

## GIVING OURSELVES TO THE WORLD: SPONTANEOUS COMPASSIONATE ACTIVITY

Talk given by Dayanandi at Manchester Buddhist Centre on 18th April 2011

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In the last of her talks on the five great stages of the spiritual path, Dayanandi takes us to the culmination of the path – a spontaneous and compassionate response to the world and the people around us.

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Here we are at the last stage of the path – spontaneous compassionate activity – ultimately enlightenment and real bodhisattva activity, but we can also relate to it as experiencing the fruits of our spiritual practice in any moment.

### To recap:

The first stage of the path is **integration** – becoming whole and a harmoniously connected being, primarily through the practice of mindfulness and ethics.

Imagine we are setting out on a day's walk in the hills. Starting out the path can be really pleasant. The stream is bubbling and it's sunny. But later it may pour with rain, and we find we're walking through a quagmire and have to climb barbed wire fences! However, we're getting to know ourselves and the view is lovely! We keep on going and through all these experiences we integrate ourselves more deeply, and develop **positive emotion**.

The main spiritual practices of this stage are the metta bhavana, the practice of ethics and devotion. So the path builds on all this. We keep on grounding ourselves by practising mindfulness – the more aware we are the more skilful we can be in our daily lives. In our hearts we become freer of conflict and freer of regret about our unskilful actions and therefore more positive as well.

We're ascending a mountain so things can get a bit tough. We're yearning to see how things really are, to find the truth of things and the truth of ourselves and that isn't easy, so we're plunging deeper into our meditation to strengthen our resources. Sometimes someone gives us a hand up the mountain. They've thrown a rope down and encourage us.

*Sometimes we may get flashes of vision and insight. We may not be at the highest point but actually we can see quite a bit. It's important to notice those and take them seriously and not put them aside thinking "that's not really it, I need to wait until I have real vision or insight". All the insights we have in our lives are vital and important.*

We are now on a small peak. We rest for a bit and then carry on. We're getting higher and can see further.

We're now coming to the stage of **transformation** when our insight is so deep and has such an impact on us that our attitude and our lives are changed by it. It's no longer just an inspiring idea – it's real! It's like when we get a car door slammed on our fingers and we immediately know we're not going to do that again, and insight apparently is like that. It's so obvious and so clear when we see things as they are. It's not just a head thing, it's not

even just a heart thing – it comes from our whole body and we try to act from that in our lives.

So we spend a bit of time up here on the mountain top, just to sit and mull it over, being quiet and spacious, assimilating what's happened. Transformation includes a spiritual death and a **spiritual rebirth** in our being.

We can become open to beautiful, refined and inspired dimensions of ourselves that we hadn't known existed.

So the bodhisattva is spontaneously free – free of the ego, and the drives of craving or aversion which are what often drive our own spontaneity.

A bodhisattva doesn't feel there's any essential difference between him or herself and other beings because they see that we're all just equally alive, equally precious. A bodhisattva is flooded by that appreciation of life all the time. I'm sure we have all had glimpses of that.

Bodhisattvas enter a situation of suffering in the world to be of whatever benefit they can. Apparently for a bodhisattva this is like play. The traditional simile is that bodhisattvas throw themselves into compassionate activity like elephants throw themselves into cool pools in the forest on a really hot day in India, with the same sort of relish and abandon! We've seen pictures on the TV of elephants washing themselves, filling their trunks with water and playfully shooting the water all over the place. They love eating lotus stalks and lotuses as well, so for them it's just complete delight being in a lotus pond.

For a bodhisattva their action is just like that – it's completely delightful, because they get so much satisfaction out of just meeting beings where they are and being able to be of benefit. And apparently they have no thought of the past or the future.

We may think that this is the end of the journey – but the last stage is actually coming back down the mountain and back to the world. We're coming back to **spontaneous compassionate activity**. We want to share something of whatever we've learnt on this journey, and spontaneously give back to the world.

