

Action and Contemplation

(Adapted from a Dharma talk of June 17, 2001)

This talk was sparked by an e-mail discussion that I had following a presentation to a philosophy class in which I mentioned the Sarvodaya Movement, a village-based self-help organization in Sri Lanka. One of Sarvodaya's sayings is, "We build the road and the road builds us." Here is part of the message I received after the talk:

I understood your point about the road building us as we build the road, but I'm also skeptical of attaching ourselves to achievements such as building roads. I do not consider Enlightenment to be an achievement. . . . I'm unsure that anything needs to be done. In general I'm skeptical about social activism. It isn't that the final end isn't a good, it's that we lack (demonstrative or non-demonstrative) evidence of how to make it concrete. Perhaps sages know what they are doing; I don't. This is why very frequently, the best thing to do is nothing.

I wrote back saying that I didn't think we could wait until we were fully enlightened to act. From one point of view we could certainly say that everything is perfect just as it is, this is the absolute or "wisdom" side of the coin. But if we regard all the suffering in the world, human and non-human, and its often systemic causes, all is not well. This is the relative or "compassion" side of the coin, and responding to suffering in the relative world is very much a part of the way of enlightenment. Here's what Japanese Zen Master Muso Kokushi says:

Those who seek liberation for themselves alone cannot become fully enlightened. Though it may be said that one who is not already liberated cannot liberate others, the very process of forgetting oneself to help others is in itself liberating.

I hope in this talk to look more deeply into this question of "to do or not to do," as it's one I've struggled with over the years, and one I believe many people who are sincerely practicing and want to put energy into their practice struggle with. How do I balance sitting and engaging in social issues, contemplation and action?

It would be hard to overemphasize the importance of action in Buddhist teaching. On the altar today we have the Center's only Samantabhadra figure. Samantabhadra is the Bodhisattva of Enlightened Action. He's riding on an elephant, which gives us a clue as to the nature of enlightened action; it has great power, intelligence, and deliberation. Elephants are heavy, so they will not walk on any unfamiliar surface. First they test it to make sure that it can take their weight. Because of this habit, the elephant became a symbol of prudence, and as a mount of kings it is also associated with the kingly virtues. Not only in the Mahayana tradition is action important; it is also central in classical Buddhist teaching. Where others said "soul" the Buddha often talked about action. He emphasized that we are what we do. The Anguttara Nikaya states:

My action is my possession,
my action is my inheritance,
my action is the womb which bears me,
my action is my refuge.

In this impermanent world, our actions are the *only* things we own – everything else can be taken from us. Also reminding us that Buddhism is not merely quiescence is the presence of Right Action, *Samyak Karmanta*, in the Eightfold Noble Path, the way of

enlightenment that the Buddha taught in the Four Noble Truths, his very first discourse.

Karma is Sanskrit for “action.” The key is the will. Every time we intentionally do something it leads to the creation in the mind of *samkharas*, or volitional formations. Every time we act we create grooves in the mind and then those grooves in turn condition the way we see the world and the way we act next time. Every action that we take forms us and then, in its turn, influences future thoughts and actions. This is why even small actions are not insignificant.

My correspondent wrote, “Perhaps sages know what they are doing, I don’t.” Well, we can’t know. We can’t know when we do something what the results are going to be, nor can we know what the results of our inaction might be, and whether or not that contributes to the evil in the world. This doesn’t mean that we just don’t do anything. What we can do is examine our motives. This goes back to the point about intentional or volitional action. We try to avoid acting (or holding back from acting) out of selfishness. Weaves are pure as far as we can tell, we act. If we make a mistake we try to learn from it.

We have the sixteen precepts as guidelines and also the Four Vows that we chant so often:

All beings without number, I vow to liberate.

Endless blind passions, I vow to uproot.

Dharma gates beyond measure, I vow to penetrate.

The great way of Buddha, I vow to attain.

Many people when they first hear these vows think, “How can I possibly save all beings, I can’t even save myself, how can I even begin?” In *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* (which I’ll be quoting from frequently in this talk), Vipassana teacher Jack Kornfield makes a good point about the significance of these vows for practice. He says that these vows are not talking about something we achieve, they are giving us a sense of direction, setting an intention, and *intention* is the key. Samantabhadra, for example, is renowned for his vows. Vows are very important in shaping our actions. They are not a gauge, but a compass, a guide for the heart to follow. And this ties in very much with not knowing what the results of our actions will be. We might think that this is something that the wise don’t have to struggle with, but that’s not so. Kornfield writes of the Dalai Lama:

Over decades of difficulties, as a political and spiritual leader and a worldwide exemplar of non-violence he has had to make wrenching decisions for his nation and his people. He admits that sometimes he is not sure his decisions are the best ones and sometimes he has made mistakes. “The only thing I can rely on,” he explains, “is my sincere motivation.” His heart’s motivation is to foster compassion and liberation as best he can in each act. He takes refuge in the seed of intention behind his acts. By one’s planting seeds of goodness, eventually something beautiful grows.

