

Direct Action and the Dharma - Maitrisiddhi, May 2019



I'm passionate about the Dharma, including the wisdom perspective. I'm passionate about spreading the Dharma. As well as spending the last ten years of my life in service to Taraloka, I've also started up West Wales Buddhist Group, in Aberystwyth, where we're growing a lively sangha. I'm passionate about Maitreya, my yidam - Bodhisattva of Metta and Buddha of the Future - who meditates at the city gates, in the middle of the world, not in some quiet cave somewhere. And I feel for my own personal integrity, if for no other reason, I need to discover how to respond to the world's current ecological crisis.

Generally in my life, I haven't been an activist - not at all! But there's something about meditative direct action that to me feels completely different. My first encounter with a meditation protest was in Sheffield, ten or so years ago. On my commute home from work, I cycled past a protest about the Burmese military killing or imprisoning Buddhist monks. There were some loud shouting people with placards, and then there was another separate group, from the Amida Trust, who were sitting on the pavement meditating.

It was so powerful to see them there, like a genuine fourth sight, another way of responding. It wasn't angry, and it didn't involve blame. They were so still, so present, yet somehow full of energy. The impact on me was much more powerful than the people shouting and waving banners. I tried to carry on going home, got five minutes down the road, stopped, turned round, and joined them, sitting on the cold paving slabs using my shoes as meditation cushions. Now, meditative direct actions are a response that I want to make - a way I want to

engage with areas of painfulness in the world that for me, for years, felt too painful even to go near. I didn't have the emotional resilience.

Here's what happened on 15 April, the first day of the big [XR](#) protests in London. The five of us from Taraloka got up before dawn, left the house at four, caught the Crewe train to London in the half-light. We walked through London, Londoners awakening to the morning, going about their ordinary day. The air was crisp; the sunshine cool.

We met in a Quaker Meeting House. It was a large room, but people kept coming and coming till there were no more chairs; latecomers were sitting on the floor. Everyone was wearing funeral black. There were people who knew each other, and people who knew no-one. The atmosphere was friendly, warm. There were Sokagakkai and Nichiren Buddhists, those from Tibetan traditions, Amaravati and those associated with Gaia House. There were folk from *Wake Up London!* a Thich Nat Hanh young people's movement. Well over half of us were from Triratna: Order Members, Mitras and friends.

Everyone was there to participate in a DANCE direct action in support of the XR climate change protests in central London. [Dharma Action Network for Climate Engagement](#) (DANCE) was initiated in early 2013 by a group of Dharma teachers, staff and friends of Gaia House, including Rob Burbea and Kirsten Kratz, as a forum for the wider sangha to explore what might be possible in bringing Dharma responses to the climate crisis. An impressive guy called Joe Mishan was facilitating this event.



After connecting with each other and with our hearts, why we were there, we straggled through the Tube to the Edgware Road. Forty of us, we formed a long single file line, and put on our kesas - those of us who were ordained. We all had a poster around our necks: an image of the Earth from space, and the message 'grief and love for the Earth'. Then we processed ritually down this ordinary bustling London street to meet the Marble Arch protest. People stared. People took photos. At Marble Arch the road was already blocked by XR protestors. There was a lively good-humoured festival atmosphere - amplified music from a live band; protestors chanting, singing, shouting; children playing. We seated ourselves across the road to meditate. And a large traffic jam. Yellow-jacketed police watched, but made no attempt to move us off.



I don't know what practices everyone else was doing: personally I did an hour of the *metta bhavana*. Metta for those I was sat with; metta for the other protestors; metta for the car and truck drivers who hooted their horns - some in support, some in anger at the road block; metta for Londoners and for all the different beings on this earth, all the fish, insects and animals, all wanting 'business as usual' in their lives. There was quite a traffic jam!

In terms of the noise, it was a bit like meditating at the temple at Bodh Gaya. To me the atmosphere became very strong, and as though the forty of us meditating were grounding the whole area and generating a field of love. The other protestors became stiller, and the whole atmosphere seemed to shift. If I cracked my eyelids open, five or six people would be pointing cameras at us - media and passers-by. Yet my meditation was powerful and many others said the same. Sarah from Taraloka said to me on the way home something like:

'I felt like I was meditating in the middle of an abstract painting. And my meditation was so absorbed! How come I felt so connected, with all that craziness and noise, when that doesn't happen in our silent shrine room at home?'

After the first sit, the other protesters were thanking us and we them; they were asking questions: who were we? where were we from? what had we been doing? Then picnic lunch in the sunshine; wandering around the rest of the creative, passionate yet peaceful-feeling Marble Arch protest site; then another meditation in the road - and then walking back through London, past the big stores in Regent Street; past the pink boat saying: 'Tell the Truth' at Oxford Circus - back to take the train home. I felt as though I'd been on a particularly strong retreat, although I was also very tired the next day! Some Triratna folk, the more seasoned activists like Cittapala, Yogaratna and Rowan Tilly stayed the whole two weeks, including getting arrested.

I'd like the meditative direct actions to have an effect in the external world. This year at Taraloka we've only had five swallows arrive - two nests worth. Three years ago we had eight nests, and swallows and swallow fledgelings filled the sky. I'm sitting in the road for those swallows, and for the Taraloka hedgehogs we no longer have. Even if only for my own integrity, at least I am trying. I think the actions are effective, and powerful to witness. I love being an 'out there' Buddhist, and I believe we are, in that situation, a fourth sight. Certainly we generate a lot of interest!



