

Chapter 18

Ratna: The Wisdom Energy of Earth

The next light of elemental energy, said to shine out in the *bardo* of *dharmata*, is personified as the primordial Buddha deity known as *Ratnasambhava*, and is associated with the colour yellow and the subtle element of earth. When distorted, this energy manifests as a bloated sense of pride or a deflated sense of inadequacy, which are simply two sides of the same coin. When freed from the confines of a small-minded reference point of self, this energy manifests as the wisdom of equanimity, a peaceful and panoramic awareness which sees the value in all things. This wisdom has a sense of contentment, richness, boundless resources and unending generosity. In Tibetan tantra, this energy is symbolized by a wish-fulfilling jewel, *rinchen* in Tibetan or *ratna* in Sanskrit. It is also called to mind by the rich qualities of gold, amber, saffron and butter.

Imagine that you have been invited to a farm for Thanksgiving dinner. It is mid-morning on a perfect fall day. The golden sun is warm on your face, yet there is a pleasant crispness to the air. Endless rows of huge, fluffy, white clouds populate the sky and float gently over rolling hills of orange yellow and red. As you walk down a country road towards the farm, you are aware of an endless symphony of smells. There is the thick and slightly pungent smell of wet and mouldy leaves just beginning to decompose. This blends with the more acrid smell of manure, the smell of fresh-cut hay, and the simple smell of muddy water in the puddles on the road. As you come closer to your destination, you smell the grain that is still being poured into the huge silo, then you smell the pigs and the chickens. As you approach the house, you smell the turkey roasting, as well as steaming vegetables, broccoli, turnips, onions in a cream sauce, squash and yams, then the yeasty smell of bread baking, chestnuts and almonds roasting, the sweet smell of pumpkin pie and the spicy scent of cinnamon, tart apples, and a rich buttery crust.

On the porch of the farmhouse, a large, ruddy-faced man with hands as large and rough as the branches of a tree hands you a giant mug of extra strong, golden, homemade ale. He pats you on the back and introduces you to the myriad of family, friends and members of the local community. As you sip your beer, you begin to melt into the homey atmosphere. You smile, and your heart begins to glow with warmth and friendliness. As you meet the folk and make small talk, you notice that each of them is a character with his or her own peculiar qualities and charm that endear you to each and every one for very different reasons. The ritual of the meal takes many hours, and when you have finished with the long parade of textures and tastes you are satiated and content, without a worry in the world. Then there is a night of music, dancing, jokes and story-telling that extends into the wee hours of the morning.

Experiencing the world with an open mind through the

perspective of this energy, which is like golden honey drenched in sunlight, you feel unconditionally rich. Even if you have very little by conventional standards, you stand firmly on the earth, secure in trusting your own resourcefulness, and are aware of endless resources around you. With this firm security, you are not miserly but generous, giving freely to others of your time, money, energy, your friendship and whatever you might have that they might need.

This is the wisdom energy of mothers who nurture their babies; feeding them, burping them, clothing them, bathing them, singing softly to them, playing with them, listening to them cry, and taking care of their every need. It is the wisdom that sees the value in all experiences. It is the wisdom energy of acceptance, accommodation and non-judgemental caring. It is the wisdom of healing, nursing and caring for the sick and needy. It is the wisdom of knowing how to be the ideal host or hostess who does not smother his or her guests in oppressive generosity, yet nonetheless remains completely aware of their every need and offers sumptuous pleasures, each in turn, with perfect timing. Before you even ask, you are offered a comfortable seat in a richly decorated and inviting environment, then: food, drink, music, lively conversation, good friendship, a warm fire, peace and quiet, an interesting book, a comfortable bed, a good night's rest, a warm bath and clean, dry towel.¹

This is the wisdom of those people who may have very little, but make the best of what they do have. Some people have an uncanny resourcefulness. If they are missing a tool, they find a way to combine old pieces of junk to get the job done. This kind of creative vision comes from being able to see the inherent value and potentiality in all things and not being rigidly fixed to conventional concepts and linear logic.

