

Year One



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1.1

Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels



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Introduction

The main aim of this course is to help people to improve their lives and mental states, rather than to give information about Buddhism for intellectual interest. But to practice the Dharma we need to know the Dharma, and Buddhist ideas have a transformative effect in their own right, by changing the way we see the world, and therefore the way we feel and act.

So this course will have a large element of reading texts, reflecting on texts, and talking about texts. But it is important that we do not approach this with our usual attitudes to what we call ‘study’, which can bring in a sense of competitiveness or inferiority, or engage just our critical, rational intellect, rather than our whole being.

The following text, based on a talk by Padmavajra, offers a more creative way of relating to what we sometimes call ‘study’ – seeing it as ‘talking the Dharma’, an essential and time-honoured spiritual practice that gives inspiration, develops wisdom, creates spiritual community, and gives us a context in which we can work on our habitual ways of being.

Talking the Dharma

Based on the talk Talking the Dharma, Padmavajra, with extra material.

For the early Buddhists ‘talking the Dharma’ – Dharma-kathā – was an important practice. Dharma-kathā means talking about the Dharma, conversing on the basis of the Dharma, relating through the Dharma. It means using the ideas, the ideals, the formulations, and the symbols of the Dharma as the medium for communication.

In the *Meghiya Sutta*, the Buddha describes Dharma-kathā as one of the five things – along with meditation - that, ‘when the Heart’s Release is immature, conduce to its maturity.’ Talking the Dharma is as important as meditation. It is not an optional extra.

At this point someone will usually object that experiencing the truth in Buddhism is supposed to be about getting beyond words and concepts. But ‘invoking the wordless’ prematurely will not liberate us on its own. Before we ‘invoke the wordless’ we need to free ourselves from the tangle of imprisoning concepts and world-views we have already taken on without knowing it. We gradually replace these unconscious views with ideas we have consciously chosen, which are liberating and help us live a spiritually vital life. Only when we have done this can we go beyond concepts altogether. If we ‘invoke the wordless’ too early, before we have gone through this process, we will simply remain imprisoned in the net of unconscious views we have picked up from our family, friends, education, society and so on. To quote *The Awakening*

of Faith in the Mahayana, 'We use words to get free from words, until we reach the pure wordless Essence'.

Exposure to the Dharma is transformative

When we study a text that originates from the mind of someone more spiritually developed than ourselves we enter their mind - we enter a higher world. In a study group we can spend some time with our spiritual friends living in this higher world, helping each other to experience it as fully as possible. This exposure to a higher world is a transformative experience. It can put us in higher states as surely as any meditation practice. It can even lead us directly to Insight. In the Pali Canon¹ there are more cases of people breaking through to a new level as the result of exposure to the Dharma than as the result of meditation! (Later examples include Hui Neng and Sangharakshita, both of whom experienced Insight as a result of exposure to the *Diamond Sūtra*).

To benefit from this transformative effect of the Dharma we need to approach it in the right way. We need to remember that we are entering another higher world, and to be open to the atmosphere and magic, rather than simply focusing on the concepts.

We also need to approach with an attitude of respect, acknowledging that the text originates from a being who is more developed than ourselves. If we dislike aspects of what is being said we need to be open to the possibility that our reactions may say more about us than they do about Reality. This doesn't mean we must agree uncritically, but we need to keep an open mind, and be willing to try out unfamiliar ways of looking at the world. To approach a text in this way is an insight practice in its own right. Often our views are more connected with conditioning than with in-depth reflection. If we don't like an idea it can be very helpful to ask ourselves why this is. If we are honest the real answer may be "because I think of myself as such and such a sort of person", "because all my education emphasised a different view", "because everyone else in the circles I move in thinks differently", or "because if I really took this on I would have to change in ways I am not yet ready to do." Becoming honest with ourselves in this way is a step to freeing ourselves from our fixed self view, an important aspect of Insight.

Dharma study gives inspiration

When we immerse ourselves in a Dharma text we enter the world of a more developed mind. We enter a higher world, and visiting a higher world is inspiring, if also challenging! We can make study more inspiring for ourselves and others by preparing a few points we want to bring out in the group. These could be points from the text we find particularly inspiring or eye-opening, things from our experience that illustrate what is being talked about, or ways the text could help us practice. Thinking of these before the meeting is an act of generosity towards the group, and if everyone prepares in this way the study will be lively and inspiring.

Dharma study is the way we develop wisdom

Traditionally there are three steps to developing Wisdom:

- Śruta-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from hearing and learning.
- Cinta-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from thinking and reflecting.
- Bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā, Wisdom which comes from meditative development.

¹ The Pali Canon is the collected record of the Buddha's discourses and the rules of monastic life recorded in the Pali language, which forms the basis for the teachings of the Theravada School of South-east Asia.

The last of these is ‘real’ Wisdom, but for just about all normal beings the others are essential steps, without which the last wisdom never happens.

Śruta-mayī-prajñā

We need to hear and learn the basic teachings. As practising Buddhists we need to know the basic formulations off by heart – the precepts, the hindrances, the levels of Going for Refuge, the levels of wisdom, and so on. When we know these things off by heart they become a part of our thinking, and part of the way we live in the world. This is the most basic function of study.

To develop this level of wisdom we need first of all to be clear about what the study text is saying, independent of our reactions to it. To do this we will normally need to make notes, simplifying down to the main points and the main Dharmic formulations. This will allow us to go into the study group confident that we know the important points, and able to give a summary for the rest of the group if asked.

Some people who have had an unfortunate experience of formal education have difficulty with this process. This is an area where members of the Sangha can help each other. If the process of reading and note-taking is difficult, it is very helpful to go through the text with someone else, picking out the main points, as a way of overcoming lack of confidence or experience in this area.

Cintā-mayī-prajñā

This level of wisdom arises from thinking and reflecting. This includes reflecting on the Dharma on our own, but discussing a text with other Buddhists is also an effective way of developing this level of wisdom - for most people it is an essential part of the process. We get the benefit of many different temperaments, many different life-experiences, many different imaginations, and so we see what is being talked about from many different angles. It can also be easier to maintain a high level of interest and energy in a discussion than when reflecting on one’s own. We can all contribute to this process of exploration by coming armed with some main points we want to emphasise, as suggested earlier.

Bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā

Sometimes a Dharma study group will seem to take off into magical territory – a joint exploration of the Truth, where ego is forgotten, where we seem to be one mind with many bodies, and where we get an idea of the living, life-changing spiritual truth behind the words of the teachings. This is bordering on bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā. Usually we need the clarity and focus of meditation to develop this level of wisdom in its fullness, but when this does come about it is usually as the result of a deep experience of the previous levels: we know the Dharma at the intellectual level, we have reflected on it deeply, it has become part of our thinking, it has seeped into our bones. Then when we meditate on it, it transmutes us into another being entirely.

Dharma study helps us develop Sangha

Dharma study is an opportunity to relate to other Buddhists in a Dharmic context, which reminds us to relate on the basis of our highest selves – relating from our own highest self, to the highest self of the other. This relating to one another on the basis of what is highest within us is one definition of Sangha. An important aim of a study group is to create a mini-Sangha on this basis. Talking with others about the Dharma is often more helpful in this respect than talking about football, politics, everyday events, or our personal problems, all of which tend to bring up the old normal lower self we present in the everyday world.

Study groups are ways to work on ourselves

What usually gets in the way of developing Sangha in any group situation is our conditioned reactivity, and the fact that other people ‘push our buttons’. A Dharma study group is an excellent place to work on this, because it is safe, supportive, challenging, and constantly reminds us that our reactions are there to be transcended, not indulged. Building Sangha is an exercise in self-awareness and self-transcendence.

Study pushes buttons, and groups of people push us into habitual roles. We need to focus as much on how we are in the group – especially the effect we have on others - as on the ideas being discussed.

Possible reactions in the study situation include competitiveness, argumentativeness, shyness, withdrawal, anger at unfamiliar ideas, and so on.

Possible roles include rebel, wannabee leader, good boy or girl, devil’s advocate, superior observer, know-all, show-off, cynic, and joker.

We need to ask ourselves, what are our habitual reactions and roles in the group? We need to find ways to stay ‘in the gap’ with regard to these. And we need to look for more creative ways of being in the group that create harmony and a sense of shared inspiration. If we treat it in this way, being part of the study group becomes an exercise in mindfulness, mettā, communication, and transcending our old habitual ways of being - it becomes a powerful way of practising the Dharma in its own right.

Introduction

When we become a Mitra we assert that:

- I think of myself as a Buddhist.
- I am trying to practice the Five Precepts.
- The Triratna Buddhist Community is the main context in which I want to practice, at least for the foreseeable future.

Part 1, Year One of this course is intended to help us explore the first of these declarations, giving us a better understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist.

But as soon as we ask what it means to be a Buddhist we run into a difficulty. In traditional Buddhism there is no word equivalent to our word 'Buddhist'. For us in the West, to become an 'ist' of any sort usually means that we have accepted a set of ideas and beliefs. But Buddhism is not really an 'ism' in this sense. Buddhism is not so much a 'faith' as a path of practice. So to 'be a Buddhist' does not mean that we have signed up to a set of beliefs. It is more likely to mean that Buddhism has influenced the way we live, or that we are committed to Buddhist practices, or that we resonate with Buddhist ideas, or that we feel a link with the other Buddhists we have come across.

At the time of the Buddha the closest anyone got to saying "I am a Buddhist" was to say "I Go for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha." But when we first come across it this phrase probably means nothing to us. We need to decode it, and we need to break through the strange-sounding words to the inner experience they stand for. This is an experience you will already have had to some extent, otherwise you would not be taking part in this course. It is an experience that leads to a shift in our world-view, a shift in what we place our heart on, and a shift in how we act.

So the first part of this course aims to decode this phrase 'Going for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.' It aims to help us relate it to our own experience, partly to get a clearer idea of what it means to be a Buddhist, and more importantly to deepen and strengthen the experience it refers to.

In the following excerpt from his talks, Sangharakshita gives a brief introduction to the meaning of Going for Refuge to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In doing so he rather mischievously uses the term 'conversion'. For some people this word will have unwelcome 'religious' echoes, but we need to set these aside and focus on its real meaning - the 'turning around' that leads us to shift our priorities in life. In this text Sangharakshita talks about 'going for refuge' to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha as an intense experience that leads us to

completely re-orientate our life. You may not experience such a deep sense of commitment, but this does not mean that you are not 'going for refuge' at some level, or that you cannot be a Buddhist. The experience of going for refuge occurs at a number of different levels, and a less intense commitment is also a valid and valuable experience. But you may find it useful to hear about what 'going for refuge' to the Three Jewels can be like in its fullness, and to reflect on the revolutionary, liberating effect such a commitment would have.

The Meaning of 'Going for Refuge'

Text composed of combined extracts from lectures: Going for Refuge; Commitment and the Spiritual Community; Dimensions of Going for Refuge; and Levels of Going for Refuge, all by Sangharakshita.

'Conversion' in Buddhism

'Conversion' in the spiritual sense may popularly be thought to be the turning from heathenish ways to the light of the 'true faith', but it also has a much higher and more valuable meaning. The general meaning of the word conversion is clear enough: any dictionary will tell us that it means simply 'turning around'. And when one turns around, this involves a double movement: a movement away from something and also a movement towards something. 'Conversion' means a turning from a lower to a higher way of life, from a worldly to a spiritual life. Conversion in this sense is often spoken of as a change of heart.

One of the most notable examples of a sudden 'turning around' is the case of the robber Angulimāla, who changed in the course of a few days from a murderous thief into an emancipated being. But while some people have these instantaneous experiences, conversion can come about in a much more gradual way. There may be a 'moment of conversion', the experience may be sudden, even catastrophic, but then it dawns on you that actually your whole life has been building up to that moment over many years.

But however it comes to us, over a period of years or in a matter of seconds, the experience of conversion is of the greatest possible importance, because it marks the beginning of our spiritual life. The meaning of conversion therefore deserves our closest attention.

