

The Five Great Stages of the Spiritual Path

Introduction

What follows is my own edited version of a short extract from a seminar of Bhante Urgyen Sangharakshita, in which he describes the five great stages of the spiritual path. The seminar, held in 1976 at Padmaloka, was on Nagarjuna's Precious Garland.

Though short, the seminar extract has considerable significance because it was the first time that Bhante described the Buddhist path in his own distinctive fashion.

Two years later he was to give a related exposition of the path in his lecture 'A System of Meditation' given on the Western Buddhist Order convention. The intention of that lecture was to reveal the relationship between the different meditation practices that Sangharakshita had taught. There are important differences between these two expositions, the exposition of 1976 being more concerned with the whole of one's life, rather than with systemising our meditation practices. In addition, the 1976 description describes the culmination of the path, as 'spontaneous compassionate activity': doing what needs to be done. And the 1976 exposition does not refer to the 'Just Sitting' practice, which the 'A System of Meditation' lecture does.

The other feature of Bhante's 1976 description, and perhaps the most important feature of all, is its brevity. Bhante wanted to describe the path in a simple and direct way, which was memorable for people in their daily lives. In this sense his 1976 teaching of the stages of the path resembles what Atisha calls 'the precept of the Lama': a direct, personal and practical instruction that communicates the essence of the Dharma.

In more recent times there have been several elaborate expositions of Sangharakshita's description of the path by members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, as it is this path that forms the basis of the Triratna system of Dharma life. But it is important, I feel, to return to Bhante's original, simple, direct, practical and memorable articulation of his insight into the underlying principles of the Buddhist path. This insight is not theoretical. It emerges from his individual engagement with the traditional Buddhist path combined with the experience of communicating that path to others, especially, at that time, to those in the modern West.

If we look at the original transcript from the seminar, we can see that Bhante is talking extempore, the teaching taking form as he speaks. Perhaps because of the extemporary nature of his communication, there is, perhaps an imprecision of terminology. At the same time, because of that very extemporisation, Bhante's language has a flexibility which perhaps elaborate and systematised expositions can lack. Nowhere is that more evident than in the discussion under the heading of 'The Stage of Vision'. Bhante uses a number of terms here to evoke what happens at this stage. As well as using the metaphor of 'seeing', he also uses the terms 'openness' and 'the dimension of openness to Being' (terms borrowed from the scholar H.V. Guenther). He also describes this stage as 'the stage of spiritual death', which later would become the predominant description of this stage. In this discourse, he also describes this stage of vision as 'the stage of spiritual rebirth'. This, of course, is rather different from his later exposition in 'A System of Meditation' where the stages of 'spiritual death' and 'spiritual rebirth' are treated as separate stages. No doubt Bhante wanted to delineate these stages for the practical reason of giving them their full weight and significance, as well as relating these stages to specific meditation practices employed in the Triratna Buddhist Order.

That said, it is perhaps well worth our while contemplating the fact that in his original exposition of the great stages of the spiritual path, Bhante saw the stage of vision as including both 'spiritual death' and 'spiritual rebirth'. The obvious significance of this is that the stages of 'spiritual death' and 'spiritual rebirth' cannot really be separated. Another point to draw attention to is the stage that follows the stage of vision. This is the stage of transformation. This fact makes it clear that however exalted our vision might be, it is not the final goal. Vision must be followed by transformation, of the 'descent' of that vision into every corner of our being, until we are indeed acting constantly with spontaneous compassion.

Padmavajra

The Five Great Stages of the Spiritual Path

- Urgyen Sangharakshita

I was just thinking this morning before we actually go into Nagarjuna's verses, that it might be useful to consider what the principal stages of the spiritual path are in practical terms, because in Buddhist texts, not only in sutras, but in all kinds of books on Buddhism which are being produced nowadays one finds different descriptions of the path. Some of them are very good and very inspiring descriptions, but they don't always agree; sometimes, in fact, they are very, very different. At times of course they do overlap. Some of these descriptions are very detailed and we can sometimes get lost in the detail. You cannot help wondering exactly where you are and what you have to do to get to the next stage or sub-stage – or even sub-sub-stage! So I thought it might be useful at this point as we are about halfway through the seminar just to outline what the main stages of the Path are, as far as we are concerned, as well as to indicate some connections with some traditional formulations of the path.

It seems to me that we can regard the whole spiritual path as consisting of five great stages. These very roughly correspond to the Five Paths of the Indian Buddhist tradition, but I won't, at this stage, compare them very much. What I want to do is give a quite straight forward description of the path in terms of our needs and our own experience.

