It’s impossible to try and summarise the whole of my experience over the 3 months, so I’m just going to say a little about some of the main themes for me, which were my experience of interconnectedness, beauty, abundance and gratitude.

For those of you who don’t know, our women’s ordination retreat centre is called Akashavana and it’s in a very remote and very beautiful mountainous region of Spain. There were 21 retreatants and 5 members of the team running the retreat, 26 of us in total on the 3 month retreat together.

It felt to me like everything about our way of life on retreat was a beautiful teaching in interconnectedness and conditionality, showing me over and over again how my experience was a result of innumerable factors and that I don’t exist in isolation.

I loved how we needed to live together as a community, with each person contributing to keeping everything running smoothly. Everyone took it in turns to wash up and cook for others, and we all had our share of other daily jobs, such as collecting drinking water from the nearby spring, cleaning, washing tea towels by hand. Many times every day I felt moved simply watching others doing their jobs - people in the kitchen peeling vegetables and making soup for our lunch, people washing up my and everyone else’s dishes after dinner, someone cleaning the bathroom I’d used that morning - knowing that the whole community only worked because of each individual doing their bit.

Our community reminded me of the ants that I spent quite a lot of time watching on the retreat. I was fascinated by the way the ants went about digging out a tunnel in the dry mud ground. I’d watch as a constant stream of ants disappeared into a little hole in the ground where they were digging a new tunnel, each emerging with a round piece of earth just the right size for them, the little ants emerging with a little ant sized piece of earth, the large ants with their own large ant sized piece of the earth. The ants seem to move around each other seamlessly and effortlessly as if they were connected by some special extra sense, and watching them it felt like they really were working together as one. Our community felt like this to me; each person contributing what they could of their energy, taking on the right sized job for them, 26 individuals all working together to create a harmonious whole much bigger than each of us.

Our retreat was supported by members of the Akashavana community who live a 20 minute 4x4 journey down the mountain along a rough track in a separate community house. They came up to the retreat centre a few times a week with all of the food and other supplies we needed, and we were completely dependant on the community team to keep the retreat running. I was always moved when someone from the community came bundling up the track in the landrover and pulled up outside the retreat centre, unloading a bounty of fresh vegetables and other supplies for us. The landrover’s arrival reminded me again and again how much I was constantly receiving from others, how my experience of being on retreat was made possible by others, and how I was part of something bigger than just myself, this dance of people working together in harmony, united by a deep belief and commitment to what we were doing.

I loved too how living in community was a continual invitation to let go of my own preferences into this something bigger, give up my ideas about my wants and needs, and practice patience. Living closely together as we did in a smallish retreat centre, this was very often tangibly the case in simple practical ways. For example, I might find that the last piece of freshly baked bread I’d been smelling with anticipation all morning was taken by the person in front of me in the lunch queue, or have it in mind that the comfy favourite sofa in the lounge was where I wanted to be with my book for the next hour, only to find that all the comfy sofa spots were taken.

In small practical ways many times a day, this letting go of myself as the centre of the universe had a very strong effect over the weeks, and what I kept learning again and again in this letting go was that instead of any ideas I might have had about this being difficult or that I would somehow loose something in it, my experience was of happiness and freedom.

This was all taken to another level during the 2 weeks that the private and public preceptors came out to be with us, when our numbers swelled to 45. During this phase we really did need to move around each other with a special extra sense like the ants did, and it felt like it only worked because people were able to let go of self-concern into other concern. In the narrow corridors and corners of the retreat centre, at times it become a dance in order to do anything, to get up and down the stairs, make your way around the kitchen to get some hot water for a shower, or even negotiate your way in and out of the front door.