'Going for Refuge'

Going for Refuge is the simplest aspect of conversion in Buddhism. So what is Going for Refuge? Although the term is so widely used, it can be rather mystifying when you first come across it. What does one mean by 'Refuge'? And who or what does one 'Go for Refuge' to? The short answer is that as a practising Buddhist one Goes for Refuge to the Buddha, the enlightened teacher; to the Dharma, or his teaching of the path leading to Enlightenment; and to the Sangha, the community of those progressing along that path in the direction of Enlightenment. These three Refuges are commonly known as the Three Jewels.

The meaning of 'refuge'

To begin with, what is meant by 'refuge'? Refuge from what? The traditional explanations are quite clear on this point: the Three Jewels are a refuge from suffering. It is the existence of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha that makes it possible for us to escape from the unsatisfactoriness, the transitoriness, the conditioned-ness, the 'unreality' of the world as we experience it.

The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are called the Three Jewels because they represent the world of the highest spiritual values. The fact that those values exist gives us the possibility of development, evolution, and progress far beyond our present comparatively low

level. Considered as refuges, the Three Jewels represent the possibility of complete liberation from suffering.

It is no linguistic accident that we speak of going for refuge. You don't just accept the Three Refuges; you go for refuge. This action is a total, unqualified reorientation of your life, your existence, your striving, in the direction of the Three Jewels. When you say 'I Go for Refuge' you are not only acknowledging that the Three Jewels are the most supremely valuable things in existence; you are also acting upon that acknowledgement. You see that the Three Jewels provide a possibility of escape into a higher spiritual dimension, and so you go – you completely redirect and reorganize your life in the light of that realization.

'Going for Refuge' at the time of the Buddha

Sometimes, when reading the Buddhist scriptures, we get the impression that the Dharma is a matter of lists. But it certainly wasn't like that at the beginning. It was all fresh, all original, all creative. The Buddha would speak from the depths of his spiritual experience. He would expound the Truth. He would show the Way leading to Enlightenment, and the person to whom he was speaking would be absolutely astounded and overwhelmed. In some cases he might not be able to speak or to do more than stammer a few incoherent words. Something had been revealed to him. Something had burst upon him that was above and beyond his ordinary understanding. For an instant, at least, he had glimpsed the Truth, and the experience had staggered him. Time and again, on occasions of this sort, the scriptures tell us that the person concerned exclaimed,

Excellent, Lord, excellent! As if one should set up again that which had been overthrown, or reveal that which had been hidden, or should disclose the road to someone that was astray, or should carry a lamp into darkness, saying, "They that have eyes will see!" even so has the Truth been manifested by the Exalted One in many ways.

He or she would feel deeply affected, deeply moved, deeply stirred, and sometimes there were external manifestations of this. Their hair might stand on end, they might even shed tears, or they might be seized by a violent fit of trembling. They would have a tremendous experience, an experience of illumination. They would have a tremendous sense of freedom, of emancipation, as though a great burden had been lifted from their back, or as though they'd been just suddenly let out of prison or as though they could at last see their way. The questioner, the listener, would feel spiritually reborn, would feel like a new man or woman.

Then, out of the depth of his gratitude, such a person would fervently exclaim,

To the Buddha for refuge I go! To the Dharma for refuge I go! To the Sangha for refuge I go!

We can now see not only where the Going for Refuge had its origin, but also something of its tremendous spiritual significance. It is the heartfelt response of one's total being to the impact of the truth, the impact of Reality. One commits oneself to the truth, one surrenders to the truth, one wants to devote one's whole life to the truth.

The Going for Refuge represents our positive emotional reaction – in fact our total response – to the spiritual ideal when that ideal is revealed to our spiritual vision. Such is its appeal that we cannot but give ourselves to it. As Tennyson says, 'We needs must love the Highest when we see it.' Going for Refuge is a bit like that. You've seen the 'Highest', therefore you needs must love it, needs must give yourself to it, needs must commit yourself to it. That

commitment of yourself to the 'Highest' is the Going for Refuge. The person would commit himself, because the vision that the Buddha had shown him, the vision of truth, the vision of existence, was so great that all he could do was give himself to that vision, completely. He would want to live for that vision.

And this was how one could know who was a Buddhist, this was the criterion: a Buddhist was one who goes for refuge in that sort of way as his response to the Buddha and his teaching. A Buddhist was one who commits himself, gives himself, if you like, to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. So this was the criterion in the Buddha's day two thousand five hundred years ago, and it remains the criterion today.

Now the object of refuge is threefold. One goes for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. What then do these three things mean? We can understand in a general way this feeling of committing oneself to the 'Highest', but what does it mean to go for refuge to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha specifically?

The Buddha

The Buddha is an Enlightened human being. He is not God, nor an Avatar or messenger of God. He is a human being who, by his own efforts, has reached the summit of human perfection. He has gained the ineffable state which we designate Enlightenment, Nirvana, or Buddhahood. When we go for refuge to the Buddha, we go for Refuge to the Buddha in this sense. Not that we just admire him from a distance. Great as the gap between the Buddha and ourselves may be, that gap can be closed. We can close it by following the path, by practising the Dharma. We too can become as the Buddha. We too can become Enlightened. That is the great message of Buddhism. Each and every human being who makes the effort can become even as the Buddha became.

When, therefore, we go for refuge to the Buddha, we go for refuge to him as the living embodiment of a spiritual ideal that we can actually realise. When we go for refuge to the Buddha it is as though we say, 'That is what I want to be. That is what I want to attain. I want to be Enlightened. I want to develop the fullness of wisdom, the fullness of compassion.' Going for Refuge to the Buddha means taking the Buddha – taking Buddhahood – as our personal spiritual ideal, as something we ourselves can achieve.

The Dharma

The Dharma is the Path or Way. It is the path of what I have sometimes called the higher evolution of man, a stage of purely spiritual development above and beyond ordinary biological evolution. As a path, the Dharma exists in a number of different formulations. We speak of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, as well as the path of the Six Perfections of giving, morality, patient forbearance, vigour, higher consciousness, and wisdom – the Path of the Bodhisattva.

There are many different formulations, but the basic principle of the path is the same. The path is essentially the path of the higher evolution. It is whatever helps us to develop. The Dharma, or the path, is not to be identified with this or that particular teaching. According to the Buddha's own express declaration, the Dharma is whatever contributes to the spiritual development of the individual. When we go for refuge to the Dharma we therefore commit ourselves to whatever helps us develop spiritually – to whatever helps us to grow into Enlightenment, into Buddhahood.

This clear understanding is necessary, but not sufficient. Going for refuge to the Dharma means not just understanding the doctrines, but also the actual practice of the Dharma, through observance of Buddhist ethics, through meditation, and through the cultivation of transcendental wisdom.

The Sangha

Sangha means ‘Spiritual Community’. Firstly this is the community of all those who are spiritually more advanced than we are: the great Bodhisattvas, the Arahants, the Stream Entrants, and so on. Together they form the Āryasangha, or the Spiritual Community in the highest sense. Secondly, it is the community of all Buddhists, all those who go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha². In the case of the Āryasangha, going for refuge to the Sangha means opening ourselves to the spiritual influence of the sublime beings of whom it consists. It means learning from them, being inspired by them, reverencing them. In the case of the Sangha in the more ordinary sense – that of the community of all Buddhists – it means enjoying spiritual fellowship with one another and helping one another on the path. Sometimes you may not need a highly advanced Bodhisattva to help you. All you need is an ordinary human being who is a little more developed spiritually than you are, or even just a little bit more sensible. Only too often people are on the lookout for a great guru, but that is not what they really need, even if such a person was available. What they need is a helping hand where they are now, on the particular stage of the path which at present they occupy, and this an ordinary fellow Buddhist can generally give.

Of course the Sangha Refuge cannot really be understood in isolation from the context of the Three Jewels. Those who go for refuge to the Sangha necessarily go for refuge to the Buddha and Dharma. Before you can effectively go for refuge to the Sangha, you and all the other people who form the Sangha need to have a common spiritual ideal. It is this that draws them together.

But coming together in a kind of congregation is not enough to form a Sangha. We may all agree on doctrinal issues and even have the same meditation experiences, but this does not make us a Sangha. Sangha is a matter of communication – communication on the basis of spiritual ideals. If we find our contacts with people at work and at parties a bit meaningless, it is because we are not communicating on the basis of spiritual ideals. We could define the sort of communication that happens in a Sangha as ‘a vital mutual responsiveness on the basis of a common ideal and a shared principle’. This is communication in the context of Going for Refuge – a shared exploration of the spiritual world, between people who are in a relationship of complete honesty and harmony.

The most generally accepted mode of this communication is between spiritual teacher and disciple, but it is not limited to this. It may also take place between those who are simply friends, or kalyāṇa mitras – good friends in the spiritual sense. Going for refuge to the Sangha takes place when, on the basis of a common devotion to the Buddha and the Dharma, people explore together a spiritual dimension which neither could have explored on their own.



2 In some forms of Buddhism, most notably the Theravada school of South-east Asia, Sangha is taken to refer exclusively the monks and nuns, and excludes those who live a lay life. In Sangharakshita’s view this gives too much importance to a matter of lifestyle, and not enough to the commitment that makes a person a Buddhist. In Triratna we therefore use the word ‘Sangha’ to mean all seriously practising members of the Buddhist community, regardless of whether they live the life of a monastic, a householder, or a solitary practitioner.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What does “being a Buddhist” mean to you? Can you relate this to the commitment to Buddha, Dharma or Sangha that Sangharakshita describes?
2. What the process that led you to Buddhism sudden or gradual? What steps did it involve?
3. What do your non-Buddhist friends ‘go for refuge’ to? What do you ‘go for refuge’ to, apart from the Three Jewels?
4. Which of the Three Jewels do you relate to most strongly?
5. In what ways have you “redirected and reorganised your life” since becoming a Buddhist? Are there any ways you would like to redirect your life that you haven’t got round to yet?

Introduction

The first of the Buddhist refuges is the Buddha himself. In the next four parts of this course we will be looking at the figure of the Buddha, and exploring what it might mean to 'Go for Refuge to the Buddha' – seeking to break through the strange and maybe alien words to the experience they point to.

The Buddha's importance does not lie in who he was, it lies in what he was. 'Buddha' is not a name, it is a title, meaning something like 'he who is awake'. The Buddha's importance to Buddhists comes from the fact that he woke up - he reached the state which we call Enlightenment. The Buddha is one who woke up out of the sleep-like state in which we exist to a true experience of reality.

In the following text Sangharakshita explains something of the meaning of the term 'Enlightenment', telling us what it was that was so important about the Buddha. In the process he clears up some common misunderstandings about the nature of the Buddha and his place in Buddhism. He also perhaps gives us a clue to how 'Going for Refuge to the Buddha' can be a cure for our underlying dukkha – suffering or dissatisfaction – because this means committing ourselves to realising our own spiritual potential, which is the only way to true happiness.

The Ideal of Human Enlightenment

Text condensed from The Ideal of Human Enlightenment, by Sangharakshita.

Even people who do not know anything at all about the teachings of Buddhism will at least have seen an image of the Buddha. What does that image show? It shows a man in the prime of life, well built and handsome. He is seated cross-legged beneath a tree. His eyes are half closed, and there is a smile on his lips. The figure conveys an impression of solidity, stability, and strength. It conveys an impression of absolute calm, absolute repose. But what attracts us most of all is the face, because this conveys something which it is very difficult to put into words. As we look at it, perhaps even concentrate on it, we see that the face is alive, that it is alight, and in that light we see reflected an unfathomable knowledge, a boundless compassion, and an ineffable joy.

This, then, is the figure, the image of the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Usually it represents the historical Gautama the Buddha, the 'founder' of Buddhism, the great Indian teacher who lived approximately five hundred years before Christ. But the figure also possesses a wider significance. It represents The Ideal of Human Enlightenment.

Human Enlightenment is the central theme of Buddhism. It is what Buddhism is basically concerned with, both theoretically and practically. Indeed, it is what the Buddhist himself is

basically concerned with. Therefore in this lecture we shall be trying to understand what is meant by Enlightenment in general and, in particular, by 'Human Enlightenment'. This raises three questions:

1. What is Enlightenment, or Buddhahood?
2. How do we know that this state which we call Enlightenment is the ideal for man?
3. Where does this ideal of Enlightenment come from? Whence does it originate?