1) The Stage of Mindfulness and Awareness

This is really the first thing that one has to do: develop mindfulness and awareness. One can think of this in terms of the four foundations of mindfulness, or in terms of the four dimensions of awareness, but the first thing that one has to do is to develop mindfulness and awareness, which means especially developing self-awareness, which, in turn means developing self-integration.

So, in a way, the stage of mindfulness is also the stage of integration because in this stage we bring all of our scattered bits together, we overcome conflict and disharmony within ourselves, we get ourselves functioning as a smoothly working whole, not a jumble of bits and pieces, and fragments of selves, all struggling and jostling for supremacy. So, this is quite a big task in itself, practising mindfulness and awareness and becoming integrated, but this is the first stage. This stage really means giving birth to oneself as an integrated person: a self-aware individual.

2) The Stage of Positive Emotion

By positive emotion I mean friendliness, compassion, joy, equanimity, faith and devotion. Positive emotion is not static. It is something that moves, so this is also the stage of energy; in this stage, we try to make ourselves as positive as possible. We overcome all negative emotions. We not only try to develop positive emotions, we also try to refine them; we develop 'spiritual emotions'. Here, the whole subject of spiritual beauty becomes important. In this stage we develop the positive, even 'spiritualized', emotions to a very high pitch of intensity indeed.

This is also the stage of meditation, in the sense of *samadhi*, because these positive emotions and the energies that you generate through them carry you through all the levels of *dhyana*. But it is not the stage of meditation in the sense merely of sitting in meditation. It's the stage of being emotionally positive, if possible, in a highly spiritual sense, whatever you are doing, whether you are sitting and meditating, or working, or talking, or just being quiet by yourself.

3) The Stage of Vision

In this stage we see the truth, not in the sense of regarding truth as a thing 'out there' to be seen, like an ordinary object. You could also describe it as the stage of 'openness to truth'. Guenther speaks of 'the dimension of openness to Being'. This is his rendering of *sunyata*. Although his expression is a bit roundabout, at the same time it is quite expressive: 'the dimension of openness to Being'. So this is the stage of 'openness': 'openness in the direction of ultimate reality', which means not holding back on the progress of expansion – not opening up so far – as in the stage of positive emotion – but then refusing to open up any further. No, it is indefinite openness to the ultimate; it is a vision of reality; of truth.

This stage can also be described as 'the stage of death', of 'spiritual death' because it signifies the death of the old self, the death of the ego however refined. The stage of vision is the stage of death because when you see the truth, you die (you could also say that when you die you see the truth).

The main practice that we do at this stage is the Contemplation of the Six Elements and the meditation on *sunyata*, except that you don't meditate on *sunyata* as though it were a thing out there on which you are meditating. That would just be an idea, a concept, or a vague image of *sunyata*, not *sunyata* itself.

The Stage of Vision is also the stage of 'spiritual rebirth' because there is also the birth of the seed of Buddhahood. Not that the seed was not there already, but at this stage it has become visible and from that seed the new being, as it were – the Buddha – will eventually develop and spring.

4) The Stage of Transformation

This stage is when the vision that you have seen – the experience of reality you have had – starts descending and transforming every aspect of your being, it pervades all parts of your 'spiritual body'. This is also the stage of meditation, in the sense of meditation that arises after the initial visionary experience. It is the practice of meditation in the sense of dwelling on that visionary

experience – that glimpse of reality – so as to deepen and broaden that vision and to bring it down, as it were, so that it pervades and transforms all the different aspects of one's being.

5) The Stage of Spontaneous Compassionate Activity

This means that having completely transformed our-selves in accordance with our original vision of reality, we are then in a position to really help others. One could say that this is also the stage of true spontaneity. You don't think of what you are going to do to help others, at least not in the ordinary way of thinking, you just spontaneously function: you do what needs to be done. There's a sort of overflow of your fully enlightened being.

If one traverses these five stages, then one traverses the whole spiritual path. But, as you know, there is a path of regular steps and a path of irregular steps. You could start work on the first stage – the stage of mindfulness, awareness and integration – and complete that and then go onto the stage of positive emotion. You complete that stage and then go onto the third stage and so on. But I think that very few people would actually function in this way. Most people for some time will follow a path of irregular steps and they will work now on one and now on another of these stages.

You can even think in terms of working on all the stages simultaneously. This would mean that every day you have five things to practice:

- 1) Keep up the effort to be mindful and aware: be as integrated as possible.
- 2) Remain in as positive a state as possible.
- 3) Do not lose sight of your ultimate goal at any time.
- 4) Apply at every level whatever you have realised or discovered at the highest level of your being.
- 5) Do your best for other people; do what you can to help them.

