Lecture 11: the Arising of the Bodhicitta - Edited Version

Having Looked at Conversion to Buddhism, and conversion within Buddhism, one might think that it is hardly possible to go any further, and in a sense - though only in a sense - this is true. But conversion in Buddhism not only has different levels; it can also be approached from different aspects and points of view. This brings us to conversion understood in terms of what is known in Mahayana Buddhism as the bodhicitta utpada.*

We can provisionally render this term bodhicitta utpada as `the arising (utpada) of the will (citta) to Enlightenment (bodhi)', but the term bodhi in particular needs a little more elucidation. It derives from a Sanskrit root meaning `to know' or `to understand', so it comes to mean `understanding', `wisdom', or even `Enlightenment'. Traditional Buddhism distinguishes three kinds of bodhi: sravaka-bodhi, `Enlightenment of the disciple'; pratyeka-bodhi, `private' or `individual' Enlightenment; and anuttara-samyaksambodhi, `unsurpassed, perfect Enlightenment'. Until we have grasped what is meant by these three kinds of Enlightenment, there is much in the development of the history of Buddhist thought, especially in India, which we are not really in a position to understand.

Sravaka literally means `one who hears'; it is the Indian word for a disciple. However, a disciple not only hears with the ear, but also hears within; that is, he or she is receptive to the word of the teacher. Srava-kabodhi, the Enlightenment of the disciple or hearer, therefore means the illumination which is gained not only by one's own effort but also on the basis of having been taught the method and discipline by someone else. Having been shown the path, one makes an effort and gains Enlightenment. However, one makes no attempt to communicate that experience to anyone else; one has a teacher but no disciples.

Pratyeka-bodhi differs from sravaka-bodhi in that it is gained without the benefit of a teacher's instruction; one discovers the path for oneself. This is, of course, very difficult to achieve, and it is therefore very rare. And having attained Enlightenment in this way, one makes no attempt to communicate one's knowledge and experience to anyone else: hence `private' or `individual' Enlightenment.

Thirdly, there is anuttara-samyaksambodhi: unsurpassed, perfect Enlightenment. This too is gained without a teacher, but having been gained it is not kept to oneself but communicated to other beings so that they may have the opportunity of sharing the experience of Enlightenment. Gaining Enlightenment `without a teacher' is to be understood in quite a narrow sense, of course, because it refers only to the present existence. Having been shown the way by others in previous lives, one has accumulated sufficient momentum to be carried through the present existence without a teacher, and to make the ultimate discovery by oneself.

At this stage a very important question arises, a question with far-reaching implications. What is the real, basic difference between these three kinds of bodhi? Are we concerned here with three different types of spiritual experience, or is it one and the same Enlightenment in each case? Is the difference between these three kinds of bodhi essential or merely accidental? When we first come across them, we might naturally conclude that the difference is circumstantial, or even adventitious, but in fact it is much more fundamental than that. Provisionally, the three bodhis may be said to represent three grades of Enlightenment within a hierarchical structure, the third of which is the highest, the consummation as it were, of the whole series.

If we want to identify the single essential distinction between these `grades', we can simplify things by amalgamating the first and second of them and setting them apart from the third, anuttara-samyaksambodhi. The basic difference between these two categories obviously lies in the relation of the Enlightened being to other, unenlightened, people. The first group, whether they gain Enlightenment with or without a teacher, do not communicate their experience, whereas the second group do. This difference between the two is neither accidental nor merely external, because the communication, the `giving away', of spiritual experience is not at all the same as the giving of material things. If we happen to acquire a precious stone, the jewel itself remains the same whether we keep it or give it away. But with spiritual experiences it is not like that in the least, because something far more subtle, delicate, and complex is involved. A spiritual experience which can be kept to oneself, we can say, is not the same as one which is communicated - which indeed has to be communicated, in the sense that the very nature of the experience demands that it should be communicated.

The fundamental difference between these two kinds of spiritual experience lies in whether or not the experience includes a feeling of selfhood. The feeling of selfhood has various forms, some gross and easily detected, others infinitely subtle and extremely difficult to detect. The subtlest of all the forms of this

feeling is the form which arises in connection with the gaining of Enlightenment itself. We have a certain experience which we take as tending in the direction of Enlightenment, but then we attach to that experience a feeling that this is my experience, my Enlightenment, this is what I have gained. It is because this subtle feeling of selfhood arises that we may consider it possible not to communicate our experience to others. From the mundane point of view it may be a very high and sublime experience, but it is not the experience of unsurpassed, perfect Enlightenment; it is not the Enlightenment of the Buddha himself. So long as that feeling of `my' can be attached to it, it is not the ultimate experience.