What is Enlightenment?

Buddhist tradition speaks of Enlightenment as comprising mainly three things. To begin with, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of pure, clear, even radiant awareness. Some schools go so far as to say that in this state of awareness the subject/object duality is no longer experienced. There is no 'out there', no 'in here'. That distinction, that subject/object distinction as we usually call it, is entirely transcended. There is only one continuous, pure, clear awareness, extending as it were in all directions, pure and homogeneous. It is, moreover, an awareness of things as they really are, which is, of course, not things in the sense of objects, but things as transcending the duality of subject and object. Hence this pure, clear awareness is also spoken of as an awareness of Reality, and therefore also as a state of knowledge.

This knowledge is not knowledge in the ordinary sense, not the knowledge that functions within the framework of the subject/object duality, but rather a state of direct, unmediated spiritual vision that sees all things directly, clearly, vividly, and truly. It is a spiritual vision, even a Transcendental vision, which is free from all delusion, all misconception, all wrong, crooked thinking, all vagueness, all obscurity, all mental conditioning, all prejudice. First of all, then, Enlightenment is this state of pure, clear awareness, this state of knowledge or vision.

Secondly, Enlightenment is spoken of as a state of intense, profound, overflowing love and compassion. Sometimes this love is compared to the love of a mother for her only child. This comparison occurs, for instance, in a very famous Buddhist text called the *Mettā Sutta*, the 'Discourse of Loving Kindness'. In this discourse the Buddha says,

Just as a mother protects her only son even at the cost of her own life, so should one develop a mind of all-embracing love towards all living beings.

This is the sort of feeling, the sort of attitude, that we must cultivate. You notice that the Buddha does not just talk about all human beings, but all living beings: all that is sentient. This is how the Enlightened mind feels. And that love and compassion consists in a heartfelt desire, a deep, burning desire, for their well-being, for their happiness: a desire that all beings should be set free from suffering, from all difficulties, that they should grow and develop, and that ultimately they should gain Enlightenment. Love and compassion of this kind, – infinite, overflowing, boundless, directed towards all living beings – this too is part of Enlightenment.

Thirdly, Enlightenment consists in a state, or experience, of inexhaustible mental and spiritual energy. Energy is characteristic of the state of Enlightenment. The state of Enlightenment is one of tremendous energy, of absolute spontaneity, continually bubbling forth: a state of uninterrupted creativity. The state of Enlightenment is a state of perfect, unconditioned freedom from all subjective limitations.

This, then, is how Enlightenment is usually described. But of course Enlightenment cannot really be put into words or separated into parts. What really happens is that knowledge passes into love and compassion, love and compassion into energy, energy into knowledge, and so on.

We cannot really split any one aspect off from the others. Nonetheless, we are traditionally given this ‘tabulated’ account of Enlightenment, to convey some hint of the experience, to give some little idea, or feeling, of what it is like.

If we want to have a better idea than this, then we shall have to read, perhaps, some more extended, poetic account, preferably one found in the Buddhist scriptures; or we shall have to take up the practice of meditation, and try to get at least a glimpse of the state of Enlightenment as we meditate. So when Buddhism speaks of Enlightenment, of Buddhahood or Nirvana, this is what it means: it means a state of supreme knowledge, love and compassion, and energy.

How do we know that this state of Enlightenment is the ideal for man?

Before attempting to answer this question, we shall have to distinguish between two kinds of ideal – ‘natural ideals’ and ‘artificial ideals’. A natural ideal is an ideal which takes into consideration the nature of the thing or the person for which it is an ideal. The artificial ideal, on the other hand, does not do this. The artificial ideal imposes itself from the outside, in an artificial manner.

Using this distinction, we may say that Enlightenment is not an artificial ideal. It is not something imposed on human beings from outside, something that does not belong to us or accord with our nature. Enlightenment is a natural ideal for man, or even *the* natural ideal. There is nothing artificial about it, nothing arbitrary. It is an ideal that corresponds to our nature and our needs.

We know this in two ways. I have spoken about the nature of Enlightenment, and obviously it has seemed something very rarefied, something remote from our experience. But the qualities that constitute Enlightenment are, in fact, already found in man, in germinal form. They are not completely foreign to us. They are, in a sense, natural to human beings. In every man, in every woman, there is some knowledge, some experience of Reality, however remote and far removed, some feeling of love and compassion, however limited and exclusive, and some energy, however gross and unrefined, however conditioned and unspontaneous. All these qualities are already there, to some extent.

But in the state of Enlightenment, these qualities are fully and perfectly developed, to a degree that we can hardly imagine. It is for this reason, because the qualities of knowledge, love, and energy are already present within us, in however embryonic a form, that we have a natural affinity with Enlightenment, and can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment when we encounter it. Thus even when someone speaks in terms of absolute knowledge, of the vision of Reality, or in terms of boundless, unlimited love and compassion for all living beings, it is not something completely foreign to us, it is not just so many words. We can feel something. And this is because the germ, the seed, is already there, in our own experience, and we can respond to the ideal of Enlightenment whenever and however we encounter it, even when we encounter it in comparatively weak, limited, or distorted forms.

We also know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for human beings because, in the long run, we are never really satisfied by anything else. We can have all sorts of pleasures, all sorts of achievements, but eventually we still feel within ourselves something not satisfied. This is what in Buddhism is called dukkha: unsatisfactoriness, or even suffering.

Tradition speaks of three forms of dukkha. The first is called simply, ‘the suffering which is suffering’. It is obviously suffering if we cut our finger, or when someone upsets us or

disappoints us, for instance. This is the kind of suffering that is, simply, suffering. Then there is what is called 'suffering by way of transformation'. We have something, we enjoy it, we get a great deal of pleasure from it, but by its very nature that thing cannot last. And because we have enjoyed it and become attached to it, suffering results. This is the suffering that comes about as a result of change, of time. Then there is 'the suffering of conditioned existence itself': the suffering, ultimately, of everything which is not Enlightenment. Even if we do acquire things, and even if we go on possessing them and enjoying them, there is still some corner of our heart which is not satisfied, which wants something more, something further, something greater. And this something is what we call Enlightenment.

So from this too we know that Enlightenment is the natural ideal for man, because man ultimately is not satisfied with anything less. Personifying the ideal of Enlightenment, and borrowing the theistic language of St. Augustine, we may say, 'Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee.'

Where does the ideal of Enlightenment come from?

The ideal comes from human life itself; it comes from human history. It could not come from any other source. The ideal for man, we may say, can only come from a human being. And if we look back into history we can see various people who have actually achieved Enlightenment, who have closed the gap between the real and the ideal. If we look back in history we can see individuals who are living embodiments of the ideal.

In particular, we see the figure of the young Indian patrician who, some 2500 years ago, gained Enlightenment or, as the Buddhist scriptures call it, Bodhi, which is 'knowledge', or 'awakening'. He it was who, after gaining that state of Enlightenment, inaugurated the great spiritual revolution, the great spiritual tradition, that we now call Buddhism.

Misunderstandings

At this point I would like to clear up certain misunderstandings with regard to the Buddha. At the beginning of this lecture I said that even the non-Buddhist has at least seen an image or picture of the Buddha, and that he might even be quite familiar with it. However, although he might have seen it many times, he may not have a very clear idea of what it represents; he may not know who, or what, the Buddha is.

There are, in fact, on the part of many people, some quite serious misunderstandings about him. There are in particular two major misunderstandings: firstly that the Buddha was an ordinary man, and secondly that the Buddha was God. Both of these misunderstandings are the result of thinking, consciously or unconsciously, in theistic terms, which is to say, in terms of a personal God who has created the universe, and who governs it by his providence.

For orthodox Christianity, God and man are entirely different beings. God is the creator. Man is the created. Man can never become God: such an idea would be meaningless. Orthodox Christians, therefore, when confronted by the figure of the Buddha, classify him as an ordinary man, essentially just like everyone else, even as a sinful man, albeit perhaps better than most people.

The second misunderstanding arises out of the first. You often read in books, even now, that after his death the Buddha's followers 'deified' him, or made him into a God. This is indicated, we are told, by the fact that Buddhists worship the Buddha, and of course worship is due only to God. If you worship someone or something, a Christian will inevitably think that you are treating it, or him, as God.

Now both these misunderstandings can be cleared up quite easily. All that we have to do is to free ourselves from our Christian conditioning, which affects, at least unconsciously, even those who no longer think of themselves as Christians. We have to stop trying to think of the Buddha in what are really non-Buddhist terms.

A new category

So who, or what, was the Buddha? How do Buddhists think of him? How did he think of himself? In the first place, the Buddha was a man, a human being. But he was not an ordinary man. He was an Enlightened man: a man who was the living embodiment of perfect knowledge, unbounded love and compassion, and inexhaustible energy. But he was not born an extraordinary man. He became an extraordinary man, as a result of his own human effort to make actual what was potential in himself. So Buddhism recognizes two great categories: the category of the ordinary man, and the category of the Enlightened man.

Although the gulf between these two is not unbridgeable, as is the gulf between God and man in Christianity, the distance between them is very great, and it takes a tremendous effort to traverse this gap. Many Buddhists, in fact, believe that this effort has to be maintained through a whole succession of lives, whether here on earth or in higher realms. For this reason, the Enlightened man is regarded as constituting an independent category of existence. The Enlightened man is regarded as the highest being in the universe, higher even than the gods. For this reason the Enlightened man is worshipped. He is worshipped out of gratitude for setting an example, for showing the way, for showing us what we too are capable of becoming. In other words, the Buddha is worshipped, not as God, but as teacher, as exemplar, as guide.

In this connection, Gautama the Buddha is often referred to as ‘the elder brother of the world’, or ‘elder brother of mankind’, because He has been born, spiritually, first, and we are born, spiritually, afterwards. Sometimes the Buddha is compared to the first chick to emerge from a clutch of eggs. This first-born chick starts to tap on the shells of the other eggs with his little beak, helping the other chicks to emerge. And so, we are told, the Buddha is like that first chick. He is the first to emerge from the shell of ignorance, the shell of spiritual darkness and blindness, and then he taps on our shells, he wakes us up with his Teaching, He helps us to emerge.

From all this we can see that the Buddhist conception of the Enlightened man represents a category for which we have no equivalent in Western religious tradition. He is neither God nor man in the Christian sense. He is not even man-without-God, man left on his own without God. He is something in between and above. Perhaps we can best think of Enlightened man in evolutionary terms. Man is an animal, but he is no ordinary animal. He represents a new category: an animal, but, at the same time, infinitely more than an animal. In the same way, a Buddha is a man, but he is not an ordinary man. He is an Enlightened man. He too represents a new category of existence: a human being, but, at the same time, infinitely more than a human being: an Enlightened human being, a Buddha.

Conclusion

Let us conclude, then, as we began, with the figure of Gautama the Buddha. He is seated under the Bodhi tree, just a few weeks after His great awakening. According to one of the oldest accounts, at that time He looked out over the world, over the whole of humanity with His spiritual vision, or what is called His ‘divine eye’.

And as He looked out in this way. He saw mankind as like a great bed of lotus flowers. He saw that some of the flowers were deeply immersed in the mud, while others rose half out of the water. Some were even standing completely clear of the water. In other words, He saw all human beings as being at different stages of growth. And that is how Buddhism has seen humanity ever since: as a bed of plants capable of producing shoots, as shoots capable of producing buds, as buds capable of opening into flowers, into lotus flowers, even into the thousand-petalled lotus itself.

