

# Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year

## Part 4: Exploring Buddhist Practice – Wisdom

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### *Week 6: The Unconditioned Acting on the Conditioned*

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#### **Introduction**

During the last few sessions we have explored the Buddhist vision of the conditionality of all phenomena, as well as introducing the idea of a mysterious Unconditioned, or Nirvana. We have also seen that conditionality can work in two ways – it can be reactive or creative.

However the idea that all physical, mental, and spiritual phenomena evolve by a process of conditionality from other pre-existing phenomena seems to pose a difficult question. If everything we do, say, feel and think is conditioned by what went before, how can we ever begin to break free? How can we do anything but live out what the past has made us?

In the following text Sangharakshita introduces a central concept from Mahāyāna Buddhism – the Bodhicitta, or ‘Will to Enlightenment’ – which throws some light on this problem. The ‘relative’ Bodhicitta is the Unconditioned acting on the conditioned – in Sangharakshita’s words, it is “the manifestation, even the irruption, within us, of something transcendental.” The need to open ourselves to the action of the Bodhicitta is an important part of Triratna’s approach to the Dharma, and in the following text Sangharakshita not only explores the nature of the Bodhicitta, he also gives us some advice about how we need to live the spiritual life to allow the Bodhicitta to manifest in us.

#### ***The Arising of the Bodhicitta***

*(Text from ‘A Guide to the Buddhist Path’, by Sangharakshita, pp186-193 in the revised edition, with an additional passage from ‘Ritual and Devotion in Buddhism’, pp106-108)*

#### **The Bodhisattva and the Bodhicitta**

A Bodhisattva is one whose whole being is orientated towards Enlightenment, not for his own sake only, but for the sake of all sentient beings. Now there arises a most important, practical question: how does one become a Bodhisattva? How does one embark upon the realization of this sublime spiritual ideal? The traditional answer to this question is quite short and straightforward, but it demands considerable explanation. It is that one becomes a Bodhisattva upon the arising of the Bodhicitta.

Let us go back for a moment to the original Sanskrit term, which is bodhicitta-utpada. Bodhi means 'spiritual Enlightenment' or 'spiritual Awakening' and it consists in the seeing of Reality face to face. Citta means 'mind', 'thought,

'consciousness', or 'heart'. Utpada means simply 'arising' or, more poetically, 'awakening'.

### **The nature of the Bodhicitta**

Bodhicitta-utpada is one of the most important terms in the whole of Buddhism, certainly in the Mahāyāna. It is usually translated into English as 'the arising of the thought of Enlightenment', but let me say at once that this is exactly what it is not. You could hardly have a worse translation. It is not a 'thought' about Enlightenment at all. The thought about Enlightenment has undoubtedly arisen in our minds as we sit here, but the Bodhicitta has not arisen – we haven't become transformed into Bodhisattvas. The Bodhicitta is something very much more than a thought about Enlightenment. Guenther translates it as 'Enlightened Attitude'. I personally sometimes translate it as 'Will to Enlightenment' or as 'Bodhi Heart'. Although all these alternative translations are considerably better than 'thought of Enlightenment', none of them is really satisfactory. This is not altogether the fault of the English language. It is perhaps the fault of language itself. We might say that 'Bodhicitta' is a very unsatisfactory term for the Bodhicitta.

The Bodhicitta is, in fact, not a mental state (or mental activity, or mental function) at all. It is certainly not a thought which you or I can entertain. It is not even an 'act of will', if by that I mean my personal will. The Bodhicitta is none of these.

The Bodhicitta basically represents the manifestation, even the irruption, within us, of something Transcendental. In traditional terms – I am thinking of Nāgārjuna's exposition of the Bodhicitta in a short but profound work which he wrote on the subject – the Bodhicitta is not included in the 'Five Skandhas'. This is a very significant statement indeed. Nāgārjuna's statement, representing the best Mahayana tradition, requires a great deal of pondering.

### **The Five Skandhas of conditioned existence**

Skandha is another of those untranslatable terms. It is usually translated as 'aggregate', or something equally unsatisfactory. It literally means 'the trunk of a tree', but that doesn't get us far. Dr Conze delights to call the Five Skandhas the 'Five Heaps', which again doesn't help us much. However, the Five Skandhas are one of the basic doctrinal categories of Buddhism.

