

The Five Great Stages of the Spiritual Path – Talk 1

In a series of six talks at Manchester Buddhist Centre last year, **Dayanandi** gave an overview of the phases of spiritual experience we pass through in the course of our practice of the Dharma. Her talks were based on Sangharakshita's teachings, ***The Five Great Stages of the Spiritual Path***, given in a study seminar in 1976 on a text by Nagarjuna called ***The Precious Garland***.

Dayanandi's talks were both personal and informative. Here is the edited version of the first talk, given on 28th February 2011.

In the first talk, we are going to explore the experience of both finding our path and having an overview of this path. Sangharakshita (Bhante) offered this teaching as a down to earth and practical teaching that we could bring to mind when we feel unsure of our next step on the spiritual path or we feel bewildered by the array of options in terms of how we should/could be practising.

Of course, our individual practice of the Dharma never falls into the neat path we read about as we are all unique and different, a product of our complex set of conditionings, Spiritual life by definition is taking us into unknown territory as we try to let go of familiar and ego-based responses.

However if we are completely unsure of our next step, we can lose confidence and energy and eventually fall into doubt. We need all the help we can get, tips to help us recognise points in the path, a lodestone which we can use to help us navigate the choppy waters. So Bhante has offered us this teaching to be used as a lodestone to help us find our way in the Dharma.

Finding our Path

Bhante talks of how we all have a sort of current in our being, an urge towards spiritual unfolding - an inner direction that may be more or less conscious. *"We've found our way to the Buddhist Centre and however foreign and strange the spiritual path seems at first, something seems to be attracting us"*.

In my own life, I spent a lot of my childhood feeling lost, not knowing what I should be doing, following my parents' routines but feeling separate from them. I remember a powerful experience when I was 8, reading a book about two children seeking answers to questions about

life and them coming across a wise old man in the mountains. I felt this enormous relief that there was wisdom. As I got older, the idea of there being this source of wisdom got lost, as I got on with life in the usual way, finding a partner a job etc. I smoked a lot of dope and hung around with people who were critical of the status quo, but didn't have anything positive or creative to offer as an alternative. When I stumbled upon the Dharma by accident, it came as a total relief. Here was an idea that the path to wisdom and truth was one of seeking my own truth. Authenticity as a path is SO radical. It gave me great confidence in Buddhism - I didn't have to add on anything false to me that I didn't believe in.

Perhaps this is what makes the search for wisdom possible within Buddhism, because it allows the deepest urges of our "soul" to lead the way. There is a sense of knowing that we all have, an intuition of the way things are, and it is through this that we recognise the truth, realise that the path we are on is the right one. People talk of that feeling of "coming home". I find that my

inner voice and the teachings of the Dharma coincide and through it we learn to trust the Dharma and ourselves. The path is essentially ourselves, finding ourselves, and removing obstacles we put in the way.

Important and powerful as it is however, intuition is not enough. We need two other things. Firstly we need an intellectual understanding of what we are doing otherwise our mind cause us trouble!. It is helpful for us to recognise what's going on and diagnose the problem to find a way forward. Second, we need experience. Intuition can feel like knowing but its nothing like the knowing that's based on experience. You can't argue with experience, it's the most solid basis of faith in the Path.

What is the essence of the path we are embarking on?

To know the path, we need a brief glimpse at the goal. We probably each have a sense of what it is that attracts us to the spiritual quest - something that expresses what our beings are orienting towards. Maybe it's a search for meaning, or a yearning for peace, or maybe we are inspired by the possibility of becoming spontaneously compassionate. Whatever it is, much of our practice of the Dharma is geared towards us helping see reality as it really is. Everything unfolds from here. It is the heart of transformation. Accepting how things are, learning how to slow down, open our eyes, ears and heart, so we can receive our experience without wanting to control or change it. Everything comes from there - all compassion and wisdom. We very gradually, in glimpses and heightened moments, learn to see the world clearly, as it is, as an unending flow of

interconnected experience. We see that we cannot ever have or own anything. It all slips through our fingers. It cannot be held back, it is impermanent, elusive and all the more beautiful for that. It's like a wild animal, free and not to be caged, glorious in its naturalness.