But in order to grow, in order to develop, human beings must have something to grow into. They cannot grow unconsciously, as the plant does: they must grow consciously. In fact for human beings growth means growth in consciousness, growth in awareness. This is why man needs an ideal for himself as a human being. It must be an ideal, moreover, which is not artificial but natural, not imposed upon him from without but implicit in his own nature, in the depths of his own being: an ideal which represents, indeed, the fulfilment of his nature in the deepest possible sense. It is this ideal, the ideal of human Enlightenment, that I have tried to communicate.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What are your responses to the traditional image of the Buddha?
2. Sangharakshita describes Enlightenment as a state of clear awareness, infinite love, and boundless energy – and also as “perfect, unconditioned freedom from all subjective limitations.”
 - a. Which of these aspects of Buddhahood do you respond to most strongly?
 - b. Are there any other qualities that you think are part of the ‘natural’ ideal for human beings?
3. Sangharakshita says that, no matter what ‘worldly’ pleasures we experience, until we fulfil our spiritual potential “there is still some corner of our heart which is not satisfied, which wants something more ... something greater.”
 - a. Does this agree with your experience?
 - b. If it is true, does it throw any light on how the Buddha can be a refuge from dukkha (dissatisfaction or suffering?)
4. A Buddha, we are told, represents a new category of being: much more than human, just as human beings are much more than animals.
 - a. Can you relate to this idea?
 - b. Would you prefer to think of the Buddha as a more or less ordinary human being? Alternatively, would you prefer to think of him as a god?
5. Do you believe you can become Enlightened? How magnificent can you imagine yourself becoming?

Introduction

For Buddhists the figure of the Buddha represents first and foremost the ideal of Enlightenment, the awakened state that is the goal of the spiritual life. But the Buddha is not just a static image. He is also the centre of a story which tells us a great deal about the spiritual quest. The traditional biography of the Buddha is full of incidents that have a deep symbolic meaning. Some may be historically accurate. Others may be mythology. But this hardly matters. What is certain is that the traditional story brings a number of fundamental truths to life in a concrete and vivid way. We need to have an appreciation of the meaning of the Buddha's life story to understand what the figure of the Buddha means within the Buddhist tradition.

In the next two sections of this course we will look at the story of the Buddha's life, bringing out many of the more important symbolic episodes. In the following text Sangharakshita gives us a general overview of the Buddha's life, and brings out the significance of two episodes with a particular symbolic significance for us – the Four Sights, and the Going Forth.

Who is the Buddha?

An edited extract from Who is the Buddha?, Sangharakshita.

'One who is Awake'

The tradition which in the West we now call Buddhism sprang out of the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree 2,500 years ago. It is with the Buddha, therefore, that Buddhism begins. But the question which at once arises is, 'Who was the Buddha?' It is useful, even for those who regard themselves as Buddhists of long standing, to think about this question.

The first thing we have to make clear is that the word 'Buddha' is not a proper name but a title. It means 'one who Knows, one who Understands'. It also means 'one who is Awake' - one who has woken up, as it were, from the dream of life, because he sees the Truth, sees Reality.

The early life

This title was first applied to a man whose personal name was Siddhārtha, whose clan or family name was Gautama, and who lived in the sixth century BCE in the area which is partly in southern Nepal, partly in northern India. Fortunately we know quite a lot about his early career. We know that he came from a well-to-do, even patrician family. Tradition sometimes represents his father as being the king of the Śākya clan or tribe. But it seems more likely that he wasn't so much the king as the elected president of the clan assembly, holding office for twelve years with the title of ājā, and that it was during this period that his son Siddhārtha Gautama, who afterwards became the Buddha, was born.

Siddhārtha received what was, by the standards of those days, a very good education. He didn't go to school, of course, and it is not really clear whether he could read or write, but we know that he received an excellent training in all sorts of martial arts and exercises. From the wise old men of the clan he also learned, by word of mouth, various ancient traditions, genealogical lists, beliefs, and superstitions. He led a comfortable life, with no particular responsibilities. His father, a very affectionate, even doting, parent, married him off when he was quite young – some accounts say when he was only sixteen – and in due course a son was born.

The Four Sights

The traditional accounts make it clear that, despite his well-to-do way of life, Siddhārtha Gautama was very deeply dissatisfied. The legends speak of a sort of spiritual crisis, of a turning point, when the young patrician saw what are called the 'Four Sights'. These Four Sights crystallize in a powerful form certain fundamental teachings of Buddhism, and throw a great deal of light on the Buddha's own early spiritual development.

The legend goes that one beautiful, bright morning Siddhārtha felt like going out for a drive in his chariot, so he called his charioteer, whipped up the horses, and set out. They drove into the town and suddenly Siddhārtha saw his first Sight: he saw an old man. According to the legend he had never seen an old man before. Taking the account literally, this means that he had been shut up in his palace and hadn't taken much notice of other people, hadn't realized that there was such a thing as old age. But one can take it another way. Sometimes we see something as though for the first time. We have seen it a hundred, even a thousand times already, but one day we see it as though we had never seen it before. It was probably something like this that happened to Siddhārtha, and it gave him a shock. He said to his charioteer, 'Who on earth is that?' And the charioteer replied, 'That is an old man.' 'Why is he so frail, so bent?' 'Well, it's just that he's old.' And Siddhārtha asked, 'But how did he get like that?' 'Well, everybody gets old sooner or later. It's natural. It just happens.' 'Will it happen to me too?' And the charioteer of course had to reply, 'Yes, young as you are, this will inevitably happen to you. One day you too will be old.' These words of the charioteer struck the future Buddha like a thunderbolt, and he exclaimed, 'What is the use of this youth, what is the use of this vitality and strength, if it all ends in this!' And sick at heart he returned to his beautiful palace.

The second Sight was the sight of disease. It was as though he had never seen anyone sick before, and he realized that all human beings are subject to maladies of various kinds. He had to face the fact that, strong and healthy though he was, he might at any time be struck down by disease.

The third Sight was that of a corpse being carried to the burning ground on a stretcher. He asked the charioteer, 'What on earth is this?' The charioteer said, 'It is just a dead body', and Siddhārtha said, 'Dead? What has happened to him?' 'Well, as you can see he's stiff, he's motionless. He doesn't breathe, doesn't see, doesn't hear. He's dead.' Siddhārtha gave a gasp, and said, 'Does it happen to everybody, this death?' So the charioteer drew a long sigh and said, 'Yes, I'm afraid it does.' Thereupon Siddhārtha realized that this would happen to him too one day. The revelation struck him very forcibly, like a thunderbolt. He saw how it was. You don't want to grow old, but you can't help it. You don't want to fall sick, but you can't help that either. So you start asking yourself, 'How do I come to be here? Here I am with this urge to live, and to go on living, but I have got to die. Why? What is the meaning of it all? Why have I been made like this? Is it God who is responsible? Is it fate, or destiny? Or has it just happened? Is there any explanation at all?'

In this way Siddhārtha was brought up against these existential situations, and he started thinking about them very deeply. Then he saw a Fourth Sight, a holy man, walking along the street with his begging-bowl. He seemed so calm, so quiet, so peaceful, that the future Buddha thought, 'Maybe he knows. Maybe this is the way. Maybe I should do likewise – should cut off all ties, all worldly connections, and go forth as a homeless wanderer as this man has done. Maybe in this way I shall find an answer to the problems that are tormenting me.'

Going forth

The story goes on to relate how one night, when everything was quiet and there was a full moon in the sky, Siddhārtha bade a last farewell to his sleeping wife and child. He wasn't happy to leave them, but he had to go. He rode many miles that night, till he reached the river that marked the boundary of Śākya territory. There he left his horse, left his princely garments, cut off his long hair and his beard, and became a homeless wanderer in search of the truth.

This 'going forth' is psychologically very significant. It is not just becoming a monk. It is much more than that. It means cutting oneself off from the ties to blood and soil and kindred and leaving oneself free as an individual to work out one's own salvation, one's own spiritual destiny.

This is what Siddhārtha did. He got away from it all. He opted out. He'd had enough of worldly life and was now going to try to find out the truth, to try to see the truth for himself. The search was to last for six years.

Asceticism

In those days there were in India many people who professed to teach ways leading to the realization of truth. One of the most popular of these ways was that of self-torture. Now in this country we can't really take this sort of thing seriously. But in India such practices are very much part of the atmosphere, and even now many Indians have the strong belief that self-torture is the way to heaven, or the way even to Enlightenment.

So it was in the Buddha's day. There was a powerful movement of this sort, a movement teaching that if one wanted to gain the truth one had to subjugate, even mortify, the flesh. And that is exactly what Siddhārtha did. For six years he practised the severest austerities. He limited his food and his sleep, he didn't wash, and he went around naked. As one of these accounts says, the fame of his austerities spread 'like the sound of a great bell hung in the canopy of the sky.' No one in India, he afterwards declared, had outdone him in self-torture and self-mortification. But he also said that it had led him nowhere. He had become famous as a great ascetic and had a number of disciples with him. But when he realized that this was not the way to Enlightenment, he had the courage to give it up.

Meditation and Awakening

He started eating again, and his disciples left him in disgust. And this is also significant. He had already left his family, left his friends, left his tribe, and in the end even his disciples deserted him. He was left utterly alone, and on his own he remained. He went about from place to place and eventually, we are told, he came to a beautiful spot on the banks of a fresh running river. There he sat down in the shade of a great tree, and made the resolution, I will not rise from this spot until I am Enlightened.'

So day after day, night after night, he sat there. As he sat he controlled and concentrated his mind, purified his mind, suppressed the mental hindrances, the defilements, and on the night

of the full moon of May, just as the morning star was rising – just as he fixed his mind on that star glittering near the horizon – full Illumination, full Enlightenment, arose.

It is obviously very difficult to describe this state. We can say it is the plenitude of Wisdom. We can say it is the fullness of Compassion. We can say that it is seeing the Truth face to face. But these are only words, and they do not convey very much. So let us simply say that at that moment the light dawned, and Siddhārtha Gautama became the Buddha.

Teaching

In a sense this was the end of his quest. He had become the Buddha, the ‘one who Knows’. He had found the solution to the riddle of existence. He was Enlightened, he was Awake. But in a sense it was only the beginning of his mission. Deciding to make known to humanity the Truth he had discovered, he left what we now call Bodhgayā and walked to Sārnāth, about one hundred miles away, gathered together the disciples who had left him when he gave up his austerities, and made known to them his great discovery. He gave his first discourse, or sutta, to his former followers.

Gradually a spiritual community grew up around the Buddha. He didn’t stay permanently in any one place, but roamed all over north-eastern India. He had a long life, gaining Enlightenment at the age of thirty-five and living to be eighty. So he had forty-five years of active life, spreading his teaching. The pattern seems to have been that for nine months of the year he wandered from place to place preaching, and then for three months took shelter from the torrential monsoon rains. Whenever he came to a village he would, if it was time for his one meal of the day, get out his begging-bowl and stand silently at the door of the huts, one after another. Having collected as much food as he needed, he would retire to the mango grove which, even now, is to be found on the outskirts of every Indian village, and sit down under a tree.

When he had finished his meal the villagers would gather round and he would teach them. Sometimes brahmins would come, sometimes wealthy landowners, sometimes peasants, sometimes merchants, sometimes sweepers, sometimes prostitutes. The Buddha would teach them all. And sometimes in the big cities he would preach to kings and princes. In this way he gained a great following and became in his own day the greatest and best known of all the spiritual teachers in India. And when he died there were thousands, even tens of thousands, of his disciples to mourn his departure, both monks and lay people, men and women.

In outline, such is the traditional biography of Siddhārtha Gautama, the Indian prince who became the Buddha. But does it really answer the question, ‘Who was the Buddha?’ This question, in its deeper sense, has been asked since the very dawn of Buddhism. In fact it is a question which was put to the Buddha himself, apparently, soon after his Enlightenment.

Who are you?

Journeying along the high road, the Buddha met a man called Dona. Dona was a brahmin, and skilled in the science of bodily signs. Seeing on the Buddha’s footprints the mark of a thousand-spoked wheel he followed him until he eventually found him sitting beneath a tree. There was a radiance about his whole being. We are told it was as though a light shone from his face – he was happy, serene, joyful. Dona was very impressed by his appearance, and he seems to have felt that this wasn’t an ordinary human being, perhaps not a human being at all. He came straight to the point, saying, ‘Who are you?’