This is the earthy wisdom of a farmer who intuitively knows the value and danger of the elements. Such a farmer attunes his senses to signs in the natural world. He knows how to read the shapes of clouds to predict the changing weather. He knows the optimum time to pick the fruit, based on colour, texture, taste and smell. He identifies with his crops and hears them call out for water in the dry wind of a drought or knows that the soil lacks a certain nutrient by the way it smells.²

This wisdom energy of the earth element, this warmth, richness and generosity, is rarely recognized, appreciated or cultivated in our schools, unless it is so strong within the nature of a particular teacher that it cannot be suppressed. In general, schools do not acknowledge this style of awareness as part of education. Why should such an essential part of being human not be included in the development of children?³

Successful schools seem to foster a sense of community where older students as well as teachers look after the well being of the younger students. The Waldorf schools, a widely respected holistic system of education founded by

Rudolf Steiner, a German visionary of the first part of the century, puts a great deal of effort into nurturing this wisdom energy, as well as others neglected in the conventional educational system. For example, a Waldorf teacher will follow his or her students through their entire twelve years of education in order to nurture a warm relationship of trust and an emotional bond that allows learning to unfold deeply within the child.

The earthy qualities of this wisdom energy may seem more at home within the intuitive mode; however, they are just as likely to manifest through the intellect. Those scholars who have vast stores of memory drawn from a wide range of knowledge are tapping into the intellectual aspect of this wisdom. They might tend to lapse into long and entertaining anecdotes, seemingly tangential, yet ultimately relevant in a poetic sort of way. Likewise, this energy is evident in those who know history so well, from their vast studies, that they teach it with such appreciation for detail and the tone of the times that you would swear that they had been there participating, observing, and taking notes.

Although the arts sparkle with various aspects of all of these five styles of wisdom energy, the wealth and richness of culture owes much to the wisdom energy of the earth element. The ancient crafts traditionally associated with the earth goddesses, such as pottery, basketry, weaving, any art associated with the cultivation of plants and the care of animals, as well as the culinary arts of good food and wine, all engage the energy of this earthy wisdom. The Dionysian element in myth and literature⁴ also has the qualities of this energy, as do epic novels that chronicle the rise and fall of families, nations and cultures.⁵ The operas of Richard Wagner are examples of this all-encompassing and gloriously expressed earthy energy.

Whereas the crystal clear energy of vajra distinguishes differences and picks things apart, the wisdom energy of ratna perceives and appreciates the sameness of things and sees a vast vision of the whole process. For example, one can appreciate the quality of each season in turn. From this perspective, life is seen as an adventure or journey where each experience is tasted, chewed and fully digested; whether joyful or sad, painful or pleasurable, each is appreciated as it is, on its own merits. Every experience, whether dull or exciting, is a learning experience. It is all good food that can be converted into useful energy. These experiences may not confirm one's self in the particular way that one might have hoped for, nonetheless, from the vaster perspective of the wisdom of equanimity, it all seems equally valid and worthwhile. There is a certain security and stability in this, like the solidity of earth.

The earth is large and bountiful and does not discriminate between those inhabitants that live out their lives on its surface. It does not accept or reject those who are dependent on it. It simply gives forth everything that sustains life. An earthquake, however, can destroy in seconds what human beings have laboured to build for generations. This, perhaps, can serve as a metaphor for

the destructive energy of pride, which is the distorted energy of the earth element.

We might ask what quality of this earth wisdom could possibly be so terrifying as to frighten us away from its pure intensity and yearn for the muted light. For it seems that to become one with the powerful stability and abundant fertility of the earth could only prove to be a solid and expansive experience without anxiety, like that of the Buddha himself seated beneath the bodhi tree, gesturing to the earth as his only witness to enlightenment. Perhaps it is this very power of joining forces with the earth, threatening to annihilate our sense of self, that seems to flip this energy of richness into one of poverty and inadequacy.

