

Yogaratna thinks many Buddhists want to respond more directly to the climate and other crises, but perhaps face two internal obstacles in particular: concern about disruption or making people angry, and attachment to a gradualist model of how Buddhism can affect society. Here's a shortened version of a talk he gave at the Buddhafield Festival (UK) 2019, which goes into these questions.

Buddhist activism as spiritual practice

by Yogaratna

I'm assuming that you agree that there is a climate emergency, and a biodiversity/Earth's living systems emergency. And that there are serious problems with our existing global political and economic systems. And that the political and economic problems are crucially getting in the way of effective action on the ecological problems. That's quite a few assumptions, but my sense is that there is beginning to be a surprising amount of agreement on those points across the political spectrum in the uk.

I'm making those assumptions, but I've really no wish to oversimplify a very complex picture. And I am aware that all these questions look very different and will be experienced very differently depending on many factors such as your income, your skin colour, gender identity and where you live globally. Surely there's a structural racism in how global politics plays out in relation to climate breakdown. The wealthy countries have historically done most to bring about this situation, but are on the whole not taking responsibility for that, whilst it's the poorer people in the world, often people of colour, who are already on the sharp end of climate and biodiversity breakdown in all kinds of ways, and are very likely to be even more so in the future. And that's without going into how refugees and asylum seekers are already being treated in this unfolding situation.

I admit upfront that I have an agenda. In this talk I'm encouraging us to respond as actively as we can to the ecological and systemic emergency we face, particularly along the lines of speaking out, protesting, and even nonviolent direct action — by which I mean disruptive and possibly illegal actions intended to make an ethical point, stimulate dialogue and promote change). I'm recommending these kinds of activities particularly with a view to promoting system change. By system change I'm meaning a whole lot of things, including economic systems and laws. I'll be giving just a few reasons why I think ambitious system change is needed, and why I think it wouldn't be a good idea to leave this to the current political and business establishment. I'll also be celebrating the fact that this speaking out and responding actively in itself is a broad spectrum. It's not just about gluing yourself to things and getting arrested, wonderful though those things might be. There are many different ways to push for system change or support it — including things that might not be so obvious like the arts, supporting people's emotional

wellbeing who might be on the edge of burnout, things like trying to make trashing the natural world an internationally-recognised crime and many more things.

And when I say I'm encouraging us to respond as actively as we can, that is what I mean. I'm not encouraging us to try to do what we can't. The more difficult a situation is, the more we need to be kind to ourselves, look after ourselves, come from positivity and kindness as much as possible. I'm recommending that we try to be the change we wish to see in the world, both in how we relate to ourselves and to each other. And by 'each other' I mean people we feel affinity with, feel comfortable with, but also people we perceive to be 'other' or different to ourselves, in any way at all. And long-term emotional sustainability is very much part of all that.

Also I'm very happy to acknowledge and celebrate all the excellent things many people have been doing and are doing that aren't activism (as usually defined) or nonviolent direct action. Any efforts to live ethically, including low carbon living, including any attempts to alleviate suffering and promote a compassionate society. These are all good and much-needed in themselves, and influence the world in positive ways. They are themselves the change that needs to happen.

But having said all that, we're still in an emergency. If the house is on fire right here and now, it wouldn't really be appropriate to respond to that situation solely by teaching mindfulness meditation and pure Buddhist teachings — precious though those things are. Even though lack of mindfulness and spiritual insight might indeed have been what started the fire, as it were. So I'm trying to think like a fireman: using the word emergency, but I'm not advocating horrified anxiety. In fact, I'm advocating cool assessment and strategic thinking. Now, I'm guessing that many agree that we are in a very serious situation, but I think many people are really not sure about nonviolent direct action or any form of Buddhist activism as responses to it. So in this talk I'll be going into the whole question of means and ends. I'll be exploring how activism can achieve practical real-world goals, and also can be really effective spiritual practice. Along the way I'll also be suggesting that a solely gradualist vision of how Buddhism can influence society is not appropriate to the situation we are in — and that engaging with Buddhist activism could be a way for us to develop a new vision. We could evolve as individuals and as a spiritual community, and at the same time we could promote and influence the evolution of a new global society.