Now the ancient Indians believed that the universe is stratified into various levels of existence, that there are not just human beings and animals, as we believe, but gods, and ghosts, and yakṣas, and gāndharvas, and all sorts of other mythological beings, inhabiting a multi-storey universe, the human plane being just one storey out of many. So Dona asked, 'Are you a yakṣa?' (a yakṣa being a rather terrifying sublime spirit living in the forest). But the Buddha said 'No'. So Dona tried again. 'Are you a gāndharva?' (a sort of celestial musician, a beautiful singing angel-like figure). Once again the Buddha said 'No', and again Dona asked, 'Well then, are you a deva?' (a god, a divine being, a sort of archangel). 'No.' Upon this Dona thought, 'That's strange, he must be a human being after all!' And he asked him that too, but yet again the Buddha said 'No'. By this time Dona was thoroughly perplexed, so he demanded. 'If you are not any of these things, then who are you?' The Buddha replied, 'Those mental conditionings on account of which I might have been described as a yakṣa a gāndharva, as a deva, as a human being, all those conditionings have been destroyed by me. Therefore I am a Buddha.'

The word for mental conditionings is 'saṃskāra', which means all kinds of conditioned mental attitudes. It is these conditioned mental attitudes, these volitions or karma-formations as they are sometimes called, which, according to Buddhism, and Indian belief in general, determine the nature of our rebirth. The Buddha was free from all these, and so there was nothing to cause him to be reborn as a yakṣa, a gāndharva, a god, or even as a human being; and even here and now he was not in reality any of these things. He had reached the state of unconditioned consciousness, though his body might appear to be that of a man. Therefore he was called the Buddha, Buddha being as it were an incarnation, a personification, of the unconditioned mind.

You are the Buddha – potentially!

We have seen that 'Buddha' means 'unconditioned mind', or 'Enlightened mind'. Knowing the Buddha therefore means knowing the mind in its unconditioned state. So if at this stage we are asked, 'Who is the Buddha?' we can only reply, 'You yourself are the Buddha – potentially.' We can really and truly come to know the Buddha only in the process of actualizing our own potential Buddhahood. It is only then that we can say from knowledge, from experience, who the Buddha is.

Going for Refuge

We cannot do this all at once. We have to establish, first of all, a living contact with Buddhism. We have to arrive at something which goes further than mere factual knowledge about Gautama the Buddha, but still falls far short of knowing the unconditioned mind, of really knowing the Buddha. This something that comes in between the two is what we call Going for Refuge to the Buddha. This means taking the ideal of Enlightenment as our ultimate objective, and trying our utmost to realize it. In other words, it is only by taking Refuge in the Buddha in the traditional sense that we can really know who the Buddha is. This is one of the reasons why I have always attached such great importance to the Refuges, not only to Going for Refuge to the Buddha, but also to the Dharma and to the Sangha.

In conclusion, it is only by taking Refuge in the Buddha, with all that that implies, that we can really and truly answer, from the heart, from the mind, and from the whole of our spiritual life, the question, 'Who is the Buddha?'



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. As a young man the future Buddha lived a comfortable, opulent life, but he did not find this satisfying or meaningful. What might this say about the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society? Do you see any parallels in your own experience?
2. The first three of the 'Four Sights' were experiences that brought the future Buddha face-to-face with uncomfortable aspects of reality, and made him realise that the conventional approach to life was based on illusion. The Fourth Sight showed him that there was an alternative way of living that promised a deeper fulfilment. What have been your equivalents to the Four Sights? What experiences have led you to be here, studying the Dharma?
3. Gautama felt the need to leave his old life completely behind – the 'Going Forth'. Why might cutting ourselves off from familiar people, places and roles – at least for a time – have a beneficial effect on our spiritual life? Does this throw any light on why retreats can be helpful? Are there any aspects of *your* life that keep you stuck in an out-of-date version of yourself?
4. After his Enlightenment the Buddha did not fit into any of the categories of being that people were familiar with. At a lower level, could we see freeing ourselves from the descriptions we use to define ourselves as an aspect of our spiritual lives? How do you define yourself: by age, gender, nationality, social class, education, subculture, political persuasion, and so on? Which of these descriptions are you particularly attached to?
5. What might it mean to say that the Buddha was "unconditioned mind"?

Introduction

For Buddhists in the East the life story of the Buddha is much more than a historical account – it is a poetic myth full of profound meanings that resonate in the depths of the mind. In the following text Sangharakshita looks at a number of these mythic elements in the story of the Buddha, bringing out some aspects of their significance, and in the process making the point that from a spiritual point of view poetic truth is just as important as historical truth – or perhaps more so.

To feel the impact of the mythic and poetic elements in the Buddha's story we need to open up to them imaginatively, and not just engage our rational, critical mind. This needs time, so it would be very helpful to read the text well before the study group, and then to follow up on the questions and suggestions at the end. In particular it might be helpful to look at some representations of the incidents described in the text in Buddhist art, and to bring any art you find to the study group.

Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha

Text condensed from A Guide to the Buddhist Path, Sangharakshita, Chapter 3, Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha.

The language of the depths

If we look below the rational, conceptual surface of man's mind, we find vast unplumbed depths which make up what we call the unconscious. The psyche in its wholeness consists of both the conscious and the unconscious. The unconscious, non-rational part of man is by far the larger part of his total nature, and its importance is far greater than we generally care to recognize. Consciousness is like a light froth playing and sparkling on the surface, whilst the unconscious is like the vast ocean depths, dark and unfathomed, lying far beneath. In order to appeal to the whole person, it isn't enough to appeal just to the conscious, rational intelligence that floats upon the surface. We have to appeal to something more, and this means that we have to speak an entirely different language from the language of concepts, of abstract thought; we have to speak the language of images, of concrete form. If we want to reach this non-rational part of the human psyche, we have to use the language of poetry, of myth, of legend.

This other, no less important, language is one which many modern people have forgotten, or which they know only in a few distorted and broken forms. But Buddhism does very definitely speak this language, and speaks it no less powerfully than it speaks the language of concepts. Some people are under the impression that Buddhism speaks only the language of concepts, of reason; that it is a strictly rational system, even a sort of rationalism. Such a misunderstanding is in a way quite natural in the West. After all, most of our knowledge is derived from books,

magazines, lectures, etc., so that although we may not always be aware of this, our approach is in terms of rational, conceptual understanding. But if we go to the East we see a very different picture. In the Eastern Buddhist countries people tend to the other extreme. They tend to be moved and influenced by the images all about them without easily being able to give a rational, conceptual formulation of what they actually believe.

So far as Buddhism in the West is concerned, much more attention has been given to the conceptual, analytical, intellectual approach. We now have to give much more time and much more serious attention to the other type of approach, to begin to try to combine both these approaches, unite both the conceptual and the non-conceptual. We need a balanced spiritual life in which both the conscious and unconscious mind play their part.

It is therefore through the language of poetry and myth that we are going to approach our subject, changing over from the conceptual approach to the non-conceptual, from the conscious mind to the unconscious. Here we shall be encountering some of what I have called the '**Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha**'. To allow for this encounter, we have to be receptive, to open ourselves to these archetypal symbols, to listen to them and allow them to speak in their own way to us, especially to our unconscious depths, so that we do not just realize them mentally, but experience them and assimilate them, even allowing them eventually to transform our whole life.

The meaning of 'archetypal symbolism'

Now, let us define our key terms. What is an archetype? Broadly speaking, an archetype is the original pattern or model of a work, or the model from which a thing is made or formed. And what do we mean by symbolism? A symbol is generally defined as a visible sign of something invisible. But philosophically and religiously speaking it is more than that: it is something existing on a lower plane which is in correspondence with something existing on a higher plane. To cite a common example, in the various theistic traditions, the sun is a symbol for God, because the sun performs in the physical universe the same function that God, according to these systems, performs in the spiritual universe: the sun sheds light and heat, just as God sheds the light of knowledge and the warmth of love into the spiritual universe. One can say that the sun is the god of the material world, and in the same way God is the sun of the spiritual world. Both represent the same principle manifesting on different levels. 'As above, so below.'

Two kinds of truth

Various Western scholars in modern times have tried to write full, detailed biographies of the Buddha. There is quite a lot of traditional material available. Western scholars have explored this abundant material thoroughly, but having gone through the various episodes and incidents, they divide them into two great 'heaps'. On one side, they put whatever they consider to be a historic fact. On the other side they put what they consider to be myth and legend. Now this is all right so far as it goes, but most of them go a step further, and start indulging in value judgements, saying that only what they regard as historical facts are valuable and relevant. As for the myths and legends, all the poetry of the account, they usually see this as mere fiction, to be discarded as completely worthless.

This is a very great mistake, for we may say that there are two kinds of truth: what we call scientific truth, the truth of concepts, of reasoning; and in addition to this – some would say above this – there is what we may call poetic truth, or truth of the imagination, of the intuition. This is at least equally important. The latter kind of truth is manifested in what we call myths and legends, as well as in works of art, in symbolic ritual, and also quite importantly

in dreams. And what we call the archetypal symbolism of the biography of the Buddha belongs to this second category. It is not meant to be historic truth, or factual information, but poetic, even spiritual, truth. We may say that this biography of the Buddha in terms of archetypal symbolism is not concerned with the external events of his career, but is meant to suggest to us something about his inner spiritual experience, and therefore to shed light on the spiritual life for all of us.

Examples of archetypal symbolism

I will now give a few examples of archetypal symbolism from the biography of the Buddha.

The Twin Miracle

A traditional text says:

Then the Exalted One standing in the air at the height of a palm tree performed various and diverse miracles of double appearance. The lower part of his body would be in flames, while from the upper part there streamed five hundred jets of cold water. While the upper part of his body was in flames, five hundred jets of cold water streamed from the lower part. Next, by his magic power the Exalted One transformed himself into a bull with a quivering hump. The bull vanished in the east and appeared in the west. It vanished in the north and appeared in the south, it vanished in the south and appeared in the north. And in this way the great miracle is to be described in detail. Several thousand kotis of beings, seeing this great miracle of magic, became glad, joyful and pleased, and uttered thousands of bravos at witnessing the marvel.

I am not going to say anything here about the Buddha's transformation into a bull – I am going to concentrate here on the 'Twin Miracle' proper, in which the Buddha emits both fire and water. First of all, the Buddha stands in the air. This signifies a change of plane, and is highly significant. It represents the fact that what is described does not happen on the earth plane, or on the historical plane. The Twin Miracle is not a miracle in the usual sense, not something magical or supernatural happening here on this earth, but something spiritual, something symbolic, happening on a higher metaphysical plane of existence.

Having stood in the air, in this metaphysical dimension, the Buddha emits fire and water simultaneously: fire from the upper half of the body, water from the lower, and vice versa. On the higher plane of existence where he now stands, fire and water are universal symbols. They are found all over the world, in all cultures, all religions. Fire represents 'spirit', or 'the spiritual'; and water represents matter, the material. Fire, again, represents the heavenly, principle; water the earthly principle. Fire represents the active, masculine principle; water the passive, feminine principle. Fire represents the intellect, and water the emotions. Fire again represents consciousness, and water the unconscious. In other words, fire and water between them represent all the cosmic opposites.

The fact that the Buddha emitted fire and water simultaneously represents the conjugation of these great pairs of opposites. This conjunction on all levels, and on the highest level of all especially, is synonymous with what we call Enlightenment. This episode of the Twin Miracle tells us that Enlightenment is not a one-sided affair, not a partial experience, but the union, the conjunction, of opposites, of fire and water, at the highest possible level.

The ladder between heaven and earth

Let us now turn to another episode. According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha preached what became known as the Abhidharma to his deceased mother in the Heaven of the

Thirty-three Gods (a higher heavenly world where she was reborn when she died, seven days after his birth). When he returned to the earth, he descended by means of a magnificent staircase, attended by different gods, divinities, and angels. In the texts this staircase is described in very glorious terms, as being threefold, made up of gold, silver, and crystal.

The staircase or the ladder between heaven and earth is also a universal symbol. For example, in the Bible there is Jacob's ladder, which has the same significance. The staircase is that which unites the opposites, which links, draws together, heaven and earth. In the Buddhist texts, the archetypal significance of this episode of the Buddha's descent is enhanced by colourful, glowing descriptions in terms of gold and silver and crystal, and different coloured lights, and panoplies of coloured sun-shades and umbrellas, and flowers falling, and music sounding. These all make a strong appeal not to the conscious mind, but to the unconscious, to the depths.