Low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy are pervasive in our culture which is so divorced from any natural connection with the earth. Such feelings of inadequacy are the driving force behind compulsive addictive behaviours, which also seem to dominate the lives of an increasing number of people in our consumer-driven, materialistic culture. Theodore Roszak (1993) develops an ecopsychology based on this notion that our deepest repression is the voice of the earth within us.

From the dualistic perspective of a reified separate self, the power and richness of earth is projected outside oneself as separate, which causes one to feel disassociated from it and consequently very small, worthless, poor and empty. This way of feeling is described in Tibetan Buddhist language as the hungry ghost realm.

According to the text of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, if someone cowers in fear or feels overwhelmed by the great yellow light of the purified element of earth and the wisdom of equanimity, then they gravitate toward the softer light or more familiar experience of greed, hunger and an insatiable grasping. This psychological experience is known as the realm of the hungry ghosts. In Tibetan *thangka* paintings and in ghost stories, the hungry ghosts are portrayed iconographically as having vast stomachs thought to be as wide and bottomless as an empty ocean, while their throats are long and thin and their mouths are as tiny as a pinhole. Because they can never ingest enough food to fill their gaping bellies, they are condemned to endless hunger, never able to satisfy their ravenous appetites.

In human experience, this realm is characterized by a feeling of poverty and a need to be filled up. Here the wisdom energy of equanimity, an even-natured contentment and unbiased earthy richness, is manipulated by ego's self-consciousness, creating a state of panic that flips it into a contradictory mind-set that is at once bloated with a sense of pride and deflated by a sense of inadequacy. The pride is really nothing more than a mask hiding the frightened, dependent, needy and unfulfilled little child inside.

The empty and hollow feeling of this energy is really an accurate awareness of the emptiness of self. If we attempt

to draw psychological energy and resources from the empty well of this non-existent self instead of the vast store of energy and resources available through our connection with the earth, and all the other elemental energies of the environment around us, we will obviously feel empty, poverty-stricken, needy and hungry.

No amount of external gratification can take away this empty and hungry feeling. If such a person is able to amass a fortune and expand his influence over a vast area including persons, places and material objects, the feeling of richness and expansiveness is somehow very hollow and never really satisfies. There is a continual yearning. The tendency, then, is to become obsessed with the constant process of acquiring. Whether it be material objects, knowledge, or experience, there is an insatiable craving for more and more.

In this frame of mind, we cannot stay in the present to appreciate what we have, for as soon as we possess what we have desired, we lose interest in it. A simple, everyday example of this is our relationship to food, the earthy substance which maintains our body. Just as most of us have a difficult time sitting still and quiet on the earth like the Buddha, for similar reasons we also have a difficult time slowing down enough to properly ingest and digest our food. While having breakfast this morning, with my first taste of strawberries on my cereal for the season, I caught myself in a kind of frantic frenzy, feeling that I couldn't shovel it in fast enough. Having 'woken up' to this hungry ghost mentality, I attempted to slow down and appreciate my food. However, I noticed that in less than a second after putting a delectable spoonful into my mouth, it lost its appeal entirely. After the first bite when the tartness of the strawberry bursts forth, the utilitarian process of chewing further loses any appeal as the mouthful becomes ground up into a tasteless mush. The next bite, already on the end of my spoon, entices my attention away from my mouth, throat and stomach, and I again feel that surge of energy which yearns for satisfaction. This tendency to crave, grasp and blindly devour food, as well as other kinds of experiences, comes up over and over in the Buddhist teachings. For example, in the *Hinayana Abhidharma* teachings on *pratityasamupada* or 'dependent origination,' two of the twelve *nidanas* or 'interdependent arisings' in the Wheel of Life, the eighth *nidana*, known as *trnsa* or 'craving,' and the ninth *nidana*, *upadana* or 'grasping,' are considered to be crucial aspects of the entrapment process to recognize if one wishes to cut the chain link of causes and effects that perpetuate the suffering of *samsara*. What follows is a contemporary explanation of these two *nidanas*:

