

# Earth Day Earth Witness

*By Ayya Tathaaloka Bhikkhuni*

Warm Earth Day greetings, my human friends, and to all forms of life. I share with you a little story—a story within a story. But first, a poem from the Ratana Sutta:

*Like woodland groves in blossom  
in the first heat of the summer  
Is the sublime Dhamma that he taught  
leading to Nibbana, the highest good.  
In the Buddha is this precious jewel.  
By this truth may there be well-being.*

And now the story:

Earlier on in my life, as a younger person, I despaired of the sufferings in our world: personal sufferings, interpersonal sufferings, global systemic sufferings, illness, disease, poverty, death, conflict, war, the desecration of the forests, pollution of our waters and air, landfills, consuming and turning once pristine natural resources of land, water, and earth into garbage . . . and I sought the spiritual way out. Practicing yoga and forms of meditation to raise the mind out of and above all such crude phenomena, I loved the lightness and clarity that was above and beyond.

Then one day I met a Zen (Seon) meditation master who touched and changed all that. He stopped me in my tracks and called me to attention. He mentioned that the way I was practicing might lead to heaven, but that is not the Buddha's way. The Buddha also taught this, yes, but it was not his path. Rather his path was the touchdown. He asked me to look.

To look at the statuary image of the Buddha. He pointed out the posture. One hand in meditation posture, but the other with hand reaching out, touching the ground. And he told me that I needed to do this to. To touch the ground.

He said that in order to awaken in this world, one must first become truly human. And to become truly human, we need to know not only the sky (heaven), but the Earth. To stop, to touch ground, to know our origin, our root.

Photo: <http://www.fotopedia.com/items/1r2ekv47sdbnq-ydxxVkg9-BY>





Earth Witness Buddha, San Francisco International Airport.

Photo: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/wonderlane/2698841837/sizes/z/in/photostream/>

He asked me to go stand on a little landing on the mountainside, and just stand, feeling into the Earth. Feeling and knowing the Earth, and my connectedness with all forms of life on this Earth. Feeling into and sensing into them all, and knowing my co-being with them. Even all the humans.

In the clear air of the mountainside, I could look down and out and see far in the distance like the city in the Wizard of Oz, the peaks of a city under shimmering haze. I had come up from them. This part was hardest.

I felt I could not blame nature. But humanity, endowed with morality, conscience, and higher mind seemed culpable. It took a long time of working with developing kind and compassionate understanding to begin to really enter or reenter the human world. At his advice, I looked at the Buddha image daily. Awake, with one hand in meditation posture, and one hand touching the Earth.

It is called the *Bhumasparsa* (Pali: *Bhumapassa*) image, which means Touching Earth, or the Earth Witness—the most popular of the statuary and painted forms of the Buddha, more popular than with both hands in meditation. But one could ask, is it the Buddha's witness of the Earth or the Earth's witness of the Buddha?

According to the old Buddhist legends told in Thailand, it is the Earth's witness of the Buddha's awakening, the goddess of the Earth, the great goddess of land and waters, who emerges in witness to the bodhisattva's right to awakening,

washing away the armies of Mara—Death himself—with her waters. The story says that if you are replete in generosity (together with the other *paramis*), and if you awaken, the Earth Mother herself will rise to support you. And as you have watered her soils through your benevolence, she will wash away all destruction wrought by the power of the *kilesas*—the defilements in the human heart. It is a powerful story.

A story not of dominion of the Earth, or of coming to safety and security through conquering her. But a story of a man's coming to ultimate safety, security, and peace through conquering himself. Whence, Earth to him becomes a benevolent protector. She is powerful beneficent protectress.

But in this story, she truly has no supernatural power other than the power of our own kamma, the power of our own moral actions, our moral choices, and their accumulated virtue. She does not need to be propitiated. But rather, we ourselves have the power and the call to clean up our own acts.

We need to turn and look at what we have done, what we have made. We need to develop the openheartedness, and great-heartedness—like the great expanses of the sky, the vastness of the ocean, the great breadth of the Earth—to be able to see the suffering of our world for what it is, truly. The external world and the internal world. The elemental nature of the body. The momentary energetic nature of all phenomena. To see and know all of this as it is. Knowing the senses and the sense bases.





Phra Mae Thorani, Thai Mother Earth Goddess

Photo: <http://theworldofstatues.blogspot.com/2010/04/phra-mae-thonaree-chiang-mai.html>

Work with mindfulness of the body and the elements can be very helpful for this work of touching in, touching down, and waking up.

The breath that flows through this body, through you and me, is the breath of the world. The breath of the oceans and of the trees. The light in my eyes and your eyes is the light of the sun and moon and all the stars, the light deep within the Earth, the light within each cell—each dancing particle—the life. The bones of this body like rocks, rocking outcroppings on the hillside visible where flesh of green and earth has worn away.

They are all the same elements.

Our lives are all a part of this, and all a part of each other. Touching ground, touching the Earth, in the space of loving kindness, we can have the heart to bear and to be with it all. And witnessing all intimately, awareness grows and awakening can happen.

It has been said masculine and feminine elements are fused in these stories, each becoming complete in themselves. No longer at war with, and no longer needing to dominate one another. But in harmony, full, complete, and replete in themselves.

And still, knowing our interdependency, knowing the truth of our interconnectedness, and that of all life, living with great honor and great care for one another. Loving all forms of life. With love, compassion, joy, and ease with one another. Not heaven, but here together with one another.

The Earth Witness challenge.

There are the times that it is needed to turn away from the world, to walk into the hills, to go within. And the time to turn back, to embrace the world, with clear view and mindfulness, and with right effort, to respond—to whatever the path calls for, whatever needs to be done—to care well and most wisely for ourselves and each dear other.

*As a post firmly rooted in the earth  
cannot be shaken by the four winds,  
So is the superior person, I say,  
who definitely sees the Noble Truths.  
In the Sangha is this precious jewel.  
By this truth may there be well-being.*



Ayya Tathaaloka on an Earth Day morning hike up in the hills of the San Francisco Bay Area regional wilderness at Dry Creek. Photo credit: Luisa (Lulu) Garrett

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