The World Tree

Another important variant to the theme of the union of the opposites is what is generally known as the 'World Tree', or 'Cosmic Tree'. The Buddha, according to the traditional account, gained Enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi Tree – 'Bodhi' meaning transcendental wisdom, or 'Awakening'. A tree's roots go deep down into the earth, but at the same time its branches tower high into the sky. So the tree also links heaven and earth, is also a symbol of the union, or harmony, of opposites.

The World Tree is found in many mythologies. For instance, we have the Norse Yggdrasil, the World Ash – roots deep down, branches right up in the heavens, and all the worlds suspended on the branches. We also get the identification of the Christian cross with a World or Cosmic Tree. I have seen a representation of the crucifixion where branches were growing out of the sides of the cross, and the roots went deep down into the soil. The cross also, like the World Tree, links heaven and earth cosmically, in the same way that Christ unites the human and the divine natures psychologically.

The Diamond Throne

Closely associated with the idea of a ladder, or a staircase, or a tree, is the image of the central point. In all the traditional accounts of the Buddha's Enlightenment he is represented as sitting on what is called the 'Vajrāsana', which literally means the 'Diamond Seat', or 'Diamond Throne'. The diamond, the vajra, in Buddhist tradition represents the transcendental element, the metaphysical base. According to tradition, the Vajrāsana is the centre of the universe. One can compare this with the corresponding Christian tradition that the cross stood on the same spot as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which Adam and Eve had eaten the apple, and that this spot represents the exact centre of the world. This centrality in the cosmos of the Vajrāsana suggests that Enlightenment consists in adopting a position of centrality. This metaphysical, or transcendental, centrality, which constitutes Enlightenment, amounts to the same as the union of opposites about which we have spoken.

Events surrounding the Buddha's Enlightenment

Now we are going to take up not just isolated archetypal symbols, but a whole sequence of symbols. This series is connected with the most important event in the Buddha's whole career, his attainment of Enlightenment. These symbols are represented by certain incidents usually regarded as historical, or partly historical, though their actual significance is much deeper.

The Victory over Mara

The first of these incidents is traditionally known as the 'Victory over Mara', the 'Satan' of Buddhism. The Buddha-to-be was seated in meditation at the foot of the tree, when he was attacked by terrible demon hosts, by all sorts of foul, unsightly, misshapen figures, led by Mara. These hosts and their attack are vividly depicted in Buddhist art and poetry. They were partly human, partly animal, hideously deformed, with snarling, leering, angry, and wrathful expressions, some of them lifting great clubs, others brandishing swords, all very menacing and frightful indeed. But all the stones, arrows, and flames, on reaching the edge of the Buddha's aura of light turned into flowers and fell at his feet. The significance of this is obvious and doesn't need to be explained, only to be felt. The Buddha wasn't touched, wasn't moved, by this terrible attack. His eyes remained closed, he remained in meditation with the same smile on his lips.

So Mara sent against the Buddha his three beautiful daughters, whose names are Lust, Passion, and Delight. They danced in front of the Buddha, exhibiting all their wiles, but the Buddha didn't even open his eyes. They retired discomfited.

All this represents the forces of the unconscious in their crude, unsublimated form. The demons, the terrible misshapen figures, represent anger, aversion, dislike, and so on. The daughters of Mara represent the various aspects of craving and desire. Mara himself represents primordial ignorance, or unawareness.

Calling the Earth Goddess to Witness

The second incident is known as the 'calling of the Earth Goddess to witness'. After he had been defeated Mara tried another trick. He said to the Buddha-to-be, "You are sitting on the central point of the universe, on the throne of the Buddhas of old. What right have you, just an ordinary person, to sit on that Diamond Throne where the previous Buddhas sat?" So the Buddha said. "In my past lives I have practised all the Perfections, the Perfection of Giving, of Morality, of Patience, of Energy, of Meditation, of Wisdom. I have reached a point in my spiritual evolution where I am about to gain Enlightenment. Therefore I am worthy to sit on this Diamond Throne, like the previous Buddhas when they gained Enlightenment."

Mara wasn't satisfied. He said, "All right, you say that you practised all these Perfections in your previous lives, but who is your witness?" So the future Buddha, who was seated on the Diamond Throne in the position of meditation, with his hands resting in his lap, just tapped on the earth – this is the famous earth-touching mūdra, or position. And up rose the Earth Goddess, bearing a vase in her hand. She bore witness, saying, "I have been here all the time. Men may come, men may go, but the earth always remains. I have seen all his previous lives. I have seen hundreds of thousands of lives in which he practised the Perfections. So I bear witness that he is worthy to sit in the seat of the Buddhas of old."

This scene is also often depicted in Buddhist art. Sometimes the Earth Goddess is shown as dark green in colour, sometimes a beautiful golden-brown, always half-emerged from the earth. Basically, she represents the same forces as those represented by Māra's daughters, but in their tamed, subdued, or sublimated aspect – ready to help, not hinder.

Brahma's Request

The third incident is known as 'Brahmā's Request'. The Buddha, after his Enlightenment, was inclined to remain silent. He reflected, "This Truth, this Reality which I have discovered, is so difficult to see, so sublime, that ordinary people, their eyes covered with the dust of ignorance

and passion, are not going to see it. So it is better to remain silent, to remain under the Bodhi tree, not to go out into the world and preach.”

But then another great apparition arose. A great light shone forth, and in the midst of the light an ancient figure, the figure of Brahmā Sahampati, Brahmā the Great God, Lord of a Thousand Worlds, appeared before the Buddha with folded hands. He said, “Please preach, preach the Truth – there are just a few with little dust on their eyes. They will appreciate, they will follow.” The Buddha opened his divine eye and looked forth over the universe. He saw all beings, just like lotuses in a pond, in various stages of development. And he said, “For the sake of those with just a little dust over their eyes, those who are like lotuses half-way out, I will preach the Dharma.”

We shouldn’t of course take this incident literally, in the historical sense – the Buddha didn’t need to be asked to preach. Brahmā’s Request represents the manifestation within the Buddha’s own mind of the forces of Compassion which compelled him to make known the Truth he had discovered, to preach to mankind.

The Serpent King

For seven weeks the Buddha sat at the foot of the Bodhi tree, and in the middle of the seventh week there arose a great storm. The Buddha was Enlightened in the month of May, and seven weeks takes us to the middle of July, the beginning of the rainy season. In India, when the rainy season begins, in a matter of instants the sky becomes black and rain descends, not in bucketfuls, but in absolute reservoir-fuls. The Buddha was out in the open, under a tree, with just a thin robe – he couldn’t do much about it. But another figure arose out of the undergrowth: a great snake, King Mucalinda, the Serpent-King. He came and wrapped his coils around the Buddha and stood with his hood over his head like an umbrella, and in this way protected him from the downpour. This episode is often depicted in Buddhist art.

Then the rain disappeared, the storm-clouds cleared up, and the Serpent-King assumed a different form, that of a beautiful youth about sixteen years of age, who saluted the Buddha.

Some scholars, I am afraid, try to take this episode literally, saying, “Oh yes, it is well known that in the East snakes are sometimes quite friendly with holy men, and come and sit near them, and this is what must have happened.” But we cannot accept this pseudo-historical type of explanation. We are on a different plane, a different level of meaning altogether. All over the world, as we have seen, water, or the sea, or the ocean, represents the unconscious. And in Indian mythology the nāgas, that is to say, the serpents, or the dragons, live in the depths of the ocean. So the nāgas represent the forces in the depths of the unconscious in their most positive and beneficent aspect – and Mucalinda is the king of the nāgas.

The falling of the rain, the torrential downpour after seven weeks, represents a baptism, an aspersion. All over the world, pouring water on someone or on something represents the investiture of that person or that object with all the powers of the unconscious mind.

Mucalinda also stands for the powerful psychic energies surging up inside a person, especially at the time of meditation. Mucalinda’s assuming the form of a beautiful sixteen-year-old youth represents the new personality which is born as a result of this. Mucalinda in the new form salutes the Buddha: this represents the perfect submission of all the powers of the unconscious to the Enlightened mind.



Suggestions for reflection, research, and discussion

1. Do you agree that poetic truth is just as important as factual truth?
2. Which of the episodes or symbols described do you respond to most strongly?
3. Look for any representations of these incidents from the Buddha's life in any books of Buddhist art you have access to, or on the internet, and bring them to the group. Alternatively you might like to draw or paint one of the incidents yourself.

Introduction

In the last session we saw that for many Buddhists the story of the Buddha's life is not just a factual record of historical events. This week we look at why, for most Buddhists, the Buddha is not seen just as a teacher who is now long dead, and who can therefore have no effect on us in the here-and-now.

Imagining the Buddha and his qualities, bearing the Buddha in mind with respect, visualizing the Buddha or some other manifestation of Enlightenment – these are all important practices for many Buddhists, which have a definite spiritual purpose, and a positive effect on many people. We may see these practices as an exercise in creative imagination, a way of developing qualities we are not in touch with in ourselves. We may see the Buddha we can contact in imagination and meditation as an aspect of our own potential – what is sometimes called our own 'Buddha Nature'. Or we may see these practices as a way to contact a powerful, external stream of spiritual energy. How we explain the positive effect of these practices may not matter, as long as we do not dismiss them out of prejudice or a narrow-minded rationalism.

In the presence of the Buddha

To understand how these practices developed it might help to imagine what it would have been like to be one of the early members of the Sangha, living and practicing in the presence of the Buddha. What would it be like to spend time with the Buddha, to experience the influence and inspiration of such a highly evolved being?

We can imagine that if we lived in the presence of the Buddha we would be constantly reminded of the qualities of Enlightenment, and our own potential for these qualities would be awakened and stimulated. We can imagine that as a result of this influence these qualities would grow and strengthen, becoming a more powerful part of our being, while our more unskilful tendencies would tend to wither away. We can imagine that we would quite naturally come to act, speak, and think more like the Buddha. We can imagine that, over time, we would become more like the Buddha, in quite a natural way, with little apparent effort on our part.

Many of the early Buddhists must have been aware that simply spending time with the Buddha had a powerful effect on them, and after the Buddha's death they must have realized what they had lost. Inevitably they would have tried to get some of the benefits of being with the Buddha even though he was no longer physically present – and in this way no doubt the practice of mindfulness of the Buddha developed. In fact as we will see this practice arose even before the Buddha's death, because not all of his disciples could be with him even when he was alive. But it was in the years and centuries after the Buddha's Parinirvāṇa that this style of practice really came into its own, becoming one of the most common meditation practices not

long after the Buddha's death, and in later forms of Buddhism giving rise to many different forms of devotion, many different meditation practices, and many so-called 'archetypal' Buddhas and Bodhisattvas embodying different aspects of Enlightenment.

The benefits

According to the traditional commentaries, keeping the Buddha and his qualities in mind has many benefits. It gives us courage, and the strength to rise above the suffering of living in this world. It leads to the fullness of faith, and bestows wisdom and understanding. We come to feel as though we are living in the presence of the Enlightened One, and if we are tempted to act unskillfully we are restrained by a wholesome shame, as though we were face to face with the Buddha himself. Over time our body becomes "as worthy of veneration as a shrine room", and our mind "tends towards the plane of the Buddhas." Even if this is as far as we get in this life, we will progress to a "happy destiny." It seems to be a spiritual and psychological law that what we focus our minds on, we become. Focusing our mind on an Enlightened being ripens our own potential for Enlightenment, so that we gradually come more and more to "dwell in the sphere of the supreme Buddhas."

An example from the time of the Buddha

The roots of the practice of recollection of the Buddha go right back to the time of the historical Buddha himself, as we can see from the following extract from the Sutta Nipāta, one of the oldest surviving Buddhist texts.

In this story an old man called Piṅgiya is talking to the brahmin Bāvari, and praising the Buddha to the skies. Bāvari may be a bit put out by Piṅgiya's praise for this non-brahmin teacher, because he asks him, "If this Gotama is so wonderful, why don't you spend all your time with him? Why aren't you with him right now?"