### **Sangharakshita says:**

*“having completely transformed oneself in accordance with one's original vision, one's vision of reality, one is then in a position really to help others. One could also say that this is also a stage of spontaneity, where you don't think what you're going to do to help others, at least not in the ordinary way, you just spontaneously function; you do what needs to be done. There's a sort of overflow of your fully enlightened being.”*

It brings to mind a fountain – giving from a full cup, a positive overflow of inspiration, love and self-knowledge. This state of the bodhisattva – the being who's coursing in the wisdom and compassion of enlightenment – is very hard to understand. It's said that the activity of enlightened bodhisattvas is completely spontaneous. They are deeply moved by suffering but the action that comes from that is not overly grim or serious or heavy-hearted.

We've probably all had our own experiences of being moved by suffering, and acting very immediately without a thought for ourselves – and also having a sense that this is not a gruelling or difficult thing. In fact, it can be really joyful to be able to help.

This word 'spontaneity' is interesting. I sometimes feel it means things are a bit wacky, random and unplanned. And for myself I couldn't really guarantee that anything I did spontaneously would be compassionate, because it would be random, and perhaps reactive. It's not until we have transformed our greed, hatred and delusion that we can be confident that our spontaneous response will be one of compassion.

This is one of the hallmarks of the bodhisattva – their spontaneous expression would be heart-felt compassion. And it would be effortless because there is no ego to hold them back.

I think this is one of the keys to it – they're completely present. They're not thinking 'gosh after I've dealt with this lotus pool there's going to be endless lotus pools to deal with, I'm not sure if I can really handle it!' They're just completely present in that lotus pool with those people and that makes it manageable. It's a lovely thing to aspire to – being more and more present and more and more involved and engaged with each other and with ourselves too.

**I've got a lovely quote from *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* by the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki which shows a different way of looking at total engagement –**

*"Most people have a double or triple notion in one activity. There is a saying, "To catch two birds with one stone". This is what people usually try to do. Because they want to catch too many birds, they find it difficult to be concentrated on one activity, and they may end up not catching any birds at all! That kind of thinking always leaves its shadow on their activity.*

*In order to not leave any traces when you do something, you should do it with your whole body and mind; you should be concentrated on what you do. You should do it completely, like a good bonfire. You should not be a smoky fire. You should burn yourself completely. If you do not burn yourself completely, a trace of yourself will be left in what you do. You will have something remaining which is not completely burned out. Zen activity is activity which is completely burned out, with nothing remaining but ashes."*

I find that a very evocative description of being whole-hearted, literally giving ourselves to whatever we do, whatever it is, and noticing where we feel resistance and trying to soften around that resistance so that we can just give ourselves a little bit more, and give to ourselves at the same time.

I remember being in a seminar where we asked Sangharakshita a question about how he dealt with being so busy. He looked sort of perplexed for a minute and he didn't really know what we meant by 'busy'. He said "surely you just do one thing and then you do another thing" and we all laughed. He genuinely seemed to be a bit perplexed! He also said if he has something to think about and he can't think about it then he'll decide when he's going to think about it. So he has ways of helping him be present in the moment. He doesn't worry about things unnecessarily that he can't do anything about right then and there.

There's also a story about one of Sangharakshita's teachers – Dhardo Rinpoche, who had been recognised as a reborn incarnate lama in the Tibetan tradition – a tulku as they're called. At some point somebody asked him about that. He said he wasn't totally sure he was a tulku actually, but what he had decided to do was to act like one and do his best to

become one. I find that very moving. He was somebody who had such a high exalted position that he didn't need to share that at all.

So through these five stages of the path we can work towards all of those qualities in the bodhisattva. And of course bodhisattvas aren't born bodhisattvas (or even tulkus it seems!) – the Buddha wasn't born enlightened. People gain enlightenment through sheer hard work, inspiration, perseverance and the encouragement of their friends.

Another way of looking at this stage is to take on board and fully embody the qualities we've developed and the progress we've made on the spiritual path to date. It's important to stand strong in the qualities that we have, because that'll help us expand into further qualities, and not to want other people's qualities, or compare ourselves, wishing we had other qualities which seem more attractive than our own. When I got my name Dayanandi I thought 'Daya' (which means kindness) was rather boring. I took that aspect of myself for granted. I thought it was rather dull, and wished I'd had something more dynamic, and therefore that I'm not dynamic. We get so self-referential don't we? And because of that, we don't really live out the fullness of the qualities we do have.