And this talk will have a happy ending! Just in case you were wondering. The future looks extremely challenging, but we really don't know how things will turn out. Important to be clear about that not-knowing, because it draws attention to the agency that we do in fact have. We're in a time of great dangers, but also great opportunities. The pressure of these times will be a crucible for spiritual practice, and I believe evolution — even that the human species itself could evolve spiritually — is possible. And however things turn out, there is always the possibility of deepening our insight, and our heartfelt connection to our ideals of love and wisdom.

So having reassured you that we're travelling towards a happy ending, let's start with what I suspect is on many people's minds (certainly on mine) — with tactics and strategy, with the question of means and ends, especially around nonviolent direct action. Let's start with a concrete example. I've been supporting various Extinction Rebellion events over the last year. (I'll abbreviate extinction rebellion to XR). I won't say a lot about XR since I'm sure you already know what it is. In brief, XR is a global movement which is very committed to non-violence and non-harm. In the UK it has three demands it's making of the UK government, essentially for ambitious action on climate breakdown, biodiversity loss and climate justice. [to tell the truth by declaring a climate and ecological emergency, to act now to reduce biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2025, and to create and be led by a Citizens Assembly on climate and ecological justice.] But XR isn't just a very specific activist movement. It's also a great idea. Its great idea is to face the truth of the situation, which XR suggests is an emergency presenting us with a choice: rebel against business as usual, or go along with our extinction as a species. A stark formulation which I think has a lot of truth in it. More about that later. Back to the whole question of nonviolent direct action — is it justified, does it work and so on. So let's imagine that it's November last year and we're in the City of London, right by the Tower of London, where in the past various enemies of the State have been decapitated. And we're taking part in a rebellion against the Government. It's rush hour, on a weekday morning, and we're standing behind a banner, with about 20 people, blocking 2 lanes of traffic. I'm definitely somewhat nervous. I've never done anything this obstructive and illegal before. We block for what feels like a long 7 minutes, before letting the traffic pass for a while. We've been doing this for several hours, and we can see from the internet that it's causing gridlock for miles around. Some motorbike dispatch riders are furious, and get right up to us revving their powerful bikes as loudly as possible, blowing exhaust fumes in our faces. People known as de-escalators go down the lines of traffic, letting drivers know the block will only be for a few minutes, explaining what the action is about and apologising for the delay as appropriate, offering leaflets and cake if appropriate.

As newly-released traffic sweeps by us, we hear shouted comments and really can't tell if they are in favour of what we're doing or against, so we respond as if they are friendly — some are, many probably aren't. I get talking to a policeman in a silver bib. He appears surprisingly sympathetic to our aims, but questions whether what we are doing will really as he puts it 'move hearts and minds' for rather than against our cause. He suggests we'd be better off targeting MPs going into the Houses of Parliament. I suggest that real power is with big business, as in the City of London which is where we are — but can't help feeling he may have a point, especially about the hearts and minds. A passer-by is obviously interested in our banners, and we get talking. Once she understands what we're about she is very supportive and thanks me, saying that as a mother she is seriously concerned about the future of her child.

What I've described here is just one instance of a particular tactic called 'swarming roadblock'. It can be done in less disruptive ways, and there is another more obviously-positive side to this kind of disruption — particularly the spaces it can open up, both literally and culturally. I'm thinking especially of XR's four big roadblocks in London in April which established 10-day festivals on inner city streets reclaimed from polluting traffic: many people including myself found them extraordinary outpourings of idealism and creativity. A re-visioning of city space. But those roadblocks caused disruption too, much more than the November swarmings did. OK, so what is the point of infuriating dispatch riders and good people going to work? Well, in itself it's not a great thing to do, and I certainly don't like getting in people's way. But business as usual quite literally does need to be disrupted. If unchecked it will kill the planet, and ourselves as a species. We urgently need to get the whole of society — the individuals being disrupted, the media reporting on these actions, and the government and business leaders responding to public opinion and the threat of economic disruption — we need to get all parts of society to really think about this crisis and take it seriously. We need to shift the whole frame of what is actually talked about and taken seriously in the media, in politics, by most people. History shows that forms of nonviolent direct action were essential to many movements for positive social change: such as the campaigns of nonviolent civil disobedience led by Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Disruption causes anger and can piss people off, but it can also get issues up the agenda and lead to real dialogue.

Those XR actions in London this April caused lots of disruption and anger, but I believe they worked. I was amazed actually, they were very successful in getting these issues taken much more seriously.

