



Body Wise: Dreaming Bodies, Dreaming the Earth

with Kamalamani

It's summer time and the living doesn't feel easy. The nation approached the climax of the most uncreative election campaign I can remember, with Teresa May refusing to participate in election debates and Jeremy Corbyn participating as fully as he could in spite of the best efforts of many media channels to scupper his campaigning. There have been three 'terror attacks' in the UK in the past few months, the most recent on Saturday night, June 3, 2017, on London Bridge. Countless other attacks across the globe go largely unreported; no 24 hours news coverage and live BBC interviews for the families of the 68 children who died in a Syrian bomb attack in Idlib province in April.



Picture retrieved from <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/nation-and-world/details-emerge-about-london-attackers/>

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Responses to the recent attacks are interesting. Actually, that's rubbish. They're far from interesting; they are depressing and depressingly predictable. Brushing my teeth this morning, I found myself feeling profoundly ashamed for being British – foolish of me to have watched that Boris Johnson on YouTube, with the sinking feeling that he might have been Prime Minister if the Tories had been overtly victorious in their recent election. Instead, we find ourselves with a hung Parliament, May claiming she's going to create a new government, and Corbyn's Labour party earning more seats than May expected.

In response to the London Bridge carnage Teresa May has announced "enough is enough", proposing crackdowns on the internet, New York Times reporters are being criticised for saying the UK is 'reeling' after the terror attacks in both Manchester and London, with the resulting proliferation of #notreeling social media commentary. According to the Guardian the attacks simply bring out our defiant British humour. Ho bloody ho, I must have missed out on that stoical British humour gene, for I am sick of this dissociated war-mongering militaristic arrogance at the heart of our nation, carefully concealed beneath a veneer of suited, business as normal calm and respectability. It is out of date, misplaced, sickening and dishonest.

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by a very British and very familiar sense of fear and waiting. I feel some urgency in finding a response because I know clients will be arriving in my therapy room in a day or two with their own responses, their fine antennae accurately tuning into my own levels of jangled-ness. I breathe and notice the turmoil in my belly and the dull ache in my heart, which, as I track it, moves diagonally across my chest before slowly encroaching upon my tightening throat, pinging my tear ducts, making me swallow hard and determinedly – keep calm and carry on – old habits dying hard.

The greatest tragedy is that all the while we are busy fighting the 'war on terror' and busy extracting ourselves from Europe, we are failing to attend to our relationship with the earth, failing to listen to the earth and her beings and the more pressing business: climate chaos, keeping fossil fuels in the ground, engaging with the realities of the 6th extinction crisis, to name but a few. You'd think we might be interested in this, even from the point of view of enlightened self-interest, given our interconnectedness, even if we fail to recognise the inherent value of life in all its myriad forms. No, seemingly not, although the resistance response to Trump pulling out of the Paris deal has been strangely heartening.

I count myself as fortunate that I dwell with friends, family, communities who grapple with the dirty secrets and I'm reminded of the words of ecologist, activist and writer Stephanie Mills:

"Among do-gooders, it is bad form to be a pessimist, but I cannot seem to get that extinction crisis out of my mind. Or that population explosion. Or global climate change. Or the consequences of an era of trade agreements. Can't get those billionaires; those landless, homeless, jobless billions; those new diseases; that global casino of finance capitalism; the corporate capture of the media; those aging nuclear reactors; those surveillance satellites; those crowded prisons out of my mind" (Mills, 2002: 28).

I realise for the first time that I feel hugely privileged to be in touch with those who are engaging to do whatever they can to raise awareness, resist, educate, process, act for some recognition and lessening of the ecocide which is taking place. Don't get me wrong, I think most people are aware of the destruction, but have no idea of what to do or how to engage, feeling in turn overwhelmed, powerless, in denial, disenfranchised, sometimes go off on a hedonistic trip when nothing else works - the trip doesn't work either, but the hangover only lasts half a day. I feel all these things, too, I'm just blessed to be in good company witnessing them. It doesn't make it better, but at least I can still act. My throat loosens a bit, my energy descends into my solar plexus and I feel my feet on the earth and enjoy for a moment the rain lashing furiously against the window pane.