Piṅgiya replies that he cannot be with the Buddha in body, because he is old and frail, so that he cannot travel with his teacher. But, he says, using the power of mindfulness and imagination, he is able to be in the presence of the Buddha all the time, so that in his mind he is never away from him. The Buddha then seems to speak to Piṅgiya, although physically he is many miles away, telling him that other people before him have been liberated by the power of faith or confidence (*śraddhā* in Sanskrit, *saddhā* in Pali), and predicting that Piṅgiya himself will gain Enlightenment in this way, through this very practice.

Piṅgiya's Praises of The Way to the Beyond

From the Sutta-Nipāta, trans. H. Saddhatissa, pp131-133.

'I will sing you the praises of The Way to the Beyond', said Piṅgiya (when he returned to where the brahmin Bāvari lives on the banks of the River Godhāvari). 'It was described to us by this man exactly as he saw it. But then, there isn't any reason why a man like him should lie - a mammoth of knowledge and completely pure, a man without desire.

When a voice has none of the glibness of pride and none of the ingrained stains of ignorance, then its words are full of sweetness and beauty. It is such words that I praise now.

They call him Buddha, Enlightened, Awake, dissolving darkness, with total vision, and knowing the world to its ends, he has gone beyond all the states of being and of becoming. He has no inner poison-drives: he is the total elimination of suffering. This man, brahmin Bāvari, is the man I follow.

It is like a bird that leaves the bushes of the scrubland and flies to the fruit trees of the forest. I too have left the bleary half-light of opinions; like a swan I have reached a great lake.

Up till now, before I heard Gotama's teaching, people had always told me this: "This is how it has always been, and this is how it will always be"; only the constant refrain of tradition, a breeding ground for speculation.

This prince, this beam of light, Gotama, was the only one who dissolved the darkness. This man Gotama is a universe of wisdom and a world of understanding, a teacher whose Dhamma is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side-effects, with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world.'

'But Piṅgiya', said Bāvari, 'why then don't you spend all your time, your every moment, with this man Gotama, this universe of wisdom, this world of understanding, this teacher whose Dhamma is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side-effects, and with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world?'

'Brahmin, Sir', said Piṅgiya, 'there is no moment for me, however small, that is spent away from Gotama, from this universe of wisdom, this world of understanding, this teacher whose teaching is the Way Things Are, instant, immediate and visible all around, eroding desire without harmful side effects, with nothing else quite like it anywhere in the world.'

'You see. Sir', said Piṅgiya, 'with constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, in night as well as day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him. I cannot now move away from the teaching of Gotama: the powers of confidence and joy, of intellect and awareness, hold me there. Whichever way this universe of wisdom goes it draws me with it.

Physically, I cannot move like that - my body is decaying, I am old and weak - but the driving power of purposeful thought propels me with it without break.

There was a time when, writhing in the mud of the swamps, I could only drift from one stone to the next. But then I saw the Sambuddha, fully awake and free from defilement.'

Then the Buddha spoke:

'Piṅgiya', he said, 'other people have freed themselves by the power of confidence. Vakkali, Bhadrāvudha and Āḷavi-Gotama have all done this. You too should let that strength release you; you too will go to the further shore, beyond the draw of death.'

'These words', said Piṅgiya, 'are the words of a man of wisdom. As I hear them I become more confident. This man is Sambuddha: he has opened the curtains and woken up. There is nothing barren there; his mind is clear and luminous.

Everything accessible to knowledge is known to him, even the ultimate subtleties of godhood. There are no more questions for the doubtful who come to him: the teacher has answered them all.

Yes, I shall go there. I shall go beyond change, I shall go beyond formations; I shall go beyond comparison. There are no more doubts. You may consider this as mind released.'



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Have you ever looked up to somebody as an example or role-model? (You could think of fictional characters and well-known people as well as people you have known personally.) What qualities did you particularly admire? Do you think you could have related to these qualities as easily in the abstract, without thinking of a person who embodied them?
2. Are there any qualities of the Buddha that you particularly admire or aspire to?
3. Try for a while imagining yourself in the presence of the Buddha or some other figure you admire – perhaps bring them to mind as you meditate, or imagine that they are with you as you go about some daily task. What effect does this have? Tell the group about it.
4. Why might recollection of the Buddha give us courage?
5. Do you agree that ‘mindfulness of the Buddha’ could be a useful practice? How do you think it might work? How could you bring an element of it into your own practice?
6. At the end of Piṅgiya's praises the Buddha seems to speak to Piṅgiya, although physically he is many miles away. How do you interpret this?

Introduction

In the second week of this course we saw that a Buddhist is someone who 'Goes for Refuge' to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Since then we have explored the significance of the Buddha. But what about the Dharma? What exactly is the Dharma? And what does it mean to 'Go for Refuge' to it? These are the questions we will be exploring in this session and the next.

What is the 'Dharma'

'Dharma' is a Sanskrit word that can mean many things. The most relevant meanings for this discussion are, firstly, 'the Truth', in the highest sense, as the nature of reality, and secondly, the teachings of Buddhism. But 'Truth' and 'reality' are large abstract concepts, and the teachings of Buddhism are vast, diverse, and can sometimes seem contradictory. How can we Go for Refuge – how can we commit ourselves to living by – anything so difficult to pin down?

Can we boil the teachings of the Buddhist tradition down to their essence? Can we sum the Dharma up in a single, logical concept or formula, that we can see is clearly true, and base our life and practice on? Surely we need to do this before we can really Go for Refuge to it? But unfortunately this is not really possible.

Beyond any one concept, practice or formula

If we think of the Dharma as the Truth, then the Buddha and the other spiritually advanced figures of the Buddhist tradition have been unanimous in stating that this ultimate nature of reality is beyond any concept that can be expressed in words. And if we think of the Dharma as the teachings of Buddhism, then different Buddhists will often emphasise different aspects according to their temperament, background, culture, and stage of development. If we try to limit the Dharma to any one concept, any one teaching, or any one practice, we diminish it to the level of our own understanding, and exclude aspects that are vitally important for some people. The Buddha made it clear that he considered whatever helps human beings to transcend their present limited state as Dharma, and people are so diverse that what we need to do this cannot be summed up in any one simple formula.

The big ideas behind the Dharma

But having said this there are some formulations of the Dharma that are so fundamental that they do give us a framework for our understanding. Until we ourselves have direct experience of the wordless Truth, we need these concepts to keep our life and our practice aligned with the nature of reality, as it is seen by those who do have this direct experience. We need to understand and keep in mind the big ideas that underlie what Buddhists call 'Right View'. Unless we do this our lives will tend to be governed by the usually unconscious and unquestioned beliefs, values and world-views that we have been conditioned to accept by our family, education, peer group and culture, and by the particular historic period in which we

happen to live. And, because these beliefs are often not aligned with reality, they will tend to lead us towards dissatisfaction, rather than towards growth and fulfilment.

So what are some of these big ideas, these fundamental concepts of the Dharma? Any short-list would probably start with the teaching of conditioned co-production and its corollary, the law of karma. It would then probably move on to include the Four Noble Truths, as well as the Three Lakṣaṇas, the marks or characteristics of conditioned phenomena. In this session we are trying to get an initial understanding of the basis of the Dharma in one brief text, and we cannot go into all of these ideas in enough depth to do them anything like justice. Conditioned Co-Production is a subtle concept with many implications, which we will explore later in *Year One*, and in more detail in subsequent years of the mitra course. The Three Lakṣaṇas are also discussed later in this course. Here we will focus on the Four Noble Truths, a teaching that has the virtue of being the Buddha's own first attempt to communicate his vision in words.

The Four Noble Truths

The teaching of the Four Noble Truths is a particularly good framework for an initial understanding of the Dharma, because it deals with the problem of human dissatisfaction. Most – perhaps all – of what we human beings do, say and think is associated with our attempt to escape from dissatisfaction or suffering, or, to put it the other way around, to find satisfaction and happiness. The teaching of the Four Noble Truths does not discount this quest for satisfaction, but it points out that the way we normally go about it has not worked so far, it gives us an analysis of why this approach has not worked, and it offers us an alternative that really does lead to lasting fulfilment.

If we see the truth of this teaching it has the potential to radically re-orientate our search for happiness – the driving force behind our lives - so that we change the way we live in a way that really does begin to create happiness, rather than taking us further from it.

The Four Noble Truths are fundamental because they tackle our basic problem - the fact that life as we normally live it does not give us the happiness we are looking for. They do this using a traditional format used for diagnosis in ancient Indian medicine: they describe the disease, the cause of the disease, the prognosis or outlook, and the cure.

As the Buddha expressed them, the Four Noble Truths are:

1. The Truth of Dukkha – which means dissatisfaction, discomfort, unease, or actual suffering.
2. The Truth of the Origin of Dukkha, which is craving.
3. The Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha, which is that it can be overcome, by going beyond craving.
4. The Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of Dukkha, is the Noble Eightfold Path.

The First Noble Truth

The First Truth is sometimes wrongly said to be that 'Life is suffering'. This misinterpretation has given the opponents of Buddhism a handy stick with which to beat it as being pessimistic and life-denying. But suffering is just the most extreme meaning of the Pali word dukkha, which more commonly means something like uncomfortable, unsatisfactory, uneasy, or ill-fitting. As Sangharakshita has pointed out, Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic – it is melioristic (from the Latin *melior*, meaning better.) The Dharma takes an honest look at our situation, and then suggests ways we can make it better.

What the First Truth is saying is that life as it is normally lived does not bring real lasting satisfaction or fulfilment. This is simply to take an honest look at our situation – if life as it is normally lived did bring real satisfaction and fulfilment, then most people most of the time would be in a state of satisfaction. This we obviously are not. If people in general were in a state of satisfaction, they would not need more than they have now, and the consumer society would grind to a halt. We probably do not feel that ‘life is suffering’. We may feel that our life is in many ways a rich and happy one. But we want more. Something is missing.

Traditionally dukkha is categorised in several different ways. The Buddha often repeated the formula that ‘birth is dukkha, old age is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha. To get what we dislike is dukkha. To be separated from what we like is dukkha. Not to get what we want, that also is dukkha.’ Other classifications build on this to divide dukkha into:

- The inescapable suffering that we experience because we are mortal beings with an impermanent body, living in an often hostile environment (called ‘dukkha-dukkha’).
- The suffering of having to put up with what we do not like, and of not getting what we do like.
- ‘The suffering of change’ – the fact that even when life is enjoyable we know that the present situation cannot last forever, which often introduces an element of anxiety and regret even into pleasant situations.
- ‘Existential suffering’ – which arises from the fact that even if our outward life was perfect in every way, we would still not be satisfied and fulfilled as long as we are not expressing our spiritual potential.

The Second Noble Truth

The Second Noble Truth tells us that the origin of the dukkha we experience is craving, or thirst in a literal translation. It tells us that the reason we find life so unsatisfactory is that the way we look for satisfaction actually causes us more suffering. There are a number of ways we can understand this.

The word craving is shorthand for an approach to life that tries to wrest happiness from the world by grabbing the things we like, pushing away the things we don’t like, and generally organising the ever-changing flux of events into a pattern that suits our demands. We tend to think that we can be happy and satisfied when – and only when – we have got the world around us organised in a particular way, so that events and other people fit in with our likes and dislikes. And so we devote our energies to bringing this about.

But if we make our happiness depend on the changeable and uncertain world around us, we are doomed to be unhappy and dissatisfied a lot of the time. The reasons for this are implied by the classification of the types of dukkha we looked at in the last section.

For one thing, life contains an inescapable element of suffering – birth, sickness, old age, death, and all the pains and discomforts that come from having a fragile, temporary body. If we expect not to experience this ‘dukkha-dukkha’, and if we do not cultivate the personal qualities and meaningful life that allow us to put up with it philosophically, then we just add another element of psychological and emotional suffering to the inevitable physical suffering we experience. The Buddha illustrated this point with a parable about two arrows. He said that we had no choice about being wounded by the first arrow – dukkha-dukkha – but that what we usually do is make the suffering far worse, by stabbing ourselves with another arrow, more painful than the first.