And that’s really all we can do, we can just do our best to plant good seeds, do it sincerely, and leave it up to karma to take care of the results. We really need to begin now, because if we don’t begin now when will we begin? If we wait until we are fully enlightened, or until we are somewhat enlightened, when will that be?

There's a danger that we idolize people like the Dalai Lama or other bodhisattvic figures, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Mother Teresa. We see them as special people that we can't hope to be like, and this is not so; they are human beings essentially no different from us. A few years ago Sensei gave a talk about an African American lawyer called Bryan Stevenson who trained at Harvard and could have worked in a high-powered corporate law firm, but who instead chose to go and work in Alabama on death penalty appeals for very, very little money. When he went back to class reunions at Harvard all his classmates would go on and on about him, as if he were a saint:

I hear it when I go to a reunion or I run into an old classmate who's doing something he hates. These people act like I'm a priest making such sacrifices. I'm not. It's easy for me to do what I do. What people don't understand when they say I could be making all this money is that I *couldn't* be making all this money. I could not do it. I could not get up in the morning and go to work. If the death penalty were abolished tomorrow I wouldn't be a corporate lawyer. I'd probably be a musician. When people say I'm great, and what I'm doing is great, they aren't talking about me, they are talking about themselves, about what's missing in their lives.

By making idols or heroes of people like Bryan Stevenson we abdicate our own responsibility. We avoid getting in touch with our own real desire to contribute and help. Here's another example; this one fictional, from a novel called *Animal Dreams* by Barbara Kingsolver. It's about two sisters, one called Hallie, who is working in Nicaragua teaching agriculture and another called Codi, who is back in the U.S. and drifting, unable to figure out what to do with her life. Codi writes an admiring letter to her sister, telling her how wonderful she is, that she is like God, out there saving the world. Hallie writes back:

I'm like God, Codi, like GOD? Give me a break. If I get another letter that mentions saving the world, I'm sending you, by return mail, a letter bomb. Codi, please. I've got things to do. You say you are not a moral person, what a copout! . . . You think you are no good so you can't do good things. Jesus Codi, how long are you going to keep limping around on that crutch? It's the other way around, it's what you do that makes you who you are.

Then a little bit later she says about herself,

What keeps you going is not some fine destination but just the road you are on, and the fact that you know how to drive. You keep your eyes open, you see this damned-to-hell world you got born into and you ask yourself, "What life can I live that will let me breathe in & out or love somebody or something and not run off screaming into the woods?" I don't look down from some high rock and choose cotton fields in Nicaragua. Those cotton fields chose me.

T.H. White said "Nobody can be saved from anything unless they save themselves. It is hopeless doing things for people – it is often very dangerous indeed to do things at all." In one sense that's true, but what distinguishes people like Bryan Stevenson and the character Codi is that they are not doing things *for* people, they are saving themselves. They are acting because they need to, and this is really the key to the work of the bodhisattva; notions of self and other and of doing things for people are completely dissolved, or at least dissolved at certain moments. Our actions don't have to be heroic or on any kind of a grand scale to fit the bill as bodhisattvic; it can be something as simple as addressing envelopes for an organization that we want to support; or delivering a loaf of bread to a lonely neighbor. Each small action counts and contributes to the whole.

There is a poem called *Lil* by Mary Oliver that talks about a very simple act of kindness.

"Don't pity. And don't pry,"
said my mother. "Her brother
was crazy and her sisters sick before they died,
but they were all proud, and Lil still is.
Take this" – a loaf of bread, still warm –
"and come right home." I crossed the lawn
and ducked under the dark and scabby firs
and knocked on the door, which opened

upon a face so creased and wild
I thought the brother's madness had spun back
to get her too. She thanked me, in a voice
sweet as a bell, while behind her
oh! the clutter, the dirt! the smell of her lonely meditations!
It sailed out like old fat, the smokes and chars
of ancient fires. I saw

everywhere boxes split and spilling; bundles
of papers, piles of clothes; ropes, tools;
a roomful of hats, a hallway of shoes. Smiling,
she turned with the warm loaf back into her kingdom
and shut the door. I said to my mother,
"She belongs in a cage . . ." And felt

nicked by terror because she did not anger,
which would have blown it away,
but only touched me on the lips, to hush me,
and stared at the ragged trees between our houses
till I felt those rough boughs fattening toward our future:
inside my mother's grace, inside my own –
losses, fears; the pack rat called old age.