I felt blessed being in the company of 50 of us on retreat last week, tasked with 'Dreaming the earth', the third in a series of retreats on the theme of the 'Courage to Care'. My friend Suvaco invited me to support him and I jumped at the chance: our shared love of the Dharma, therapy, birth and re-births, embodiment, and life. I am already a lover of dreaming; practising social dreaming on ecopsychology and ecodharma events and during Wild therapy trainings. These days I can't help but notice my own dreaming body, for example, in catching the tail of 'flirts', the uncanny moments and meetings, the synchronicity, and the so-called co-incidences so aptly named by the Process-oriented psychologist Arny Mindell. My heart leapt when I read the blurb on the retreat description on Gaia House's website, which included an excerpt from the Diamond sutra, a classic Buddhist text:

"All conditioned dharmas are like a dream, like an illusion, like a bubble, like a shadow,

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I had a flash back to when I first heard this, years ago, early in my days practising Buddhism – it stopped me in my tracks. Its pithiness, its nature imagery, its immediacy. It cuts to the heart of things, reminding me of what lies at the heart of Dharma practice: impermanence, insubstantiality, and the unsatisfactoriness created when we cling to things, people, identities, places; limpet-like. It reminded me of the bare beauty of this truth and its simplicity. It reminds me that there's no other place to be in response to election back-biting and the carnage of terror but noticing, witnessing, opening up a space – when I can – between hearing and reacting, or, better still, responding. Noticing the shoring up of my identity, the howling chasm of separateness I can fall into, turning breathing beings into fearsome 'others' when I react and, by contrast, the spacious, potent sense of connectedness when I respond, breathing, the chance of something new, unknown, emerging from the edges.

In the month leading up to the retreat I spent a lot of time dreaming, 'Dreaming the Earth' being the retreat theme and all. I listened to my waking dreams, sleeping dreams, lucid dreams, too, inviting a stronger moment by moment awareness of my softer-edged body, plugged into the mycelium, dreaming body. There were nightmares, too, at night and during the day – struggling to get out of my mind the image of young concert-goers in Manchester, shot through with shrapnel. I noticed the edge



<http://www.cosmicdreaming.com/>

between dream and fantasy, qualitatively different, albeit having tantalising similar outer tentacles (one's free-floating, one's more grasping, with both having something useful to say....) This month-long dream time was all sorts of things: from feeling profoundly lost and rootless to being blessed and reassured in an unprecedented way, held in the immense pelvic bowl of the earth upon waking. I felt less myself and more everything else, poised between hearth and sky.

In the lead-up to the retreat, I dreamed of all the retreatants heading in the direction of the retreat, living their lives. I dreamed of Gaia House, too, a fine retreat centre amidst rolling Devon hills, with its rich history as a place of family, community, teaching and contemplation shared by so many other other-than and more-than-human beings

(the bird song is loud, the trees are mature and the vistas are expansive.)

Dreaming the earth drew me into a middle way between 'head first', more rational or intellectual approaches in understanding our relationship with the earth and the Dharma and more fantastical, magical approaches to being, practice and action. This flavour and poise seemed to come alive on the retreat, too, in and through meditation, talks, simple outdoor exercises working both alone and together, orienting ourselves in relationship to ourselves, each other, the earth and other elements, and whole group circles. It was a privilege to be mid-wife, and Suvaco, mid-husband, in holding, cajoling, witnessing and delighting in this dreaming in all its manifestations. We had the chance to evoke and play with and meditate on images, memories, and disturbances, in terms of our body's symptoms. Channels of awareness broadened and deepened.

It was particularly a privilege given that dreaming doesn't get much of a look in consensus reality these days, apart from poetry, commercials, pop songs and in the therapy room and therapy circles. Even in therapy circles, there's a focus on individual dreams and interpretation for personal understanding, rather than tuning into collective dreaming or the cosmic shimmy of the earth dreaming us and us dreaming the earth. As far as I'm aware many of us don't talk much about dreaming in relationship to Dharma practice, either, and I remember when I first introduced social dreaming on retreats being met with surprise and curiosity.

Dreaming has an important part to play given that it has been an under privileged mode of being for a long time in our culture, particularly in collective situations. Imagine if we taught our growing children not just to think but to feel and to dream. Imagine starting a school day with sharing of

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dreams. Imagine if day-dreaming was encouraged rather than “tsk tsk, you’re not daydreaming *again* are you Emma?” (Emma being my name before I was named Kamalamani). What different societies we would have. Does Teresa May dream?

I guess she must...? Was Salman Abedi dreaming as he detonated his suicide vest in the reception area of the Manchester arena? Or was he caught in a hyped, hellish, no-going-back nightmare?

Right now, dreaming feels like a particularly important channel of information, partly as a way of being with and knowing how to respond to the interrelated crises, trying and playing with new ways. Writers and orators like David Loy, the Buddhist philosopher, and Paul Kingsnorth, founder of the Dark Mountain project, talk about life on earth and stories quite a lot – the fact that our lives are made of stories and the need for new stories. We need new stories on how to live, particularly if we want to stop trashing one another, the planet and other than human life and our own species in the process. All beings have value - even trainee suicide bombers. In practising therapy and practising the Dharma we have the potential to be skilled in spotting our stories, noticing the stories we tell ourselves, noticing, maybe, when the stories start to hiccup and work less well, start to breakdown, so maybe our re-storying can start from these storying and re-storying skills we possess.