In case you're not convinced, here's a story to illustrate this point about disruption, that sometimes it might be necessary. Imagine you're in a big high-tech high-security office building at the weekend. You've just discovered a fire and it's spreading. Fire extinguishers are not putting it out. You've phoned 999 but no fire engine has turned up yet. For some reason the electronically-controlled doors have jammed shut and the security staff can't get them open. There's a management meeting going on, and you think they might have the codes and authorisations to get the doors open. You burst into the meeting and politely explain what's happening. They listen, and make a few calls. But the fact is, it's a very big building, the fire isn't anywhere near the managers meeting, and they are sure the fire engines will be here soon, so they carry on with their important meeting. You go to check out the doors — still not open, a lot of people trying to get out. The glass in the doors and windows is bulletproof, so people are trying but not succeeding in breaking it. So you decide to go back to the management meeting, and this time you disrupt it. You raise your voice, you tell them they need to stop the meeting and focus on the doors. And they're annoyed with you.

For me this story says something true about how the business leaders and politicians with real control over the global economy have been responding to the threats of climate breakdown and the collapse of the Earth's living systems over the last thirty years or so. They've done almost

nothing — so it's just not wise to leave it to them to act, because they haven't been doing for so long.

Is business as usual really as bad as I'm saying? Is system change really so important? Well, if we take a few steps back, surely there is a certain degree of insanity to how we are as a species living, and what we are collectively doing to the life support systems of our planet. As far as I know there isn't a single country, or global corporation, that isn't doing its best to maintain economic growth. But endless economic growth is not possible on a planet with finite resources. Because economic growth very much involves physically extracting from and affecting the natural world. There is such a thing as greener growth, but economic growth can't realistically be decoupled from trashing the planet. The economist Kate Raworth put it like this: the natural world equivalent of endless growth is cancer. To limit the damage from climate and biodiversity breakdown, to keep our global economy within its ecological constraints, we need a big energy descent — we need big reductions in carbon and other emissions, big reductions in resource use, big changes in how we live and do things. We need economic de-growth, or to see growth in very different terms.

I really don't wish to put all the responsibility for change onto politicians and business leaders. I don't wish to polarise, or demonise, a whole class of people, let alone turn them into parent-figures. And I'm guessing most if not all of us here have benefited greatly from living in one of the wealthiest countries on Earth, we've benefited from this extractivist system which has been so bad for life on Earth. We're all part of this situation, and we need to take responsibility as far as we can for the choices we make in terms of lifestyle, personal carbon footprint and so on.

But there's really only so much that we can do in terms of personal lifestyle choices, how we shop and so on (important though those things are). There are hugely important systems (such as global corporations and global trade agreements) affecting the Earth's living systems that we have little or no influence over. These systems, including the political process, and the media which does so much to establish what is seen as reasonable debate, are themselves dominated by big business, and big business has so far shown very little interest in facing up to these issues.

Yes, we should do our bit as individuals, we should pay our taxes and try to be responsible members of society, even global society. But power and influence over these matters, which is strongly connected to economic power, is not distributed equally between human beings. Here are two facts to illustrate this. According to Oxfam this year, the world's 26 richest billionaires own as many assets as the 3.8 billion people who make up the poorest half of the planet's population. Personally I found that quite hard to take in, so I'll say it again in different words: there are 26 people who own as much as 3.8 billion people. You could fit those 26 people into one coach. Inequality (the gap between rich and poor) is growing globally each year and has been for a long time — it has been well-researched as being bad for individual societies in all

kinds of ways, and the economic system that creates such inequality is bad for the planet. As a class of people, the super-rich does include some philanthropists, but they are in a minority. On the whole, the super-rich have huge influence over the media, politics and business — and on the whole they use their influence to protect and increase their wealth. The Earth's living systems do not appear to be on their minds. And there is corruption in this system — tax evasion globally isn't just colossal, it's almost unimaginably huge. In 2012 the Tax Justice Network conservatively estimated that there were between £16-25 trillion worth of assets sitting offshore, largely untaxed. In case like me you're not completely familiar with exactly what a trillion is: a trillion is a million million. I think it's important to try to appreciate just how big these figures are. So let's take a break for a minute: here's a drug-free, mind-expanding experience, a legal high: which is to try to imagine a trillion. So let's do this in terms of numbers of people. If you want to, close your eyes and imagine what one thousand people looks like, then ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a thousand thousand. So you've reached a million people. Just to help us out, a million people standing close together would completely fill a square kilometre. Here's the really trippy bit: with that million people in a square kilometre firmly in your mind's eye, imagine that million, a million times. How was that for you? So my point is: we're all part of this, we all need to take responsibility. But it's not a level playing field. Some people have vastly more economic power, and therefore influence, than others. Part of taking responsibility is skilfully challenging what needs to be challenged — whether in ourselves, or in others or in other sections of society.