Our action may be as simple as delivering a loaf of bread, but as Oliver shows in this poem, we may touch such profound and uncomfortable matters as our own mortality in the process of recognizing our kinship with another soul. Fear of facing such truths is one of the things thaterson in need *and* ourselves in the process.

One of the things that can happen when we do get in touch with suffering in the world is that we can start to feel quite overwhelmed. The magnitude of suffering, the countless wrongs that need righting, can cause us to do nothing, because it just seems that nothing we can do will make any real difference. Jack Kornfield tells us a story about this:

There was an old man who was walking along a beach in Mexico after an unusually strong spring storm. The beach was covered with dying starfish tossed up by the waves and the man was tossing them back in the water one by one. A visitor saw this and came up to him. "What are you doing?" "I'm trying to help these starfish," the old man replied. "But there are tens of thousands washed up along these beaches. Throwing a handful back doesn't matter," protested the visitor. "It matters to this one," the old man replied as he tossed another starfish into the ocean.

Our sense of being overwhelmed may lead us to the opposite extreme of frenetic activity. This was something that Thomas Merton, the Catholic contemplative, warned about back in the sixties when anti-war activism was so fashionable:

There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by non-violent methods most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is a cooperation in violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his work because it kills the root of inner wisdom that makes work fruitful.

So we must be careful, when we open ourselves to suffering, to find a balance, not to try and do too much. To think that it's all up to us is ego-delusion. The stillness of zazen must be our foundation. Jack Kornfield suggests we look to nature for guidance:

In the natural world we find the teaching of doing and non-doing. Trees bear fruit and fall dormant; otters, bears and spotted trout sleep and wake; day alternates with night and summer with winter. We often feel that we must be making a continual effort to enact our bodhisattva intentions or else we are failures or lazy. But the wider community of being tells us that without the winter-chill months of dormancy there can be no apples. Stillness, non-doing, listening, are as important and essential as action in the mandala of awakened life. . . . Sometimes it is necessary to march, sometimes it is necessary to sit, to pray. Each in turn can bring the heart and the world back to balance. For us to act wisely, compassion must be balanced with equanimity, the ability to let things be as they are. Just as our passionate heart can be touched by the sorrows of the world, so too we must remember that it's not our responsibility to fix all the brokenness of the world – only to fix what we can. Otherwise we become grandiose, as if we have been put there to be the savior of the humanity around us.

Particularly in our culture, which places such emphasis on activity, we have to be on our guard against getting too frenetic. As Thomas Merton explains,

We are living through the greatest crisis in human history and this crisis is centered precisely in the country that has made a fetish out of action and has lost (or perhaps never had) the sense of contemplation. Far from being irrelevant, prayer, meditation and contemplation are of the utmost importance in America today. . . . Prayer and meditation have an important part to play in opening up new ways and new horizons. If our prayer is the expression of a deep and grace-inspired desire for newness of life – and not a mere blind attachment to what has always been familiar and safe – God will act in us and through us.

Merton was a great champion of the contemplative life, and yet he sees it not as an end in itself but as a source of renewal that clears the way for enlightened action. Zazen is like a chrysalis, a vessel in which the caterpillar breaks down and magically reconstitutes itself into a butterfly. The basis of any real change is changing our minds, our consciousness; in a sense it's an extremely radical thing to do. Kornfield writes, "If the world is to be healed, it cannot happen by political and economic means alone; we have seen how the revolutionaries of one generation can turn into the oppressors of the next, and how political power can beget greed and delusion. We have to face the forces of separation, of greed, of hate directly and learn to live peacefully with a free heart. If we cannot do this, how can we expect it of others?" But zazen alone will not renew society. Practitioners must carry their realization out of the zendo and into their workplaces, schools and all the other institutions that shape our lives.