The majority of us have lost interest in the stories of other species: their lives, habitats, survival. In fact, we’ve lost interest in any otherness, it seems, too busy getting by in a system striving after individual dreams of wealth, status, security. We have lost the stories and story-telling of our predecessors. We’ve stopped taking or making the time to gather with no particular purpose. At some point we seem to have lost sight of the fact that humans are but one species amongst millions – billions – of others. We’ve become the superior race, capable of anything, in our own eyes, and, in doing so, threaten the very fabric of life and our own survival.

What a fabulously correcting time it was, gathering together on retreat with the sole purpose of dreaming the earth, with the earth’s responding, loud and clear.

In losing sight of our place in the complex web of life on earth we often turn our backs on our own natures: the messy bits, the painful bits, the splits, the sobbingly empty bits, the despairing bits, ending up feeling isolated and depressed (holding that thought, maybe we have more in common with suicide bombers than we realise? The universality of isolation and alienation . . .) It’s not often we pay attention to our wild, untamed, dreaming, undomesticated spirits because it’s hard in consensus reality. It’s not quite cricket. Maybe we tend to live a short distance from our own bodies, maybe we’ve stopped dreaming. So, what a relief to be dreaming at Gaia House, free to be there as we are, our bodies fanned out in a meditation hall, like ‘the fishing net of the inland sea’ in Suvaco’s words, speaking from dreaming knowing.

Difficulties in being incarnate, abiding fully in our bodies, are wholly understandable because our dreams have been shattered. It can be hard to dream in times of shattered dreams. This morning I felt the deep-bone shame of being British. Other times I find myself head-in-hands despairing at what’s happened in the past 35 years since I first became aware of the looming crises.

Perhaps back then we had a chance of making significant enough changes. In 2014 the World Wildlife Fund reported that in the past 40 years, a little less than my life time, the earth has lost half of its wildlife. Despair is all around and is often unexpressed. As I type this, three mums with their children are sitting at a table across the way, sharing their horror at the whales which have died in the North Sea. Awareness of the horror is rising. Salman Abedi and the guys randomly stabbing strangers near Borough Market on Saturday night come to mind. How were their dreams shattered? How do we understand their dreams – or nightmares, I don’t know which – in discovering how the

heart goes from honouring life to taking life. "Enough is enough" simply isn't enough to meet the focused, death-hungry energy of the jihadist.

So here we are, alive in these times. Here we are now. In those head-in-hands moments, thinking of the problems, I breathe. Notice my feelings. Feeling the despair and the tingling, the relief that at least I can write words about this – better out than in. I keep breathing.

Both Buddhists and therapists face a crisis, too, I think, in how to practice, how to respond to the world around us. Sometimes Buddhist friends don't want to look, for fear of upsetting their mental states and guarding the gates of their senses, others are very engaged and involved and earth-centric. There are those who believe that world systems come and go and that taking action is simply palliative and therefore a waste of energy, compared to teaching meditation (do both?) How great then, with this in mind, that the people at Gaia house welcomed this less conventional 'Dreaming the earth' theme. Some therapists, perhaps the newer generation, struggle to train, take their place, earn a living, abiding by the increasing rules and regulations and accreditations. There's little space for reflecting on more systemic considerations. It's easy to forget that therapy used to be about soul, healing and the mystery, and not just about a diagnosis and a treatment plan in correcting individual, 'dysfunctional' behaviour.

Personally, I think therapists and Dharma practitioners who are prepared to look have a key role in whatever happens next. Meditating, dreaming, engaging, acting, campaigning and advocating for the earth. Coming together to do that with a rich toolbox. Having the courage to care means going beyond our comfort zones, not pushing carelessly, supporting one another in our living and waking dreaming. And dreaming takes us way beyond comfort zones, because the times we're in have gone way beyond comfort. The dreaming that arises in us supports our work with others. Can we support the Mum waiting in

the reception to Manchester arena, who witnessed her daughter being blown to smithereens, to dream again? How can our soft, listening care support the returning of dreams in hearts which have shattered in the witnessing of hell realms?

Dreaming is key here because I think we can only dream the new stories, and they dream us, or the dreaming helps us to dust off and remember old, wise stories which we've forgotten, which fell by the wayside in the gold rush.

Certainly, my experience of paying attention to my dreams, noting them, not interpreting them, I've been taught things – not just about myself and my experience, but about the times we're in. Dreaming at night and in the day can soften our edges, open up all our senses, rather than the ones that tend to dominate. The unexpected tends to emerge in dreams, and we need the unexpected right now, as the 'business as normal' approach isn't working. Next time there's a terror attack, and it is a 'when' rather than an 'if', maybe we can pause and breathe. Listen to our indignation, feel our fear, notice our responses to our leaders and be permeably skinned enough to keep on dreaming and being dreamed, holding new possibilities in a world on fire.

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Reference: Mills, S. (2002) *Epicurean Simplicity*. A Shearwater Book, Island Press.