Some people would say that — tax evasion and so on — all this is just reality, it's how the world works, it's just human nature, it's always been like this. It's not perfect but it's the best we can do, the best we've come up with. So am I just being naively idealistic, to think that things could be better, is a better world really possible? Yes, very much so, because it already exists. There are many real-world examples of systems of human relations informed by compassion and ethics, meaning people being decent to each other — at very small scale, between individuals, within households, within teams, but also at national and even international levels. I'm not meaning perfection, just systems of human relations in which ethics are taken seriously. It's not rocket science. The world is made by human beings, and it all comes down to the stories we tell each other, and the stories we collectively allow to become dominant. We know how to decarbonise our societies and our lifestyles. We know in painful detail just how we are trashing the natural world, and just how we could relate to it in much better ways. A green economics already exists, which crucially depends on valuing us human beings for our own sake rather than as consumers of increasing amounts of stuff we don't need or even really want. Are there dangers and difficulties involved in trying to radically transform our economy and how we live locally and globally? Yes there are, but I think we're faced by a choice: between the risk of radical change on the one hand, and the suicidal option of business as usual on the other.

Now you might be thinking that all this sounds suspiciously political if not left-wing, and what has Buddhism got to do with politics. Interesting question what is politics and what is ethics. Well,

personally I believe that everything I've just said comprises ethical concerns about our shared future which transcend party politics. Personally I don't see how Buddhism could not be in favour of a compassionate society, and in favour of working against climate and biodiversity breakdown, given their genocidal implications. Maybe, whether you identify as a Buddhist or not, people have different political temperaments. Maybe there is a conservative temperament, a left-wing temperament, a middle-way temperament — maybe we all have tendencies to prefer certain kinds of worldviews, to prefer certain kinds of solutions to problems. Maybe there's even a temperament which sees politics itself a bit too much in terms of people. As in the politics of personality: 'we can trust him/her with the economy'. Sure, it's important to remember that politicians and chief executives are probably decent human beings who (hopefully) love their children. But, I'm sure I don't need to give examples, history shows that nice people can go along with and tacitly support all kinds of terrible systems with terrible outcomes. A good person or personable politician doesn't justify a bad policy, or system. Maybe the images of Greta Thunberg, and children going on strike from school desperately trying to get the climate crisis onto the political agenda — are focussing our minds and bringing the whole of society to our collective senses on these issues. To state the obvious: climate breakdown and devastation of the natural world threaten all of us, but threaten the lives of the next generation even more. Whatever our temperamental or political preferences, whatever kind of Buddhist or non-Buddhist we are, surely all sections of society need to come together to work on this.

So, to summarise. I've been recommending that we don't leave it to the establishment, the politicians and business leaders, to sort this out. I've been giving just a few reasons why we need ambitious system change, reasons for thinking a better world is possible, and why I think we need to speak out and raise our voices, disrupt business as usual, even with nonviolent direct action. You might be agreeing with me on that to some extent, and perhaps that's an easy thing to say: 'we need to work together on these issues'. But what does the Buddhist perspective have to say, what can we do about all this from a specifically Buddhist point of view? Sangharakshita in his lecture 'Evolution or extinction: a Buddhist view of world problems' suggested that by transforming ourselves, by trying to become true individuals, and helping others change, we could eventually transform the world — and even promote the higher evolution of humankind. He used the image of earthworms. By devoting ourselves to our spiritual practice we would be like earthworms, burrowing underneath the structures of society and undermining the bad ones, transforming society from the bottom up. That's at the heart of his vision of the New Society. Essentially, the world will be influenced positively from the bottom up, by creating more Buddhists, by changing one heart and mind at a time, as it were, very thorough and well-rooted, grassroots change. Transforming self and world are ultimately inseparable, can't do one without the other, they need each other in a very earthy, soul-making spiritual practice kind of sense.