I think this stage is about trusting ourselves and letting the fruits of our practice really shine in our lives and noticing the new fruits that come though. And part of this is to try and let go of the views that we have that limit us. We can let ourselves fly.

The main thing we have to give to the world is ourselves! You don't want somebody coming to help you who's trying to sort you out and tick you off the list of suffering beings so they can go and save the next one! What you actually want is somebody who's prepared to meet you as an individual and just be with you.

**I found this quote in a book called *Soulcraft* by Bill Plotkin:**

*"The gift you carry for others is not an attempt to save the world but to fully belong to it. It's not possible to save the world by trying to save it. You need to find what is genuinely yours to offer the world before you can make it a better place. Discovering your unique gift to bring to your community is your greatest opportunity and challenge. The offering of that gift – your true self – is the most you can do to love and serve the world. And it is all the world needs."*

There's something quite magical about that. We feel we have to develop these special qualities and be what everybody needs – but really we need to be just how we are. In *Wisdom Beyond Words* Sangharakshita says that actually we don't need special qualities. He says somebody came to see him once and they didn't feel as though they were very good at anything. He said: "oh you don't need to worry about that – you can see yourself as an unspecialised human being". He went on to say that it was just enough to be a human being! We're the product of millions of years of evolution and so it's a waste to be sitting behind a typewriter keying in data or whatever it is that we do – that isn't the real purpose to which we were born. We may have to do something to make money, but that isn't our full expression as a human being. He said just sitting and being and doing nothing is a perfect expression of who and how we are.

I think if we can be happy to be **who** we are then the quality of **how** we are is going to be more effective with others as well. We'll be able to be more connected with human beings, which is what most people find is the most important thing.

Once, I was helping to lead a retreat at Taraloka retreat centre. I remember thinking the talks and teaching we'd given were really great and we'd done much better than before. When it came to the end of the retreat, we reported out and people were saying what they'd found helpful, and two-thirds said that what they'd found most inspiring was the friendships in the team, our communication with each other, and the openness and quality of the atmosphere. That's what really moved people – they were just very touched by that. Just being us, as human beings, is what can give the most.

So, how can we be more ourselves and give more of ourselves in the world? Is there something we need to let go of that hinders us from doing that – that stops us from giving of ourselves? How can we be more fully human? What would that mean for you or me – to be really human? Am I happy just to be an unspecialised human being? These are some questions we can reflect on in relation to this stage.

In conclusion, I think the five great stages of the spiritual path are a great model and set of practices. It isn't just a random list – these are the stages that the human psyche goes through as it evolves if we practise the dharma. It's a very simple progressive series. If we want to know what to do next, we can take each of those stages and deepen our practice of any of them at any time. They augment and build on each other. They rest on each other. And spontaneous compassionate activity is the result of the whole lot – it's the result of the insight and the transformation.

### **Sangharakshita summed up these dimensions as five very simple everyday precepts**

- something that we can do every day as a reminder of these different stages. So here they are –the five precepts of the path.

1. **Keep up the effort to be mindful and aware and be as together as possible, as integrated as possible.** So we can always try and deepen our mindfulness and extend our awareness to more areas of our being – our body, our emotions, our thoughts.
2. **Remain in as positive a mental state as you possibly can.** We try to cultivate positive mental states. And if we notice under what conditions we lose our positivity, we can make changes in our lives to support greater positivity.
3. **Do not lose sight of your ultimate goal at any time.** Remember what we're trying to do, what is really important to us, as we go about our lives and decision-making.
4. **Whatever you've realised or discovered or seen on the highest level of your being, you apply it at any time to every level of your being.**
5. **Do your best for other people, do what you can to help people.** DharDO Rinpoche once said that if you don't know what to do, do something for other people. Quite often we're hanging around thinking 'well I've got half an hour, what shall I do?' You could go and find something to do that's of benefit for others.

### **And Sangharakshita finishes it off with:**

*"If you just try to do these five things all the time you can forget all about making progress or where exactly you are on the path. One just intensifies one's efforts in those five directions as it were all the time. One simply can't go wrong then."*

We shouldn't think too much about gaining insight. Instead just get on with our practice, because that thought of 'gaining' something just gets in the way.