As we come into harmony with reality more and more, that craving for things to be otherwise drops away, equanimity arises, suffering drops away. We are no longer at the mercy of our whims, desires, hatreds and cravings. This is real happiness! A full patient acceptance of how things are is equivalent to Enlightenment; the possibility for Spontaneous Compassionate activity arises.

The Stages of the Path

1 - The Stage of Integration through Awareness and Mindfulness

This is the first thing that one has to do, to develop mindfulness and awareness. Developing self-awareness in turn leads to self- integration. We bring all our scattered bits together, we overcome conflict with ourselves, disharmony with others. We get ourselves functioning as a smoothly working whole not a jumble of fragments all jostling for supremacy. So you can see that this is quite a big task in itself, practising mindfulness and becoming integrated in this way. But this is the first stage - giving birth to oneself as an integrated person, a self-aware individual. In the traditional Yogacara version of this teaching, this stage is called Preparation. We are preparing ourselves to encounter reality. Traditionally it includes the practice of ethics and

finding a teacher and training.

Stage 2 is the Stage of Positive Emotional Energy; Inspiration and Engagement.

In this stage one tries to make oneself as positive as possible. By this I mean friendliness, compassion, joy, equanimity, faith and devotion One refines one's emotions, and overcomes negative emotions. We enter the realm of spiritual beauty. This is also the stage of meditation because these positive emotions and the energies that you generate carry you through all the levels of dhyana. It's not the stage of meditation in the sense of sitting meditation, but the stage of being emotionally positive whatever you

are doing, whether you're sitting, walking, talking or just being by yourself. So having become more present, more integrated and whole, we work on deepening our positivity and strengthening and refining our mental states, closer to a state where we can be open to the truth.

Stage 3 is the Stage of Vision; insight, seeing the Truth

In this stage one sees the truth, not of course regarding the truth out there as a thing to be seen, like an ordinary object. It is an openness to the Truth, openness in the direction of ultimate reality. This is also the stage of the death of the old self, the ego and the birth of the seed of Buddhahood.

So we can see that this is a real turning point. Spiritual vision or Insight is the axis of the whole thing. In his book, ***Vision and Transformation***, Bhante says *“this is what it means to evolve spiritually. It means to achieve perfect vision by one means or another, and then transform our whole being in accordance with that vision”*. When we really see something, really understand it and know it deeply, we are changed by it.

Stage 4 is the stage of Transformation; Spiritual Rebirth

This is when the vision you have seen, your experience of reality, starts transforming every aspect of your being. This is also a stage of meditation in the sense of dwelling on that glimpse of reality so as to deepen and broaden it so it pervade all parts of your being. We are being transformed by our insights and experiences. In our lives and actions, we become more and more in harmony with reality.

Stage 5 is The Stage of Spontaneous Compassionate Activity

Bhante says, *“This means that 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. This is a stage of spontaneity where you don’t think what you’re going to do to help others, you just spontaneously function, you do what needs to be done. There’s a sort of overflow of your fully enlightened being”*. Enlightenment is not a full stop but a state of endlessly expanding creativity. The ever changing flow of energy that is us, continues to evolve freely, spirals out in a way that is totally beyond our vision.

Traditionally, the five stages are seen as a path of progressive regular steps or stages to be developed one after another. In practice, most of us are on a ***Path of Irregular Steps***. We can see ourselves cycling around through these stages over and over again as our practice deepens. We could say, that at one point we embody a certain level of positivity and integration, a certain degree of insight, wisdom and compassion. The deepening of that insight will depend on us cultivating the preceding stages more fully.

So, here we have the bare bones of this teaching. I find it beautifully

simple. It contains the whole of the path in principle, laying out the main points on the way. If we can get to grips with this it will be very useful in our spiritual lives and practice.

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