In link eight, we experience the overt presence of painful habitual patterns in the form of *trnsa*, craving, expressed as a chubby man greedily slurping a sweet drink of milk and honey. This connotes self-indulgence, a tendency to react to the feelings exposed in the previous link, even if this reaction is ultimately destructive. From the Buddhist point of view, it is ultimately destructive to

react impulsively to egocentred demands. Nevertheless, we gobble down the drink in a manner reminiscent of the habit-bound tendencies of the blind grandmother in the first link. The ninth link extends the impulsiveness of number eight into full-blown emotionalism. It is called *upandana* or grasping, which refers to intensified desire. Here, a man climbs trees laden with fruit and eats voraciously, gathering additional fruits to carry with him. The sweet drink was merely an hors d'oeuvre. The emotion has reached its peak, and indulgence is fully exposed. The grasping is not merely sensual, it is also intellectual and aesthetic; it emanates from egocentrism. (Simmer-Brown, 1987, p. 27)

The fascination in this realm seems to be more with the process of gathering, collecting, acquiring, and even hoarding than one of enjoyment. As the need to acquire further intensifies, the acquiring itself becomes the drug. The feeling of futility is overwhelming, as the process never seems to actually work or bring any satisfaction. After a time, a nihilistic attitude sets in, and everything in the world seems utterly worthless like so much junk. This syndrome is well expressed in the Greek myth of King Midas who turns his family into lifeless statues with his golden touch.

The self-important, bloated quality of arrogance hides a desperate sense of psychological poverty, insecurity, or inadequacy. Picture a fat, rich and powerful business tycoon who is always shouting orders to his harem of frantic secretaries. He makes deals that bankrupt other companies and puts thousands of people out of work. He exploits the laborers of underdeveloped countries and pollutes the environment where other people live, while surrounding himself in ostentatious and gaudy luxury. He arrogantly explains, 'I deserve it, because I have earned it,' always with extra emphasis on the word 'I.' Furthermore, he may believe that the lot in life for others is to serve him and suffer the consequences of his never-ending thirst for power, richness, fame, glory and accomplishment. This may be an unfair and even inhuman caricature, for any real person would experience at least brief moments of doubting the solidity of his view, yet the portrait nonetheless conveys the all-pervasive and convincing internal logic of a full-blown realm.⁶

The diverse psychological problems that stem from dependency can all be seen as neurotic manifestations of this energy of the earth element. Whether it is dependency on another human being or dependency on alcohol, drugs, food, cyclical and habitual behaviours, or the dependency of having someone else be dependent on you – now widely known as co-dependency – all of these are caused by the anxiety or fear of one's own insubstantiality.⁷ Feeling insubstantial, we hunger and grope for something solid and dependable outside us that will take that feeling away. We are always seeking reassurance from our world and desperately looking for feedback from 'out there' that will confirm us and give us a sense of solidity 'in here.'

I once spent the night caring for a friend, a dying poet who was simultaneously addicted to amphetamines and alcohol. His body was so ravaged by a lifetime of using every possible drug he could get his hands on that, though once tall and strong, he weighed less than one hundred pounds and walked hunched and haltingly with a cane. Through the night he drunkenly told me the story of his desperate and miserable life with a keen wit, descriptive and earthy language, and piquant irony, while I cleaned up the remains of his regurgitated dinner, held his hand and listened. The life of a hungry ghost is surely not pleasant, though it may be human.

The false sense of self quakes in the fear of its own hollow insubstantiality and seeks to bolster itself up with materialistic security. There are different levels of materialism with which one might try to shore up a defense against such feelings of insecurity. Trungpa (1973) refers to these as the Three Lords of Materialism.