The first of the Five Skandhas is rūpa. Rūpa means 'bodily form'. Secondly, there is vedanā, which means 'feeling' or 'emotion' – positive or negative. Thirdly, there is saṃjñā, which is, very roughly, 'perception'. Saṃjñā is the recognition of something as 'that particular thing'. When you say, 'that's a clock,' that is saṃjñā. You've recognized it as that particular thing. You've identified it, labelled it. Fourthly, the saṃskāras. Some German scholars translate this term as 'steering forces'. We may translate it, very roughly, as 'volitional activities', i.e. acts of will. Fifthly, there is vijñāna, which is 'consciousness'. These are the Five Skandhas: rūpa (material form), vedanā (feeling or emotion), saṃjñā (perception), saṃskāras

(volitional activities), and vijñāna (consciousness). If you want to make anything of Buddhist metaphysics and philosophy, you must know these Five Skandhas inside out.

### **“Something transcendental”**

In Buddhist thought the Five Skandhas are regarded as exhausting our entire psychophysical existence. In the entire range of our psychophysical existence, there's nothing – no thought, no feeling, no aspect of our physical existence – which is not included under one of the Five Skandhas. This is why, at the beginning of the Heart Sūtra, the text says that the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, coursing in the profound Perfection of Wisdom, looked down on the world (on conditioned existence) and saw the Five Skandhas. He saw that the whole of psychophysical conditioned existence consists of these five things alone; nothing exists on the conditioned level of existence which cannot be included under one or another of the Five Skandhas.

But the Bodhicitta is not included in the Five Skandhas. As the Five Skandhas comprise all that is of this world, and the Bodhicitta is not included in the Five Skandhas, it means that the Bodhicitta is something altogether out of this world, something transcendental. It is not a thought, nor a volition, nor an idea, nor a concept, but a profound, spiritual or transcendental experience, an experience which re-orientates our entire being.

### **An illustration**

Perhaps I can make this matter clearer with the help of a comparison – it is only a comparison – from the Christian tradition. You can imagine someone in a Christian context talking about 'thinking of God'. You might think of God as a beautiful old gentleman seated in the clouds, or as Pure Being, but 'thinking about God' would be just thinking about God. You wouldn't describe it as a profound experience. Suppose, however, you were to speak of 'the descent of the Holy Spirit', this would be a very different matter. Thinking about God is one thing, but having the Holy Spirit descend upon you, and into you, so that you are filled by the Holy Spirit, is a quite different thing. If the thought of Enlightenment is analogous to thinking about God, the arising of the Bodhicitta is analogous to the descent upon one, in full force, of the Holy Spirit. Now this comparison is just for the purpose of illustration. There's no question of equating these two different sets of doctrinal and spiritual concepts. I am concerned only to try to make clear the nature of the difference between thinking about Enlightenment and the arising of the Bodhicitta. The Bodhicitta is not just a thought about Enlightenment, but a profound spiritual experience, even a profound, spiritual, transcendental 'entity'.

### **Something transpersonal**

Not only is the Bodhicitta transcendental, but the Bodhicitta is not individual. This is another point that Nāgārjuna makes. We speak of the Bodhicitta as arising in this person or that person, and one might therefore think that there are a number

of Bodhicittas arising in different people, making them all Bodhisattvas. In fact, it isn't so at all. The Bodhicitta is not anybody's individually, so there is no plurality of Bodhicittas arising in different people. Your thought of Enlightenment is your thought of Enlightenment, my thought of Enlightenment is mine; there are many thoughts. But your Bodhicitta is my Bodhicitta, and my Bodhicitta is your Bodhicitta; there is only one Bodhicitta.

The Bodhicitta is only one, and individuals in whom the Bodhicitta has arisen participate in that one Bodhicitta, or manifest that one Bodhicitta, in varying degrees. The Mahāyāna writers liken the Bodhicitta to the moon. The Bodhicitta is reflected, as it were, in different people, just as the moon is reflected variously in different bodies of water. There are many reflections, but only one moon; in the same way, there are many manifestations, but one Bodhicitta.