When we speak of conversion in Buddhism in terms of the arising of the bodhicitta - the will to Enlightenment - it is the second of these two kinds of Enlightenment which is meant: the unsurpassed, perfect Enlightenment, Enlightenment for the benefit of all sentient beings. So the will to Enlightenment is the aspiration to that Enlightenment wherein there is not a shadow of selfhood and which, paradoxically, cannot therefore be called `mine'. There is no question of keeping it to oneself; by definition, it has to be communicated.

Having arrived at a sense of the meaning of bodhi, we need to find out a bit more about citta. Citta is usually translated as `thought', and therefore bodhicitta is often translated as `the thought of Enlightenment' as though it were a concept or idea about Enlightenment. But this is exactly what it is not. It has nothing to do with thought in that discursive or abstract conceptual sense at all. Citta represents an immensely powerful drive, a drive which is not unconscious but perfectly aware, a drive which has one's whole being behind it. It is better, therefore, to speak not of the thought of Enlightenment but of the will to Enlightenment, although even this is not quite accurate because this `will' is infinitely more powerful than determination in the ordinary sense.

Finally, utpada literally means `arising': hence our working translation of bodhicitta-utpada as `the arising of the will to Enlightenment'. The arising of the bodhicitta is the initial process of orienting all one's energies and all one's strength, at all levels of one's being and personality, in the direction of Enlightenment understood as unsurpassed, perfect Enlightenment, Enlightenment for the benefit and welfare of all sentient beings.

Having worked out an appropriate translation, we can now turn to consider what light the arising of the will to Enlightenment sheds on the meaning of conversion in Buddhism. It can be said to represent conversion from an individualistic conception of Enlightenment to a non-individualistic ideal of Enlightenment, from the kind of Enlightenment which can be kept to oneself to the kind of Enlightenment which cannot possibly be kept to oneself. In other words, it represents a transition, a breakthrough, from that last most subtle sense of spiritual selfhood to an experience of complete and total selflessness.

Obviously this aspect of conversion is very important indeed, but it is not so easy to put your finger on it and say `It is like this' or `It occurs at a certain point,' in the way that you can with Going for Refuge and Stream Entry. One might even say that this type of conversion can occur at any stage of spiritual development, or in connection with any spiritual experience. This is why in Mahayana Buddhism there is the practice of `turning over' - that is to say, turning over one's merits to the cause of perfect Enlightenment. Although it is often neglected, this is one of the most important teachings in the whole of Buddhism. In the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures the Bodhisattva (the Mahayana's idea of the Buddhist par excellence) is advised: `Whenever you perform any good action, whenever you practise morality, or meditate, or help anybody, or give anything, turn over the merit - dedicate it to the cause of perfect Enlightenment.' In other words, don't think: `This skilful action is going to help me attain liberation.' Instead, reflect or resolve: `Whatever merit derives from my good deeds, I dedicate it to Enlightenment not just for my own benefit but for the benefit of all.' By practising regularly and systematically in this way, we ensure that in the course of our spiritual lives we do not build up a subtle spiritual selfhood which would eventually rise up and bar our way to the ultimate spiritual attainment, unsurpassed perfect Enlightenment.

The Bodhisattva is further told that this transference of merit in the direction of Enlightenment for the benefit of all beings is possible only on the basis of some insight into the doctrine of sunyata (which is often translated `voidness' but really means `non-dual Reality'), according to which there is no substantial distinction between self and other. However, this practice of turning over the merits accruing from good deeds should accompany us all along the spiritual path; we need not - cannot - leave it until Insight arises. On the other hand, it is not something you do once and for all - nor is it the case that if you did it last week you can forget about it until next year. It is something you have to do all the time, as a constant accompaniment to every practice, throughout your spiritual life.