There is the desire for material objects; those who want the biggest car, the biggest house, or collectors who hoard the finest wines, the finest art, etc. There is the inexhaustible hunger for power, prestige, and status, the desire for fame, the desire to be cheered by all, admired, loved, appreciated. Then there is the accumulation of knowledge: scholars who chew their way through endless stacks of books trying to accumulate enough knowledge so that they will eventually feel complete, substantial, important and secure. Finally, there is the subtle materialism of psychological sophistication and the pride of spiritual attainment which can so bloat someone with arrogance that they completely shut out the world with their self-satisfied smugness. All of these attempts to shore up the false self eventually fail, and the driving sense of poverty and insecurity remains like an insatiable, gnawing hunger.

This fear of our insubstantiality is natural, considering our dogged belief in a permanent and continuously existing self. On some level, we are aware that this self is ultimately an insubstantial illusion and that our earthly manifestation as a body will eventually die and decompose. Because we cling to the illusion of a self, we are terribly frightened by this truth. However, by confronting the fear directly and relaxing into the wisdom of the earth element, we can let go into a vaster sense of security. If we are dependent on the fickle conditions of reality to provide us with a sense of security, we will only be tossed about like a tiny boat on a stormy sea. But if we have a vaster vision of the fluctuations of phenomena and trust in the rooted, earthy, and endlessly resourceful aspect of our awareness, we can manifest as solid as a mountain that effortlessly accommodates forests, waterfalls, even glaciers, and provides for a myriad of creatures, both great and small.

The ability to relate to positive and negative feedback is essential for teachers if they expect to grow and develop their teaching skills. Arrogance in a teacher sets up a barrier to communication and further learning. An arrogant teacher models arrogance to his or her students, as a way

of coping with the stresses of school life, and thus casts a shadow over the joy of learning. On the other hand, if teachers are plagued by feelings of inadequacy children are very quick to pick up on this and exploit it, resulting in discipline problems and disaster in the classroom. Remaining open to feedback, yet sustaining a deeply grounded sense of unconditional confidence is not easy. Where in conventional teacher training programs do teachers learn the skills that will help them to relate to their own feelings so they develop this basic wisdom of the earth element?

If teachers were to regard their work as the unfolding of a contemplative journey, they would be encouraged to respect their personal feelings and thus develop their vast store of inner resources and gentle confidence. By doing this, they would be more sensitive to the ups and downs of their students as they struggle on their own journey. If teachers cultivate their inner confidence and sense of resourcefulness, they can perceive endless opportunities for learning in the world around them. Thus, they do not need to depend so heavily on the highly structured curricula, textbooks and teachers' manuals filled with someone else's inspirations. If they are confident to follow their own personal inspirations, they can enrich the classroom environment and enliven it with their own love for learning, which will no doubt become contagious. Learning to cultivate their own sense of inherent richness, they will intuitively know how to bring out the richness in the hearts and minds of their students.

CHAPTER 18 NOTES

1—Discussing the sixteen types which Jung (1923) first developed and which have been popularized by the scientific psychological approach of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1980; Myers & McCaulley, 1985; McCaulley, 1981), Kroeger and Thuesen (1988) tell us that the hosts and hostesses of the world are Extroverted-Sensing-Feeling-Judgers (pp. 269-272). In general Jung's Feeling type, which he sets up as a polar opposite to his Thinking type, seems to be most easily associated with this earth energy of ratna. Kroeger and Thuesen characterize the dichotomy between Thinkers and Feelers in this way:

Thinkers (T)	vs.	Feelers (F)
Objective		Subjective
Firm-minded		Fair-hearted
Laws		Circumstances
Firmness		Persuasion
Just		Humane
Clarity		Harmony
Critique		Appreciate
Policy		Social values
Detached		Involved

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2—Many such descriptions of farmer wisdom can be found in the writings of Wendell Berry (1972, 1981, 1984, 1990). His numerous books and essays on culture and agriculture

present a fairly comprehensive philosophy based on ecological principles that human nature must be defined within the context of geographical considerations, local ecosystems and regional variations in community culture. 'Local life is intimately dependent for its quality, but also for its continuance, upon local knowledge' (Berry, 1972, p. 67).