This is your spiritual life, and this is your spiritual practice. These are the things you are basically concerned with. In terms of practice, you can forget about all the other formulations of the path. Whatever has been said by all the different Buddhist teachers in the course of several hundred years of development is contained in these five things. In principle all of the different formulations of the path come down to these five things to practice.

You can also relate these five things to the five spiritual faculties, which can also be explained as a path and as five things to work on simultaneously:

- 1) The stage of mindfulness and awareness obviously corresponds to mindfulness.
- 2) The stage of positive emotion corresponds to faith.

- 3) The stage of vision corresponds to wisdom.
- 4) The stage of transformation corresponds to meditation
- 5) The stage of spontaneous compassionate activity corresponds to *vīrya*.

If you think of any particular Buddhist virtue and you want to understand its place in the total scheme, you can just allocate it to one of these five things. For example, where would one place *dana*? That would be placed in the second stage because when you are overflowing with love and joy and you are in a highly positive emotional state, your natural tendency is to give – you just can't help it.

So, if you just do these five things all the time, you can forget all about making progress or wondering where you are on the path. You just intensify your effort in these five directions all the time. You cannot go wrong then.

Now, is that reasonably clear?

Notes and references by Padmavajra:

The Five Paths are:

- 1) The Path of Accumulation (*Sāmbhara marga*).
- 2) The Path of Energetic Effort (*prayoga marga*).
- 3) The Path of Vision (*Darsana marga*)
- 4) The Path of Transformation (*bhavana marga*)
- 5) The Path of Fulfilment (*nistha marga*)

“The ‘five paths’ scheme, less well known in Western literature, is associated especially with the various Abhidharma traditions and was given one of its most influential classical formulations by Asanga in his *Abhidharmasamuccaya*.” - ‘Paths to Liberation – The Marga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought’ p. 32, note 8, Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Robert M. Gimello

For a discussion by Bhante of the Five Paths see ‘Know Your Mind – The Psychological Dimension of Ethics in Buddhism’ p. 26 – 30, Sangharakshita.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*satipatthana*):

- 1) Mindfulness of body
- 2) Mindfulness of feeling
- 3) Mindfulness of thoughts
- 4) Mindfulness of mental objects

The Four Dimensions of Awareness

- 1) Awareness of Things, or environment
- 2) Awareness of self – the body and its movements; thoughts; feelings and emotions.
- 3) Awareness of others
- 4) Awareness of Reality

The Open Dimension of Being and Openness

‘The dimension of openness to Being’ is Bhante’s misremembering of ‘the open dimension of Being’, H.V. Guenther’s translation of *Tsong-pa*, which is the Tibetan translation of the Skt. *sunyata*. In Guenther’s translation of Longchenpa’s ‘Trilogy of Finding Comfort and Ease’, “the creativity of the open dimension of Being” is frequently likened to the sky. Cf ‘Kindly Bent to Ease Us’ I, p. 212, H.V. Guenther.

Bhante has further commented on ‘the open dimension of being’ in his commentary on the mantra *om svabhava suddhah sarvadharma svabhavasuddho’ hum*:

“(This mantra means) ‘All things are pure by nature. I am pure by nature’. Or the real meaning, as it were, ‘All things are void by nature, I too am void by nature’. One is asserting, as it were, a non-difference. Not an ontological identity, but a non-difference of subject and object. You are not asserting that there is one substance which assumes two different forms – subject and object. You are asserting the non-reality of the very distinction between subject and object, but you are not asserting a common reality behind them in which they both participate as a substantial entity.

“Guenther, sometimes renders, one can’t say translates, but renders *sunyata* as ‘the open dimension of Being’. That is quite expressive and probably gives one a better feeling of what (*sunyata*) is all about than a purely conceptual rendering.”

(From the seminar on The Manjughosa Stuti Sadhana).

‘Openness’: H.V. Guenther also renders *sunyata* simply as ‘openness’ in a number of places.

Bhante describes the relationship between *sunyata* (‘the Void’) and openness in the following way: “To speak of the Void is perhaps as near as we can come to a description of the yogi’s state of complete openness and freedom. We cannot fix down a clear description of the Void, because its nature is not to be a particular thing with a fixed identity. ‘It’ is mobile, constantly changing, flowing, forever assuming different forms. Knowing the true nature of the Void, we should not be surprised if it demonstrates its void nature by changing into something else. The Enlightened mind does not try to pin reality down to any particular manifestation and insist on experiencing it only in that way.” ‘Milarepa and the Art of Discipleship’ p. 44 Sangharakshita.