Actually, this is not the only way to guard against spiritual individualism. You can, if you so wish - and some people do so wish - pursue spiritual individualism to its limits. You can think grimly in terms of `my Enlightenment', disregarding everything else, and get quite a long way. Then, when you have attained your own `individual Enlightenment' and are, as it were, resting on it, as if upon a celestial pinnacle, you can lift up your eyes to the even loftier peak of unsurpassed, perfect Enlightenment. This can be done, but there is a danger that you may get stuck, perhaps stuck indefinitely, in spiritual individualism. Even at this very high level you can end up in a sort of spiritual cul-de-sac.

It is better, therefore, if conversion in the sense of the arising of the bodhicitta occurs early on in one's spiritual life in the form of a decisive experience. It is not enough just to practise transference of merits with regard to one's everyday spiritual life and practice. One aims to precipitate the arising of the Will to Enlightenment right from the start of one's spiritual career, without settling down, even for a short period, in the path of spiritual individualism. The question is, as usual, how to do it. To understand this, we need to look at the conditions on the basis of which the bodhicitta arises.

The Will to Enlightenment is said to arise as a result of the coalescence of two trends of experience which are generally considered to be contradictory, since in ordinary experience they cannot both be pursued simultaneously. We might call these the trend of withdrawal from the world and the trend of involvement in the world.

The first of these trends represents renunciation in the extreme sense, a withdrawal from worldly activities, worldly thoughts, and secular associations. This withdrawal is aided by a particular practice, that of reflection on the faults or imperfections of conditioned existence. You reflect that life in this world, whirling round and round in the Wheel of Life, is profoundly unsatisfactory, involving as it does all sorts of disagreeable experiences. You experience physical pain and discomfort, you don't get what you want, you're separated from people you like, you have to do things you don't want to do. There's the whole wretched business of having to earn a living, doing your daily chores, taking care of your body - feeding it, clothing it, housing it, looking after it when it gets sick - not to mention taking responsibility for looking after your dependants. It all seems too much. All you want to do is get away from it all, away from the fluctuations, vicissitudes, and distractions of mundane life into the peace of the perfection of the Unconditioned, the unchanging rest of nirvana.

The second trend in our experience - involvement - represents concern for living beings. You reflect: `Well, it would be all right for me to opt out and withdraw from it all - I'd like that - but what about other people? What will happen to them? There are people who have a much harder time in this world than I do, who can stand it even less than I can. How will they ever get free if I abandon them?' This trend of involvement is aided by the practice of reflection on the sufferings of sentient beings. In the trend of withdrawal, you reflect on the sufferings and imperfections of conditioned existence only in so far as they affect you, but here you reflect on them as they affect other living beings. You just look around at all the people you know, your friends and acquaintances, all the people you meet, and you reflect on all their troubles and difficulties. Perhaps one or two have lost their jobs, another's marriage has broken up, yet another may have had a nervous breakdown, and there may well be someone who has recently been bereaved. If you think it over, there is not a single person you know who is not suffering in some way. Even if they seem comparatively happy in the ordinary sense, there are still things that they have to bear: separation or illness, the weakness and tiredness of old age, and finally death, which they almost certainly don't want.

Then, when you cast your gaze further afield, there is so much suffering in so many parts of the world: wars, catastrophes of various kinds, floods and famines, people dying in horrible ways. You can even think of animals and how they suffer, not only at the teeth and claws of other animals but at the hands of human beings. The whole world of living beings is involved in suffering. And when you reflect on this, you ask yourself: `How can I possibly think simply in terms of getting out of it all on my own? How can I possibly think of getting away by myself to some private nirvana, some private spiritual experience, which may be very satisfactory to me but is of no help to others?'

So there is a conflict, if you are big enough and rich enough in your nature to embrace the possibilities of such a conflict. On one hand you want to get out; on the other you want to stay here. Of course, the easy solution is simply to choose between them. There are some people who withdraw into spiritual individualism, private spiritual experience, while others remain in the world without much of a spiritual outlook at all. But although these trends are contradictory, both of them must be developed in the course of the spiritual life. The trend of withdrawal may be said to embody the wisdom aspect of the spiritual life, while the trend of involvement embodies the compassion aspect.