3—Perhaps home economics classes might cultivate a little earthy elemental wisdom, yet somehow a classroom kitchen seems to maintain more of a classroom feeling than a real kitchen feeling. Once, on a soccer trip in high school, I visited a private boarding school in Santa Barbara, California, where the students on work rotas were responsible for the upkeep of their entire environment and for cooking and cleaning up after all of their meals. I was impressed. Now that environmentalism is popular, a certain amount of this earthy elemental wisdom can be uncovered on field trips in the country. One program recently described by Murray (1993) involves bringing children from four schools in and near Newburgh, New York into a 3,700-acre preserve known as Black Rock Forest. Using holistic and experiential approaches, this broad-ranging program has everything from one-day trips into the forest for grades three to six to what was called 'Classroom-In-The-Forest '92,' which took 24 grade seven students into the forest for every school day from April to June. Some first-hand accounts: "I saw a garter snake. It felt strong. It was very bumpy and coily" – Brian, a primary school student. "I remember a dead raccoon lying on the ground and after that we went into our house. And when we came back a few months later from that, the raccoon's skin was gone and only the tossed-up bones were there" – Solomon, primary school student. "I learned that if you want to enjoy nature more you have to be quiet, calm and basically just let your hearing and seeing senses do their job" – a Sherpa Program participant, North Junior High School (p. 49).

4—Keirse and Bates (1978) associate Dionysius, the Greek god of wine and revelry, with Jung's Sensing and Perceiving types to bring attention to the preference for sensuality, impulsivity and a lack of striving toward goals. My use of the word 'Dionysian,' however, has more to do with comparing an earthy Dionysian approach in the arts to a more refined Apollonian approach.

5—The novels *War and Peace* by Tolstoy (1966) and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Garcia Marquez (1970) are two good examples.

6—The opposite of this arrogant, modern-day potentate and a magnificent characterization of the wisdom of the earth element is the Jungian archetype of the Ruler: King and Queen. Moore and Gillette (1991) remind us that Kings and Queens throughout history have always been sacred; however, it is not so much the mortal beings who fill the rôles, but the archetype of rulership itself of which they serve in humility as earthly embodiments, that has the power to bring order to human society and bestow blessings of prosperity and fertility upon the land and the people. Pearson (1991) explains what the Ruler archetype

has to do with our relationship with the earth element: 'The ruler is the reigning archetype for this capacity to operate on the physical plane because rulers cannot be squeamish about the realities of the ordinary material world. When the ruler archetype is active in our lives, we feel at home in the physical world and in charge of ourselves. We enjoy the process of expressing who we are in the physical domain of work, home, money, and possessions. And we have some confidence that we know how to get our needs met' (p. 183).

7—Of the endless stream of self-help books and clinical manuals dealing with the issues of addiction and compulsive behaviours, I have four favourites that I most frequently recommend: (1) May (1988) describes the process of attachment that leads to addiction, reviews the qualitative experiences of addictions of all kinds, including not just substance abuse but addictions to sex, performance, responsibility and intimacy, and his view of healing, which is firmly rooted in traditional spirituality as an experience of grace and empowerment. (2) Bailey (1990) is also rooted in a spiritual understanding of addictions and draws from rational emotive therapy. It is based on the premise that our thoughts control our reality and that different levels of consciousness are identified with various different levels of emotional responses. By developing an understanding of how the mind works and identifying how one tends to spin the web of one's own delusions, one is led, in this approach, to find recovery and serenity from within rather than as simply trading one dependency for another. (3) Elkin (1984) takes a family systems approach to understanding how addictions involve interactions around the issues of power and control within a social system and gives some valuable advice on how to interact with alcoholism in the family and in the workplace. (4) Whitfield (1985) is a comprehensive manual for understanding the transpersonal spirituality behind both the addiction and recovery processes.