What is known in the Mahāyāna tradition as the 'Absolute Bodhicitta' – the Bodhicitta outside space and time – is identical with Reality itself. Being identical with Reality, the Absolute Bodhicitta is beyond change or, rather, is beyond the opposition between change and non-change. But this doesn't hold good with what is known in the tradition as the 'relative Bodhicitta'. The relative Bodhicitta is an active force at work. This is why I prefer to translate Bodhicitta as 'Will to Enlightenment' (bearing in mind that one is speaking of the relative, as distinct from the Absolute, Bodhicitta). This Will to Enlightenment, though, is not an act of will of any individual. The Bodhicitta is no more an act of anybody's individual will than it is anybody's individual thought. We might in fact think of the Bodhicitta as a sort of cosmic will at work in the universe, in the direction of what we can only think of as universal redemption: the liberation, the Enlightenment, ultimately, of all sentient beings.

We might even think of the Bodhicitta as a sort of 'spirit of Enlightenment', immanent in the world, and leading individuals to higher and ever higher degrees of spiritual perfection. This being the case, it is clear that individuals do not possess the Bodhicitta. If you possess it, it is not the Bodhicitta, it is something else – your own thought or idea perhaps. The Transcendental, non-individual, cosmic Bodhicitta you have missed. Individuals do not possess the Bodhicitta. We may say that it is the Bodhicitta that possesses individuals. Those of whom the Bodhicitta 'takes possession' (in whom the Bodhicitta arises) become Bodhisattvas. They live for the sake of Enlightenment; they strive to actualize, for the benefit of all, the highest potentialities that the universe contains.

### **The Bodhicitta, the spiritual community, and helping others**

The Bodhicitta is something that supervenes upon individual spiritual effort when it reaches a very high degree of purity, positivity, and openness. You surrender to it, open yourself to it, become a channel for it. You are no longer 'you' in a narrow egotistic sense. There is something higher working through you. You are still recognizably there as an individual functioning in the world, but it is not just you functioning – it is the Bodhicitta moving in the direction of the Enlightenment of all beings.

That is why I have sometimes said that the Bodhicitta manifests within the context of the spiritual community. The spiritual community, especially to the extent that it is a transcendental community, is an embodiment of the Bodhicitta. Members of the spiritual community can act in the Bodhisattva spirit to whatever extent they are capable. Just as the Bodhisattva aspires to give whatever support he can to the beings of the whole cosmos, so on our own level, if we are trying to practice the Bodhisattva ideal, that should naturally involve giving whatever support we can to those within your immediate environment, our spiritual community. If we just regard the spiritual community as a convenience for our own spiritual development, we are living in accordance with a very narrow spiritual ideal. This narrow ideal becomes self-defeating, because you cannot really help yourself without helping others. If you think in terms of helping yourself to the exclusion of helping others, you have a very rigid idea of self and others, and as long as that fixed view is there you can't even gain Enlightenment for yourself.

### **How the Bodhicitta arises**

The Bodhicitta is said to arise as a result of a coalescence between two trends of experience which are generally considered to be contradictory. We may describe these as the trend of withdrawal and the trend of involvement.

### **The trend of withdrawal and renunciation**

The first trend represents the movement of withdrawal from mundane things, which is renunciation. One withdraws from worldly activities, worldly thoughts, worldly associations. This movement of withdrawal is aided by a particular practice, which is called 'Reflection on the Faults of Conditioned Existence'. You reflect that conditioned existence, life within the round of existence, is profoundly unsatisfactory. It entails all sorts of experiences of an unpleasant nature: things one wants but can't get, people one likes whom one is separated from, things one doesn't want to do which one has to do. There is the whole wretched business of earning a living. There is attending to the physical body—feeding it, doctoring it when it gets sick. There is looking after one's family—husband, wife, children, relations. You feel that all this is too much and you have to get away from it all, out of it all. You desire to escape from the round of existence into Nirvāṇa. You wish to get away from all the fluctuations and vicissitudes of this mundane life into the peace and rest of the Eternal.

### **The trend of involvement**

The second trend, the trend of involvement, represents concern for living beings. One thinks, 'Yes, I would like to get out. But what about other people? What would happen to them? There are some who can't stand it even as well as I can. If I abandon them, how will they get out?' This trend is aided by a practice called 'Reflection on the Sufferings of Sentient Beings'. In the trend of withdrawal, you reflect on the faults of conditioned existence only so far as they affect you, but here you reflect on them as they affect other living beings.