These two practices - reflecting on the faults of conditioned existence and reflecting on the sufferings of sentient beings - form part of a traditional method of creating the conditions in dependence upon which the bodhicitta can arise. This is the method taught by a great Indian master of the Mahayana, Vasubandhu, who lived, so the Mahayana tradition says, in the latter half of the fifth century CE. Vasubandhu enumerated four practices which would provide a basis for the arising of the Bodhicitta; they are known as Vasubandhu's Four Factors. We have already identified two of these factors. The other two are `the recollection of the Buddhas' and `the contemplation of the virtues of the Tathagatas' (Tathagata being another word for Buddha).

In recollecting the Buddhas, one brings to mind the historical Buddha Sakyamuni, who lived in India about two-thousand-five-hundred years ago, and the lineage of his great predecessors of which the Buddhist tradition speaks. In particular, one reflects that these Buddhas started their spiritual careers as human beings, with their weaknesses and limitations, just as we do. Just as they managed to transcend all limitations to become Enlightened, so can we, if only we make the effort.

There are several ways of approaching the fourth practice, the contemplation of the virtues of the Tathagatas. One can dwell on the life of an Enlightened One - the spiritual biography of the Buddha or Milarepa, for example. One can perform pujas in front of a shrine, or perhaps just sit and look at a Buddha image, really trying to get a feeling for what the image represents. Then again, one can do a visualization practice in which - to be very brief indeed - one conjures up a vivid mental picture of a particular Buddha or Bodhisattva, an embodiment of an aspect of Enlightenment such as wisdom, compassion, energy, or purity.

We can think of these Four Factors as forming a kind of sequence. First, through recollecting the Buddhas, we become convinced that Enlightenment is possible for us. Then, on seeing the faults of conditioned existence, we become detached from it, and the trend of our being is set in the direction of the Unconditioned. Thirdly, through observing the suffering of sentient beings - whether in imagination or close at hand - compassion arises, and we want to rescue not only ourselves but other beings from suffering. Then, as we contemplate the virtues of the Tathagatas, we gradually become assimilated to them, and approach Enlightenment itself.

However, although we can think of the Four Factors sequentially in this way, the Bodhicitta in fact arises in dependence on all four simultaneously. This means - returning to the tension between withdrawal and involvement - that we must not allow the tension between these two trends to relax. If we do that, we are lost. Even though they are contradictory, we have to follow both trends simultaneously, seeing the faults of conditioned existence and at the same time feeling the sufferings of sentient beings, developing both wisdom and compassion. As we develop and pursue both of these, the tension - and this tension is not psychological but spiritual - builds up and up until we simply can't go any further.

At that point, something happens. It is very difficult to describe exactly what does happen, but we can think of it provisionally as an explosion. The tension which has been generated through following simultaneously these two contradictory trends results in a breakthrough into a higher dimension of spiritual consciousness. Withdrawal and involvement are no longer two separate trends, not because they have been artificially amalgamated into one, but because the plane or level on which their duality existed, or on which it was possible for them to be two things, has been transcended. When that explosion occurs, one has the experience of being simultaneously withdrawn and involved, simultaneously out of the world and in the world. Wisdom and compassion become non-dual, not separate, not-two - without, at the same time, being simply numerically one. When this breakthrough occurs, when for the first time one is both withdrawn and involved, when wisdom and compassion are not two things side by side but one thing, then the Bodhicitta has arisen. There has occurred a conversion from spiritual individualism to a life of complete selflessness - or at least such a life has been initiated.

According to the Mahayana, when that happens one gives expression to the experience which one has gained, to the new dimension of spiritual consciousness into which one has broken through, by taking four great vows, the Vows of the Bodhisattva:

However innumerable beings are, I vow to save them;

However inexhaustible the passions are, I vow to extinguish them;

However immeasurable the Dharmas are, I vow to master them;

However incomparable the Buddha-truth is, I vow to attain it.

So the Bodhisattva vows in the first place to deliver all beings from difficulties, both spiritual and mundane. The second vow is to destroy all spiritual defilements within one's own mind, and - through one's advice - in the minds of other living beings. The third vow is to learn the Dharma, to practise and realize it in all its aspects, and to communicate it to others. And the fourth and final vow is that in all possible ways one will help to lead all beings in the direction of Buddhahood, that is, towards unsurpassed perfect Enlightenment. When these Four Vows of the Bodhisattva are made, then one's conversion, in the sense of the arising of the will to Enlightenment, is complete.