I love this earthworms image, or gradualist model, of how Buddhist teachings and practice can

transform society. But I think it needs tweaking, for at least three reasons. First is quite practical, that Sangharakshita's vision of a new society in its more practical aspect was partly a product of its time (ie from the 70s or so). It involved the hope that many Buddhists would actually live together physically in spiritual communities and work together, form team based right livelihood businesses, and these institutions would form an alternative society which would influence wider society — which has clearly not happened on the scale envisaged in the 80s or 90s. So if that's not so much how Buddhism is going to transform society, what's going to replace that model? It's good and important have Buddhist centres, to teach Buddhism and meditation, I'm not against it at all, but is that really enough, especially given the situation we are in today?

But the other two reasons for tweaking Sangharakshita's vision of a new society are, I think, more important. The earthworms image very much suggests change from the bottom up. Which is great, but it can to some extent play into the atomisation of society we've seen over the last 30 years or more. As in 'there's no such thing as society' (we don't have responsibilities to each other as human beings), promotion of greed and looking after number one as acceptable and even praiseworthy motivations, the growth of business-based responses to social issues, the decline of community in many ways. Without us meaning to, getting on with our own practice can fit in with this atomisation of society, we can end up over-emphasising our own individual life, our personal mental states and this can lead to a sense of being withdrawn from mainstream society. The earthworms in Sangharakshita's image are, quite literally, in another world. They're not part of the building, they're undermining it. There is a real danger (not just with Buddhism but with any spiritual community) of feeling separate from or better than 'the world', and of an over-focus on 'my spiritual practice', particularly as in 'my mental states'. The philosopher Slavoj Zizek really put his finger on this back in 2001:

"Western Buddhism enables you to fully participate in the frantic pace of the capitalist game whilst sustaining the illusion that you're not really in it, that you're well aware of how worthless this spectacle is, and that what really matters to you is the peace of the inner self, to which you can always withdraw."

Here we're in the area of what's sometimes called 'McMindfulness', the corporate takeover of some aspects of mindfulness techniques to make us better workers in the corporate machine. I appreciate that that's not the whole story about mindfulness, certainly not the whole story of engagement with society by Buddhists — but I do think a McMindful disengagement from society is a real danger for us. And — I do also appreciate that the earthworms is a complex image with a range of connotations. The earthworms may be in a way separate from society and in their own separate world, but they also have their own authenticity, usefulness and indeed power. Earthworms are a necessary element of healthy soil, they are actually fundamental to much of life itself. And they really could bring down the building, after all. (Please don't ask me about the science on earthworms and buildings).

But I think that is the main (not the only) strategy for how Engaged Buddhist practice could affect the whole of society (ie bottom up). And I think this is why working for systemic change, meaning things like getting laws changed, is sometimes viewed in Buddhist circles as a well-intentioned but mis-directed use of energy. The argument goes: what is the point of changing a law ('top-down' system change) if people's hearts and minds haven't changed? The story of Doctor Ambedkar (the great Indian social reformer) is sometimes told in such a way as to illustrate this point. So, in this very particular way of seeing his story, it goes a bit like this: Dr Ambedkar rose from poverty and untouchability, became a great campaigner, drafted the Indian Constitution in 1949. All of which was great, but the Indian Constitution didn't end the caste system, because hearts and minds hadn't changed. Towards the end of his life Ambedkar thought again about his strategy and tactics, and realised that the way to most successfully bring about social change for the ex-untouchables or Dalits would be through practising Buddhism. So he initiated the mass conversions. Putting it another way — he converted from relatively ineffective top-down campaigning to the earthworms model.

But I'm sure no-one would suggest that Ambedkar was wasting his time drafting the Indian Constitution, putting in place something through which the caste system could be challenged? Does anyone think that nowadays we don't need much better regulation of big business to protect the natural world? When in 2017 (according to the International Monetary Fund) the whole world spent £4.07 trillion on subsidies for fossil fuels corporations? (Imagine one million, a million times). When fossil fuel corporations are already immensely profitable, and really need to stop existing asap, from the point of view of the Earth's living systems. Yes, hearts and minds are important, but systems are hugely important and need to change too.