During this phase, making a cup of tea became quite a metaphor for the dance we were all in together. The tea station was a small area of counter and shelves that, as you can imagine, were always popular. At most times, it seemed, there were about 10 people with the same tea making idea already crowded around the tea station, and making a cup of tea became quite a complex procedure; first trying to get hold of a mug, pre-empting the movements of others who were mid way through the process, which way an arm might go and whether or not I could grab a mug through the gap, trying to reach the container with the right tea bag in it from the shelf, getting anywhere near where the soya milk was and how many times my generosity would stretch to saying ‘no you first’ before I managed to get hold of it, dancing around others for a kettle of hot water only to discover that there was almost none left….and so the decision to give it to someone else, and finding myself back in the kitchen quite happily watching a slowly boiling new kettle of water on the gas stove, instead of drinking that cup of tea that I thought I wanted. I found it a quite joyful process, the way that the simplest activity involved communication and dancing with many, our connectedness, and opportunities to practice patience, generosity and letting go into it all.

The weather was also a wonderful teacher of interconnectedness and conditionality, and letting go. The experience of being at Akashavana is of being much more closely connected and directly affected by the elements. In that mountainous realm, the weather shifts and changes constantly, and you never know from one hour to the next what the weather will do. On a practical level, it meant you just had to go with the flow of the weather rather than, for example, thinking you really wanted to get some washing done and dried on a particular day, or whether you wanted to go for a walk. I saw very clearly too the effect of the weather on my mood; how those pristine blue sky days lifted me, and how I felt quieter and less full of energy on the heavy dark rain sky days. And when it was cold, it was cold; there was no central heating to create our own human controlled microclimate to shield us from the shifting moods of the elements, and I soon learnt the wisdom of acceptance rather than trying to wish the cold away, or fantasise about warmer days to come.

I have always felt a strong connection to the image of Indra’s Net, and it was with me often on the retreat. For those of you who don’t know, Indra’s Net is a symbol or metaphor for interconnectedness and conditionality. It’s a vast web that stretches out into infinity through the universe, and at each point of intersection in the web there is a brightly shining, beautiful, multifaceted jewel that reflects every other jewel in the infinitely vast web. So it’s a way of illustrating how everything in existence, and every experience, reflects and is affected by every other.

I often felt like my experience on the retreat was showing me this, and I loved feeling part of the web. And I also saw how in my life what I am usually trying to do is somehow plough an unreal, straight line of fixed ideas about what I want and how I want things to be through this web. It felt very liberating to see this clearly, to let go of the exhausting, tight business of trying to plough this fantasy furrow through life and give myself up instead to flowing through the beautiful web of conditions that we are all always so intimately part of.

This all felt very beautiful to me, and during my time on retreat, I felt very in touch generally with a sense of beauty.

The deep beauty of the land had a very strong effect on me. The vast open blue sky with vultures soaring gracefully overhead, the ancient mountains and rocks surrounding and holding us, the cherry blossoms, butterflies, the shifting clouds. So many times when I was sat simply listening to the chorus of birdsong, or listening to the sounds of the wind through the trees, or watching a fire red sunset, I felt deeply aware of how the happiness and peace I felt in me was a result of the incredible natural beauty all around me.

I felt strongly in touch as well with the beauty and truth of the dharma, both in the incredibly clear, passionate and insightful teaching that we were given by the team, but particularly in my lived experience of the dharma and of witnessing this in others, including my experience of interconecteness and how my experience was so tangibly the result of innumerable conditions, and the beauty of everyone’s ethical practical which shone out in our sensitivity and care for each other and in the countless acts of metta and generosity that I witnessed in every day, opening my heart and inspiring me to also act in this way

There was the beauty of the many rituals that we shared together and the faith and devotion that I saw in others when watching them make offerings to the shrine, and how their faith and devotion drew this up and out in me.

The simple way of life that we lived felt beautiful to me; having few wants and needs, few distractions, a strong sense of purpose in a way undiluted, and the stillness and contentment that came from this.

And when the preceptors arrived to spend those 2 weeks with us during the ordination phase, I found it deeply beautiful and heart opening that they had each made the journey here to this remote mountainside to support one of us, their friend, take their practice deeper and join the order, and all the support, care and encouragement they had given in the years leading up to our ordinations to get us to this point.

