic dancers. Along with this happy atmosphere, a great variety of meditation and dharma activities are offered throughout the day in the enormous 'Dharma Parlour' and in the sequestered meditation area, an exclusive encampment of yogis and hangers-on. There are many talks, studies and classes for all levels of involvement, and rituals and practice sessions for more established meditators - who sometimes look as though they need a little peace and quiet.

Who would attend such a gathering? Vimalaraja, Buddhafield's one time treasurer, estimated one year (and I have updated the figures) that amongst the crowd were 'two thousand Triratna Buddhists, counting three hundred Order members and four hundred volunteer workers), three hundred children, three hundred tepee/yurt/van dwelling full-time travellers; not to mention miscellaneous shamans, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, anarchists, naturists, drunks, and dope heads' - who it seems got in despite the ban on drink and drugs. The rest of the festival-goers. If there were any, must have been ordinary folk.

Buddhafield also runs [serious Buddhist retreats](#) on the land. To meditate and experience oneself more deeply, and to reflect on the timeless Dharma, seems only natural in these elemental surroundings. One autumn I led a silent '*shamatha*—

vipashyana' retreat for all comers. Seventy of us took part — a larger group than could easily have participated if the retreat had been held at a typical retreat centre. Speaking was largely confined to introducing ourselves on the first evening, and sharing our experience on the final morning. There were, of course, opportunities to ask questions in the teaching sessions, and anyone could speak at any time with me, the retreat leader. The retreat lasted for ten days. The first few days were taken up with the development of **shamatha**: uncluttered, relaxed concentration. To untie the gathered knots of habitual mental tension and distraction, we meditated, session after session, on the experience of breathing. As the general level of shamatha grew, we incorporated more sessions of **metta bhavana**. There eventually came a point where the majority of the retreatants were in or near 'access concentration' — that state of consciousness in which sustained attention becomes easier and more pleasurable. It is at this stage that the mind develops at least some capacity for **vipashyana**, and may start to sense some glimmering of the real nature of things.

I therefore introduced vipashyana in the form of reflection, and directed experience, on universal impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and insubstantiality — **the three lakshanas** or 'characteristics of existence'. I then gave talks on each of the three samadhis of animitta, apranihita, and sunyata. These states of illumination arise from a realisation of the universal truth of the lakshanas. One realises that which is beyond words, beyond needs, and beyond characteristics of any kind. In particular, I spoke about the lakshana of impermanence and the **animitta samadhi**.

All this might sound abstract here on paper, but I think I managed to present the idea of impermanence in ways that each person could appreciate and put to good effect in their meditation. I explained how **prajna**, wisdom, is cultivated at three successive levels. Firstly, of course, you do need to take in some abstract ideas (for example, the **teachings about impermanence**). Then, once established in a clear mental state, you can reflect on them, and gradually absorb the ideas into a more concrete understanding. This understanding creates a basis for a third and final level of wisdom at which you directly penetrate the insubstantial nature of all experience. This is the meditative wisdom that transforms one's whole life and world. I explained that few of us would be in a position to practise much at that highest level. Most of us would be developing the first level, learning more about the idea of impermanence. And we would all be working on the second level — reflecting, making sense of the teaching in our own experience. Then, on that basis, we might occasionally participate in some

deeper kind of insight. I believe this model enabled us to work sensibly and to enjoy the practices.

Impermanence is certainly fascinating as a topic. I soon noticed that almost everyone on the retreat tended to a pre-set view that 'things coming to an end' necessarily entails something unpleasant. However, this was certainly not based on experience, for unpleasant things end too (to our great relief!) Once one actually manages to engage with impermanence reflection, one quickly finds in it a sense of liberation. This may not yet be **liberation in an ultimate sense**, but it is of great benefit, if only as a means to gain respite from the grip of the five hindrances to concentration. As we dwell in the awareness that all our experiences are impermanent, our expectations become less of an unhealthy focus, and the time-bomb pressure of our craving, anxiety, and aversion naturally becomes de-fused.

From that point on the retreat, we aimed to establish awareness of the impermanence in all our experience. I led reflections on the impermanence, not only of the breathing, but also of life generally, occasionally mentioning the physical elements, nature, civilisation, - anything, in fact, for it always applies. Whatever our attention turned towards was revealed as an impermanent flow. I think we all found that living amongst the **elements of earth, water, fire, air, and space** stimulated a greatly increased awareness of the incessant change in our experience.

A third aspect of Buddhafield's activity is the development of a new way of life more in harmony with nature. Ratnarashi, the current chairman, is especially interested in this, the cultivation of Buddhist lifestyles within Buddhafield. Many of the people that the **Buddhafield team** meet have initially been drawn to the friendship and exciting ideas that the festivals generate, as well as to the music and culture that abound there. However, eventually they find that 'festival' is not sustainable as a way of life. For a while, they may try to make it so, travelling between the hundreds of spring and summer gatherings, but few retain such an interest for long. Those who do — the committed, seasoned travellers — often have to spend the less hospitable UK months living and working in the city, leading a thoroughly mundane and un-ecological existence. There surely must be a better approach for those seeking an alternative way of life. The Buddhafield team know from experience that a harmonious way of life can emerge through collective practice of Buddhist principles. They want to explore new, alternative contexts for this.

For this exploration, the connections Buddhafield make on the festival circuit are proving valuable. For example the [Rainbow People](#), a 'tribal' group, have some decades of experience of living in natural surroundings all the year round, in dwellings such as tepees, yurts, and straw bale houses. Some Buddhafield team members are training in [permaculture](#), ecological principles that can be applied particularly to gardening and crop growing. They hope this may eventually become a right livelihood business. And in a relatively recent development, the team has [managed to purchase](#) two substantial pieces of land as [permanent sites](#).

I am very much enjoying being Buddhafield's president. Most Triratna Centres have a president — an experienced Order member from outside that Centre, whose function is to help it to stay in touch with the fundamental ideals of Triratna and with the rest of the Movement. It is something I have been doing since they asked me many years ago, and of course, I'm still learning the job. I suppose that whatever I have to offer to Buddhafield Order members, Mitras and Friends comes from my longstanding connection with [Bhante](#), the members of the Preceptors' College, and Triratna as a whole.

Presidents have a duty to visit the Centres they 'take on' and participate in their activities. For me of course, that means plenty of camping and meditation out there amongst the elements. Luckily, not only am I committed to meditation, but I also greatly enjoy being in the open air.

Being a president involves little or no formal responsibility, though I feel it to be a responsible position. There is no salary, though usually travel and living expenses are met. I am not an officer of any of Triratna charities that administer each centre. My job is simply to keep in good communication with everyone involved, especially with the key Order members. It is something I may well be doing for the rest of my life.

These days, Buddhafield functions much like any Triratna centre, with its own Mitras, men and women. For quite a number of people, Buddhafield is their main connection with Triratna. I have already got to know many of these men and women just by staying around and talking, doing some teaching on festivals and retreats, and (very occasionally) actually working in the cafe. I am looking forward to extending and deepening my range of connections. I hope that everyone connected with Buddhafield feels able to talk with me about anything on their mind — whether it's about their personal life, something happening around the centre that they're not happy about, or some point of Dharma. As president, I feel that's part of what I am there for.

I keep up my connection with the core team of Order members, especially with the Chairman. For much of the time I do this on the phone and by email - yes, even Buddhafield is on email! In fact, you can even read all about the [coming year's activities online](#). But that's no substitute for actually being wherever Buddhafield happens to be. So over the coming year I hope to spend more time with the core team and involve myself in their retreats over the summer. Maybe I'll see you there?

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