You just have to look around at the people you know, and reflect on all the troubles they have. There may be someone who has lost their job and doesn't know what to do. Another person's marriage has broken up. Someone else has perhaps had a nervous breakdown. Someone has been bereaved, has maybe lost their husband or wife or their child. If you reflect, you realize that there is not a single person you know who is not suffering in some way. Even if they are happy in the ordinary sense, there are still things that they have to bear: separation, illness, the weakness and tiredness of old age, and finally death, which they certainly don't want.

If you cast your gaze wider, you can reflect on how much suffering there is in so many parts of the world. There are wars. There are catastrophes of various kinds, such as floods or famines. People die in very horrible ways. You can cast your eye further still and think of animals, how they suffer, not only at the hands of other animals but at the hands of man. You can thus see that the whole world of living beings is involved in suffering – so much of it! When one reflects on the sufferings of sentient beings in this way, one thinks, 'How can I think simply in terms of getting out of it all? How can I think of getting away myself to some private Nirvāṇa, which may be very satisfactory to me personally, but which doesn't help them?'

### **Breaking through the conflict**

One thus experiences a sort of conflict – if one's nature is big enough to embrace the possibilities of such a conflict. On the one hand, one wants to get out; on the other, one wants to stay here. The trend of withdrawal is there; the trend of involvement is there. To choose either alternative is easy: it is easy either to withdraw into spiritual individualism or to remain involved in a worldly way. Many people do in fact take the easy solution. Some choose to get out into spiritual individualism, private spiritual experience. Others remain in the world, but in a purely secular sense, without much of a spiritual outlook.

Although they are contradictory, both the trend of withdrawal and the trend of involvement must be developed in the spiritual life. We might say that the trend of withdrawal embodies the Wisdom aspect of the spiritual life, and the trend of involvement embodies the Compassion aspect. Both of these are to be developed. That joint development is helped by what is known as 'Recollection of the Buddha'. One constantly bears in mind the ideal of Perfect Enlightenment, Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings, as exemplified most perfectly by Gautama the Buddha.

What one has to do is not allow the tension between these two trends to relax. If one does that, then in a sense one is lost. Even though they are contradictory, one has to pursue both simultaneously. One has to get out and stay in, see the faults of conditioned existence while at the same time feeling the sufferings of sentient beings, develop both Wisdom and Compassion. As one pursues both of these trends simultaneously, the tension builds up and up (it is, of course, not a

psychological tension but a spiritual tension). It is built up until a point is reached when one can't go any further. When one reaches that point, then something happens. We might describe it as an explosion. As the result of the tension generated by following these two contradictory trends simultaneously, there occurs a breakthrough into a higher dimension of spiritual consciousness, where the two trends of withdrawal and involvement are no longer two, not because they have been artificially amalgamated into one, but because the plane on which they were seen as two different things has been transcended.

When one breaks through one has the experience of being simultaneously withdrawn and involved, 'out' of it and 'in' it at the same time. Wisdom and Compassion have become non-dual. When the explosion occurs, when for the first time one is both withdrawn and involved, having both Wisdom and Compassion, not as two things, but as 'one' thing, then one may say that the Bodhicitta has arisen.

### **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. 'The Bodhicitta basically represents the manifestation, even the irruption, within us, of something Transcendental.' Do you like or dislike this idea? How far might your response be determined by your past conditioning?
2. Have you ever felt that you were helped in your spiritual life or prodded in a particular direction by 'something' that seemed to come from outside your normal self? If so, do you think this could relate in any way to what Sangharakshita describes as "a sort of 'spirit of Enlightenment'... leading individuals to higher and ever higher degrees of spiritual perfection?"
3. How does Sangharakshita's description of the Bodhicitta differ from the God of Christianity and other theistic religions?
4. What might the 'near enemies' of withdrawal and involvement be?
5. What form would the desire for withdrawal and personal liberation take for you? In other words, if you were just thinking of yourself, what would be your ideal spiritual lifestyle, your spiritual daydream?
6. Do you tend more towards being too 'spiritual' and withdrawn from 'worldly' activity, or too worldly and involved? Which do you therefore need to emphasise more – withdrawal or involvement – to set up the balanced tension recommended by Sangharakshita? What could you do about this in practical terms?