With all this beauty came a sense of abundance and deep gratitude for everything I’d been given; by everyone on retreat with me and the community supporting us, by the beauty of the land and its life, by all those whose vision, courage and determination had brought Akashavana into being, by the Buddha, by Bhante and Triratna, and by all my friends back home in Bristol who had supported me over the years get to the point of being ready to be ordained and to be here.

In the same way as when on retreat one of us spotted a rainbow or a particularly beautiful shifting swirl of mist down in the valley and naturally wanted to point it out to the others so they could enjoy it too, feeling full of beauty and a sense of abundance and gratitude, I felt I just naturally wanted to give.

And living in our community, I loved how there was always an opportunity to give and to be generous, always someone who you could help in some small way, like doing their job for them if they were tired, offering a smile or a hand on a shoulder if someone looked like they were struggling, or simply letting others in front of you in the dinner queue. As the retreat went on, I experienced more and more strongly the sense of being in a dance of giving and receiving, generosity and gratitude, care and being cared for. And I just loved giving myself to this dance and naturally finding that my concern was with what I could give to the community and the others rather than focusing on what I might need or want. This release from self-concern felt liberating and joyful.

During the retreat, I felt like I was in Ratanasambhava’s realm; the golden yellow Buddha who dwells in beauty, riches and abundance, and the wisdom of interconnectedness and the sameness of all beings. Ratnasambhava holds the jewel of the bodhicitta in his left hand - the wish to gain enlightenment out of compassion for all beings - and reaches out with the open palm of his right hand in the gesture of supreme giving and generosity.

At the point of ordination, each person takes up a new meditation practice on one of the traditional buddha or bodhisattva figures, and a commitment to try and develop and dwell in the particular qualities of that figure. I decided to take Ratnasambhava as I felt that my experience of beauty, abundance and gratitude had shown me both how I aspire to live in the world and how, to the extent that I was able to, being in touch with joyful surrender to the flow of my interconnectedness, loosening the grip of my self-interest and instead serving and giving to others is where my deepest happiness lies.

I suppose what it felt like was a glimmer of a glimmer of what Shantideva puts so beautifully and potently in the Bodhicarayvatara, so i’ll end with some words from him:

*Like a flash of lightening on a black stormy night, that gives one instant of clarity, so by the power of the Buddha, the worldly mind is sometimes lit up for a moment by skilful intentions.*

*The Buddhas have seen that the Bodhicitta is the one blessing that brings true joy and bliss. Those who want to transcend the suffering of conditioned existence, those who want to relieve the suffering of others, and those who want to experience joy in their own hearts, should never abandon the Bodhicitta.*

*Whoever longs to save themselves and others should practice this supreme mystery: exchanging self and other. All the suffering in the world comes from obsession with ourselves. All the joy in the world comes from wanting others to be happy. So, to cure my own suffering, as well as the suffering of others, I devote myself to others, and will see them as myself.*

*May I be the doctor and the nurse for all beings, until the world is cured. May I be food for the hungry, and wealth for the poor. May I be a protector for the unprotected, a guide for the lost, and a boat to the other shore. May I be a lamp for those who need light and a bed for those who need rest. May I be a servant to all beings.*

*This is the elixir of life, that puts an end to death. This is the priceless treasure, that ends all poverty on Earth. This is the supreme medicine, that cures the world’s disease. This is the bridge to freedom, that leads from unhappy states.*

*This is the moon of the mind, whose light banishes our darkness. This is the brilliant sun, that burns off the mist of delusion. This is the essential butter from churning the milk of the Dharma.*

*For the whole caravan of humanity travelling the roads of existence in search of happiness, this will give them joy.*

*Today in the presence of the Buddhas I invite the world to be my guest at a great feast of delight. May humans, gods and all beings rejoice!*