My third reason for suggesting we tweak Sangharakshita's vision of how Buddhism could transform society is quite simply the situation we are in. We are in an emergency, there is an objective need for us to influence national and international policy strongly and quickly. Which, of course, is exactly what Sangharakshita urged his followers to do in relation to the existential threat of nuclear war (in the original version of his 1984 lecture Buddhism, world peace and nuclear war).

The situation isn't hopeless, I think it's important to hold onto that: pushing for system change can work. Just one example of that: when I was young, public spaces such as pubs and clubs were full of tobacco smoke (I'd come back from a club with my clothes reeking of tobacco smoke despite me not smoking) — which has completely changed. Corporations and vested interests can be successfully challenged, whole populations can change their habits and even their addictions. The fossil fuel corporations, for example, are powerful, but they are being powerfully challenged by many groups, including the growing divestment movement (getting institutions to take their money away from fossil fuel corporations). There are many straws in the wind, such as Norway's recent decision not to drill for oil in the Arctic. Academic research on how social change happens by Erica Chenoweth and Maria J Stephan suggests that to

precipitate major social change the sustained participation of just 3.5% of the population is needed. Which isn't to say that disruption leading to system change is likely to be popular. Most Americans apparently did not approve of the tactics of the civil rights movement, at the time. I think we can forget how much resistance was faced by causes we now see as unquestionable.

And I believe that XR's combination of disruption and engagement, in the UK at least, in April this year strongly contributed to a substantial shifting of what is taken seriously, what's seen as reasonable, in relation to climate and biodiversity breakdown. There were certainly other factors, especially perhaps Greta Thunberg's schools climate strikes, and David Attenborough's BBC documentary on climate change. But I suspect XR was crucial. Climate breakdown got coverage right through UK media like it has never had, the UK parliament and many county councils have declared that there is a climate emergency — these issues are on the political agenda like never before.

So activism can achieve real change. But speaking out can also be a part of spiritual practice. It can lead to crucial situations, in the pressure of which we might find new parts of ourselves, or change and grow. Here's a small example of that from my own experience. I was once helping out with the theatrical campaigning group BP or not BP? in the British Museum in London, protesting at the Museum's acceptance of BP's sponsorship of an Aboriginal artefacts exhibition. There were many reasons to oppose this corporate sponsorship, by which BP becomes seen as a corporate good guy through being associated with a much-loved public institution. There was BP's business plan (in which majorly contributing to climate breakdown is just an acceptable side-effect of making money), its catastrophic and criminal safety record, its well-documented collusion in mistreatment of indigenous peoples around the world. In addition to all that, the Aboriginal elders hadn't given permission to the Museum for these artefacts to be displayed.

So we smuggled lots of things into the British museum, and put on an unauthorised theatrical performance in the museum itself, complete with oil rig, an oil worker in a Hazchem suit, a colonial explorer complete with pith helmet, assorted indigenous fauna being killed by an oil spill including myself, a climate scientist in lab coat, and a museum director being smothered in oil and dollars. Apart from coverage in The Guardian newspaper, the performance was seen by thousands of people on the day and via social media. As part of the performance, I had volunteered to read out a short statement by one of the aboriginal elders. This didn't come naturally to me — in some ways I'm a rather quiet and introverted person and the main atrium of the British Museum on a Saturday afternoon is a big marble space, very busy and noisy, your voice seems to stop here. But I did my best, and unexpectedly found my heart breaking open. Trying to really project my voice somehow forced me to become directly aware of the place in me that cares deeply. I already knew that I cared. But I didn't know just how much I needed to speak out, to really assert that I didn't agree with what was happening. I had spoken out before in other contexts — but in that very public place, I found something very important to me.

And speaking out is just one form of activism as spiritual practice. Meditating in public can be a very powerful but nonviolent way of bearing witness to a particular issue, or even asserting a point of view. Nonviolent direct action often throws up situations where skilful listening and communication as very real spiritual practice can be very helpful. There's a whole spectrum of things we can do as spiritual practice to support system change, and I am myself interested in how specifically Buddhist activism could develop further into new forms.

Talking of spectrums, it may be worth considering to what extent there is or isn't a clear distinction between what I've been labelling 'gradualist' ways of influencing the world, and 'activist' ways. They do overlap. Perhaps anyone who works for a better world, in any way, really is an 'activist' — because they are actually resisting some very powerful systemic forces. As I said before, I do love Sangharakshita's vision of us as earthworms burrowing usefully and subversively away. But I would suggest that these days it would be good to be, as far as we can, a more outspoken kind of earthworm.