Franz Kafka once said something that relates very much to the path of the bodhisattva: "You can hold back from the suffering of the world. This is something you are free to do. But perhaps precisely this holding back is the only suffering you might be able to avoid." Another of the things that hold us back from opening to suffering is the fear of

what we might be called upon to do and to sacrifice. We fear our own power, because if it's really true that we have the power to make a difference, then it's a big responsibility. It puts demands on us that we may feel quite concerned that we will be able to fulfill. In 1994 when Nelson Mandela, after a long struggle, became Prime Minister of South Africa, he said in his inaugural address:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our Light, not our Darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you NOT to be. You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the World. There's nothing enlightening about shrinking so that other people won't feel unsure around you. You were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it is in everyone. As we let our own Light shine, we unconsciously give permission to other people to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

One small example of this is when I first started getting monthly "Freedom Writer" letters from Amnesty International. (These are texts of letters that you copy and send off to different governments to try to get prisoners of conscience out of jail.) My heart used to sink and I would think, "What's the point?" Actually, it's well documented that this type of campaign really has an effect; if a government suddenly has the spotlight on it because of someone they are torturing or unjustly imprisoning, it can often lead to that person having better conditions or even being released. At a certain point I realized that I felt awful because somehow I didn't want to recognize that if I sent a letter, it might really help. To acknowledge that would mean taking responsibility. But, as soon as I turned it around and just took one of those letters and sent it off, it was the opposite. Suddenly I felt a connection that I hadn't felt before, both to the victims and to the perpetrators. How could I *not* be a part of them? I might never know what effect my letter had, but least I had recognized the suffering. Denial is much more painful. The separation it imposes on us is truly a kind of imprisonment. We *can* have an effect on a prisoner languishing in a jail in Burma or Afghanistan or Texas, and the governments of those places are not impervious to our words because they are not separate from us. As Joanna Macy says about our institutions in *World as Lover, World as Self*, "they are not independent structures that are separate from our inner lives like some backdrop to our personal dramas . . . nor are they mere projections or reflections of our minds. As institutionalized forms of our ignorance, fears and greed, they acquire their own dynamics. Self and society are both real, and mutually causative. They co-arise." and with some verses from the great Tibetan teacher Shantideva's *Way of the Bodhisattva*. I found these very helpful some years ago, when I began to see how selfish I was in my practice, and how impatient. I used to regularly read these lines to remind myself of what practice is really about. There's one verse which goes, "I vow to lead infinite beings to the infinite qualities of Buddhahood by carrying out the infinite activities of the Bodhisattvas over an infinite period of time." This gets us on the right time scale. No quick fix, but a never-ending path of realization. If we can get in touch with our deepest and broadest aspirations, then we will find our Way and be able to endure whatever that way throws up to obstruct us. We will no longer be so fearful of opening to suffering. We will know when to act and when to do nothing. Shantideva offers these beautiful verses on the aspiration of the bodhisattva:

May I be a guard for those who are protectorless,
A guide for those who journey on the road.
For those who wish to go across the water,
May I be a boat, a raft, a bridge.

May I be an isle for those who yearn for landfall,
And a lamp for those who long for light,
For those who need a resting place, a bed.
For all who need a servant, may I be a slave.

May I be the wishing jewel, the vase of plenty,
A word of power and the supreme remedy.
May I be the trees of miracles,
and for every being the abundant cow.

Like the great earth and other elements,
Enduring as the sky itself endures,
For the boundless multitude of living beings,
May I be the ground and vessel of their life.

Thus for every single thing that lives,
In number like the boundless reaches of the sky,
May I be their sustenance and nourishment
Until they pass beyond the bounds of suffering.

Teachers, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, listen!
Just as you who in the past have gone to bliss,
Conceived the awakened attitude of mind
Likewise for the benefit of beings I will generate this self same attitude.

Sincere zazen helps us to uncover our deepest aspirations, our innate *bodhicitta*, and so does compassionate action. In both, we forget ourselves in the service of something greater than us. Self-forgetfulness is the key. If our zazen is selfish it's not true zazen. If we attach to the seated practice and don't act when action is called for, our practice is half-baked, immature. I'll let Joanna Macy have the last word:

Because the relationship between self and world is reciprocal, it is not a matter of first getting enlightened or saved and *then* acting. As we work to heal the Earth, the Earth heals us. No need to wait. As we care enough to take risks, we loosen the grip of ego and begin to come home to our true nature. For in the co-arising nature of things, the world itself, if we are bold enough to love it, acts through us. It does not ask us to be pure or perfect, or wait until we are detached from all passions, but only to care to harness the sweet, pure intention of our deepest passions, and, as the early scripture of the *Mother of the Buddhas* says, "fly like a Bodhisattva."

We all have the wings to fly, but unless we take the leap, we'll never discover them, and never experience the freedom of the boundless sky of True Nature.

—Amala Wrightson

Amala is a priest of the Three Jewels Order, and in November moved back to her native New Zealand with her husband Richard von Sturmer.