Yet I also feel they are worth doing for themselves, not solely for the sake of an end result. Like making an offering in a puja, you do it for its own sake, because you are expressing something that matters. There's something for me about the Sangha coming together with such positive volitions, with volitions of compassion - all of us saying by our silent action:

'I care about this world. I care about all the beings on it. I would not choose ecological collapse. I would not choose mass extinctions. I care enough to do this with my day.'

These direct action meditations I've been on have felt beautiful, like puja, like good acts in themselves.

So three weeks later I was back, with Joe, Akasaraja, Yogaratna and three others to meditate outside the Barclays AGM. Again, a beautiful crisp day. This time, we were meditating wearing blindfolds, and our posters read: 'Barclays - blind to the climate crisis'. ([Barclays is the largest investor in fossil fuel industry in Europe](#), including tar sand projects and until last autumn, fracking.) There were probably four or five police and security guards for each of us. They were obviously worried! But we sat entirely legally on the pavement by the conference centre entrance, our backs to Westminster Abbey. The investors in smart city suits and the board directors arriving in shiny black Mercedes had to come right by us.



A noisy young people's protest also arrived - lots of energetic shouting through a microphone. Some people thanked us for what we were doing. Others muttered angrily: 'It's too much! After everything...!' Again, a lot of interest from passers by, media and cameras. We were on the Guardian Online by midday, and the fb post I put up got almost 3,000 hits. Even my dad saw the pictures, and said: 'Oh. Maybe I could change my bank!' He is the least socially active person you could imagine.

I do understand that people have different opinions on whether man-made climate change is happening. I doubt anyone could maintain that a man-made ecological crisis is not occurring (although you never know)! It's laid out starkly in the [UN biodiversity report](#), published in May 2019. For me, rather than

arguing about the science (which feels like a modern version of the Buddha's unanswerable questions), I'm more interested in different creative ways in which we can respond to this existential situation. Prof Sandra Diaz, one of the co-chairs of the UN report says this:

"We need to change the way we think about what a good life is, we need to change the social narrative that puts an emphasis on a good life depending on a high consumption and quick disposal. We need to shift it to an idea of a fulfilling life that is more aligned with a good relationship with nature, and a good relationship with other people, with the public good.

We need to change the stories in our heads, because they are the ones that are now enacted in decisions all the way from the individual up to government."

Changing that is not easy but this is what it would take to reach the better future for the children that are born this year."

[quoted on the BBC Website](#)

Contentment, changing inner narratives and connection - that sounds like practising the Dharma, more deeply and more radically, to me! I don't know how to help change attitudes within myself and within our Sangha. And I don't know how to spread the Dharma more widely - how to connect people who care with the realisation that there is a way of living, a path of practice, that can help. But being visible alongside this wave of radical energy - the place where radical energy *is* in today's society - can only be good. Back in the sixties and seventies, just such a wave of radical energy got Triratna started.



I find the interplay of wisdom and compassion perspectives fascinating, as I engage in direct action. From a compassion angle, there is an objective

situation with living beings dying and suffering, and if there is a way I can alleviate that, then I want to do it.

'I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too, because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being.'

The Bodhicaryavatara

It's a matter of my personal integrity. If I don't respond, I ignore it. If I carry on as usual with my comfortable lifestyle, even my comfortable Buddhist lifestyle, I'm complicit, I'm consenting. And of course I am complicit. I can't really protest about someone else doing this, corporations or governments or whoever. Who wants to drive my car? Me! Who wants to buy single use plastic? Me! Who wants cheap good quality clothes and technology? Me! Who buys books off Amazon, for convenience? Me! So when I'm sitting in the street, meditating, it's more that I'm bearing witness to a tragedy of collective delusion, without blame, that I am part of.



From a wisdom angle, to keep a sense of perspective and steer out of horrified anxiety and 'trying to fix it', I have to reflect quite strongly that suffering, impermanence and insubstantiality are the nature of all conditioned phenomena. If there is coming into being - the Earth and all its beings have definitely come into being! - then there will be going out of being. Yet that's only how it looks from my deluded point of view. In reality:

'Every event is marked by non-origination, non-extinction; non-destruction, non-permanence; non-identity, non-differentiation; non-coming-into-being, non-going-out-of-being'

Nagarjuna

What does that mean, in terms of mass extinctions? Nothing is lost, nothing dies - in an absolute sense. And I bring to mind how, whenever I've been truly in touch with something on a transcendental level, there is always a sense of deep happiness, ease and existential relaxation. Whatever is happening - even if it is global tragedy - that is conditionality rolling on and that's how it is. But that knowing is always interfused with love, in a way which I wouldn't know how to put into words. It is the mystery at the heart of the Dharma.

I will be doing more Sangha direct actions. I know it's not everyone's cup of tea, and I really do think there are many ways of fully turning towards this global existential situation. However if you're interested and UK-based, do [sign up](#) to the DANCE mailing list. And email me on triratnadiirectaction@gmail.com. We can link up and make stuff happen!