XR has, I feel, a very wise emphasis on what it calls a non-utilitarian attitude. We are doing our best to get results, but we don't measure the worth of what we are doing by how successful we are. We're taking a stand, because we think taking a stand is the right thing to do — whatever the outcome is or isn't. Strikes me as quite a Buddhist attitude (of skilful non-attachment) — but we can speak out and take a stand in an even more Buddhist way, if we want to. We can do that by digging deep into our ideals, into our Buddhist faith, by which I mean our heartfelt response to our ideals of wisdom and love.

Near the start of this talk I told a story about some nonviolent direct action in the City of London. I want to end with another story from the City of London — Ebenezer Scrooge on Xmas day morning (from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*). Because Scrooge is a wonderful example of disruption leading to transformation. Scrooge is a very wealthy old man, and a miser, a harsh person, a harsh employer but a successful City of London businessman. On Christmas Eve Scrooge is visited by four ghosts. The ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley, and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future, meaning Scrooge's personal Xmas past, present and future. Important to note that they are definitely unwelcome visitors. The ghosts don't ask permission, they walk through doors, they just turn up inside Scrooge's apartment. Scrooge not only doesn't invite them in, in fact he resists them, to begin with. Between them these ghosts burst into Scrooge's world, and effectively confront him with the whole of his life in the context of the Big Picture. With these ghosts, Scrooge revisits, in fact re-experiences key times in his life from childhood onwards, and through this process he comes to see very clearly what he has become, and (plot spoiler alert) exactly where his life is going to go if he doesn't change his ways. He sees that if he carries on with business as usual his life will end in a miserable lonely death. He sees the whole of his life, in the context of the existential situation (that life ends in death) — and he has what is in a way a devastating realisation.

He realises that what really matters in life is love (in the widest and deepest sense), not money. He's an old man, and in a way this profound realisation means that he's completely wasted almost his entire life (being a complete miser). But he's not depressed — he's ecstatic, he's reborn, he's had a spiritual rebirth. On Xmas morning, he's seeing his whole life, past present and future, with a great deal of love and wisdom. He's seeing that, having learned from the past, we don't have to hang onto it and confabulate endless regrets, or worries about the future. He's seen that loving ourselves and all beings is the most important thing we can do, and that is now the reality he is living from. Dickens writes it wonderfully, of course, makes it very real.

Scrooge's energy is outward-moving, grounded and decisive. He straightaway orders a huge goose for his poor clerk Bob Cratchit's family, he walks the streets smiling at people, goes to church, makes a huge charitable donation, ends up at his nephew's to start repairing that relationship. He is completely embodying in a very earthed way, heart and soul, love for all beings.

Of course, Scrooge's story is not completely realistic — he's had a lot of supernatural help. And I'm aware that I'm pointing to quite a lofty goal here, of profound spiritual transformation leading to love for all beings. But I do think we are in something like Scrooge's crisis: through the climate crisis and related crises we're being faced by the big realities of our lives, by our own existential situation, by the big questions — how are we going to respond, who are we, what do we want to do with our lives, even how would we like to be remembered etc. There is an aspect of deep time, how we think future generations might see us.

And I believe Scrooge's story does point to some deep truths about human beings, which is why it has resonated with so many people ever since it was published in 1843. Scrooge is a powerful wealthy man, in reality he's part of a ruling elite. But, prior to Xmas Eve, he's very much a prisoner of his ego, and of his personal demons and shadows. He needs to break out, but don't we all? Aren't we all prisoners of our own stuff, to some extent, isn't that part of the human condition? Maybe we feel some solidarity with Scrooge. But Scrooge's story also draws on a very important reality and potential that is available to us. Meaning the reality of change. Everyone can change — even a City business person, even us. Everyone can affect the world positively. Sometimes it needs some skilful disruption and change to make that happen. And that's a potential we can tap into. We can do that, we can be more like Scrooge on Xmas morning, we can be more permeated by love for all beings, which I'd call a state of faith in the Buddhist sense: of being inspired by our ideals of wisdom and love. Which, as far as we can do it, is perhaps the best way to live — and perhaps the best way to face this situation that we're in.