As well as inevitably experiencing an element of physical suffering, we can never get just what we like in this world, and entirely avoid what we don't like, and the constant striving to do the impossible is a source of continual stress and disappointment. And then, even if we do succeed in getting what we like for a while, this state can never last – and deep down we know it – so that even in the midst of pleasure we feel anxiety. The ever-changing flux of events that we are a part of simply cannot be organised into any stable arrangement for long, so it simply will not stay as we want it. And then finally, even if by some miracle we could organise the outer world around us permanently into a state we liked – even if we could be rich and famous and praised, with the perfect partner, surrounded by sensory pleasures, living a life of complete luxury – perhaps on the most idyllic tropical island we could imagine, or in whatever dream scenario appeals to us – and even if we and our loved ones never got ill, never got old and never died – this on its own would not make us fulfilled.

True fulfilment and happiness comes from our inner being, not from our outer circumstances. If our inner world is plagued by the negative mental states that come from a narrow preoccupation with our own desires, then we will be unhappy in paradise. On the other hand if we have the rich, warm, expansive inner world of someone who is in touch with their spiritual potential, and the inner strength of someone whose life is about something greater than their own personal likes and dislikes, then we will be deeply fulfilled even in the midst of life's inevitable suffering and adversity.

Like the First Noble Truth, this Second Truth of the origin of dukkha has been widely misinterpreted. For example, it is often said that Buddhists think that desire is the cause of suffering, and that all desire is therefore undesirable. But many forms of desire are necessary and good. Our desire for the necessities of life keeps us physically healthy. Our desire for friendship, beauty, and meaningful work pushes us in the direction of a fulfilling life. Our desire to fulfil our spiritual potential pushes us in the direction of the Dharma. So it seems that the problem that the Second Truth points to has nothing to do with such healthy desires, it has to do specifically with what has been called 'craving'. So how is this craving different from healthy desire?

Craving versus healthy desire

Sangharakshita has defined what he calls neurotic craving as desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we want it to satisfy. A glass of water will satisfy our thirst, and a wholesome meal will satisfy our body's need for food. But alcohol, junk food, or a piece of consumer gadgetry will not satisfy us if what we really lack is friendship, peace of mind, or the healthy self-esteem that comes from living a meaningful life. New clothes, a new partner, a new car, a new computer, a bigger bank balance, a more prestigious job, an expensive meal, or an exotic holiday – there is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these. But none of them will do more than distract us from the emptiness and dissatisfaction we feel if we are ignoring our spiritual potential and living below our real spiritual level. And if we base our happiness on having our wants for such things satisfied, we actually create suffering rather than satisfaction for ourselves. We put ourselves on a never-ending treadmill of unhealthy desire, chasing a carrot that cannot be caught. We put ourselves in a position of constant disappointment and frustration.

'Selfish Grasping'

When the Buddha taught the Second Truth he summed up the cause of our dissatisfaction in just one word – craving, or literally 'thirst'. But it is possible to flesh this word out with more detail. Buddhists in many traditions tend to emphasise that this craving the Buddha talked about is the result of our deluded obsession with ourselves. Tibetan Buddhists, for example,

often bring this out by using a phrase like ‘selfish grasping’ when translating the Four Truths. This phrase underlines two aspects of unhealthy craving – that it is narrowly selfish, and that it has a tight, grasping quality.

To give an example of the way our dissatisfaction and suffering can be related to our deluded focus on ourselves, we might consider the following quote from a talk on BBC radio on the Noble Truths, given by the American translator and academic Robert Thurman:

...[our] wrong knowing of the nature of the world puts us in an impossible situation. If I'm the most real thing in the world, that makes me the most important thing in the world. It will be universally recognized that not a single other person in the world will agree with me on that point. The material world doesn't pay that much attention to me. And time doesn't pay much attention to me as a temporary, ephemeral mind and body complex. And therefore the world is against the reality that I perceive.

So I am in conflict with the world all the time, from my basic perception of things. And being in conflict with the world, both other beings and inanimate things, I am going to lose that conflict, always. If you think you're ... the most important, and the world disagrees, you are going to lose that argument with the world. You will die, you will get sick, people will not like you, people will not do what you want, and you will be forced to do what they want. And therefore you will suffer.

Perhaps it is also significant that Tibetan Buddhists often use the word ‘grasping’ when they translate this Truth. Our tendency to grasp tightly onto the positive things in life can crush the pleasure out of them. All too often we spoil our happiness by grasping at pleasant experiences, expecting too much of them, wanting them to last rather than enjoying them as they pass, and wanting them repeated as soon as possible, so that they become an object of craving in the future. A pleasant meal, a holiday, a relationship, time spent experiencing the beauty of nature, aesthetic enjoyment, even the delights of meditation – we can spoil all of these by thinking, ‘Is this giving me the enjoyment I expect? How long will this last? When can I have this again?’

The Third Noble Truth

The First and Second Noble Truths can come as a shock, saying, as they do, that the way we normally look for happiness actually causes us more suffering. But the Third Truth gives us the good news – if life as it is normally lived leads to dissatisfaction, a different sort of life leads to fulfilment, and a deeper sort of happiness than we can get from any number of possessions or passing pleasures. Yes, we are ill. Yes, we have been making this illness worse by our behaviour. But there is a cure, once we are willing to admit this. Until then we are like the wheezing, breathless smoker who insists that he feels fine – just a bit of indigestion when walking uphill – and that his Uncle Fred smoked a pack a day and lived to be ninety. So the Third Truth is very good news – the doctor is giving us a very good prognosis – but only if we accept the bad news first.

The Third Truth is based on the fact that our dissatisfaction is the product of conditions, and can be overcome by changing those conditions. It can be overcome by eroding our craving, by expanding our self-centred view of life, and by loosening our grasping. We can go beyond suffering and dissatisfaction by transcending our narrow vision of life, and living in a more open, expansive way.

The Fourth Noble Truth

The Fourth Truth tells us that the way to do this – the way to expand our vision and reduce our craving – is to follow a progressive path of spiritual development that affects every aspect of how we live our lives. This is what Buddhists call the Noble Eightfold Path. In the next year of the Mitra course we will be exploring the Eightfold Path in some detail, so here we will just try to give a general picture of it, and a feeling for what it is about.

In Sangharakshita's exposition, the Eightfold Path covers:

1. Vision – the way we see the world and our role in it
2. Emotion
3. Speech
4. Action
5. Livelihood
6. Effort
7. Awareness
8. *Samādhi* – which could be interpreted as either meditation, or the wisdom that arises from higher states of being.

These eight aspects are like an expanded diagram of the basic Threefold Path of ethics, meditation and wisdom, showing its different components, and how they fit together. Essentially the Eightfold Path is saying that if we consistently practice the precepts more and more deeply in all areas of our life, if we cultivate mindfulness and positive emotion, if we expand our vision by exposing ourselves to the Dharma, and if we deepen our insight, then over time we will become larger beings, with a larger vision, and a more expansive approach to life. We will become the sort of beings who crave less, are less obsessed with themselves, and do not grasp so tightly at experiences. We will no longer build our quest for happiness on getting short-lived pleasures, or impermanent possessions, or the approval of others, or on status and reputation. Instead we will get a far deeper sense of happiness and fulfilment from becoming more like the sort of being we have it in us to be, no matter what the changeable, fleeting universe throws at us. To quote the Theravadin monk Ajahn Sucitto:

Circumstances such as illness or good fortune come and go, but what lingers with us are internal conditions. If we have peace of mind, we can weather through the rough patches, but guilt, hatred or depression will cloud the brightest day. A millionaire or a king can be beset with worry and mistrust, but a property-less monk can dwell in ease and fulfilment. Suffering and the cessation of suffering live in our minds and hearts.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Briefly express your understanding of the Four Noble Truths in your own words – maybe a sentence for each Truth.
2. How do you respond to the idea that life as it is normally lived – chasing what we like and avoiding what we dislike – is bound to be unsatisfactory? Do you think this is true? Do you like the idea? (Notice that these are different questions!)

3. Think of some examples of the different types of dukkha in your own experience. Which is the most important source of dissatisfaction or suffering for you?
4. Does your experience support the idea that we suffer most when we are focussed on our own wants and fears, while we are happiest when we are focussed on something beyond ourselves? Do you think there are some ways of being less focussed on our own desires which are unhealthy and do not lead to spiritual growth? What distinguishes unhealthy self-sacrifice from the self-transcendence that leads towards liberation?
5. *“If the Four Noble Truths have got it right, the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society will actually make us more unhappy.”*
Discuss!

Richness and diversity

Last week we looked at the Four Noble Truths, one of the most concise and widely accepted formulations of the Buddha's teaching. One way to paraphrase these Truths might be to say that life as it is normally lived is unsatisfactory; that the cause of our dissatisfaction is our craving and narrow self-obsession; and that the way to liberate ourselves from this is to follow a path of ethical integrity, meditation, and increasing spiritual vision. In his first discourse the Buddha used the formula of the Noble Eightfold Path to sum up this path of liberation. But he also used other formulations, and in the millennia since his death his followers have developed even more. Some of these different versions emphasise one element of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom more than the others. Some are particularly adapted to the needs of different times, cultures, or types of people. Some emphasise particular lifestyles, qualities, or practices, such as a simple monastic life, long hours of meditation, selfless altruism, or deep faith.

This diversity and richness of Buddhism can seem confusing, but it is in keeping with the Buddha's original teaching. The Buddha said clearly that the Dharma is **whatever** helps us to develop spiritually. He also said that the teachings he had given during his lifetime were just a small fraction of the genuine Dharma teachings that could be offered to sentient beings – as he put it, like a handful of leaves compared to all the leaves in the forest. In saying this he was in effect giving his approval for his more highly developed followers in later ages – those who had followed the path and realised its fruits - to develop the teachings for their own time and place.

The Path of Regular Steps

But although the diversity and richness of the Dharma is a natural development of the Buddha's teaching, it can still pose a problem for present day Buddhists. In any bookshop we have easy access to a vast range of different teachings, aimed at many different levels of experience, and from many different schools, in a way that has never been the case for Buddhists in the past. How can we make sense of it all, let alone go for refuge to this confusing mass of practices and ideas?

One answer is that we need to commit ourselves – at least provisionally – to practising one version of the path, and then see that as the most important part of the Dharma, for us, for the time being. If we pick up a bit from one book here, then practise something else from another tradition when we get bored, then move on to the next thing that catches our eye, we will not get far. (As one teacher has put it, it may be possible to get from Bombay to New York by travelling either East, West, North, or South; but if we go a few miles East, then a few miles North, then a few miles West, then a few miles South, we will end up back where we started.) At some point we need to stop trying out a bit of this and a bit of that, and start treading the

‘Path of Regular Steps’. We need to follow a coherent, progressive path of practice, where each step lays the foundation for the next, in a context where we can get advice and support from other people who have trodden the same path themselves.

The Dharma is a path of growth, and growth happens in a systematic, organic way, with one step following another, as with the growth of a plant. There is no point in trying to get a recently sprouted seedling to produce flowers. At the present moment it needs to produce leaves and roots. If the way we treat it is not appropriate for its stage of growth, it will not benefit, and we may actually harm it. Practising the Dharma is much the same.

So we need to follow a progressive path of practice. This normally means following the path as set out by one particular tradition, especially in the earlier stages. When we become Mitras we commit ourselves provisionally to the Triratna Buddhist Community as our context for practice. Along with this we commit ourselves to practising the path as set out by Triratna – at least provisionally, for the time being. We need to give this path an honest try, and see if it works. The path offered by Triratna is an attempt to apply the fundamental teachings and practices of Buddhism in a balanced way, which is firmly rooted in the basic Buddhist tradition, yet adapted for present-day needs and conditions. Committing ourselves to this particular path does not mean that we cannot get inspiration from other traditions. But it does give us the basic framework of understanding and regular practice that allows us to benefit from what inspires us in the whole Buddhist tradition, rather than just being confused and distracted by the diversity of teachings on offer.

What Going for Refuge to the Dharma is

Confidence and commitment to practice

So the most basic level of Going for Refuge to the Dharma is to be committed to practising the teaching as it applies to us here and now, in the particular version of the path we are following, and among the spiritual community we are in contact with – in our case Triratna. For most of us this starts with a recognition that the parts of the Dharma we have been introduced to make sense, and that the practices we have tried have had a positive effect on us. We may also see that the path seems to have had a positive effect on other people who have been practising longer than we have. So we develop some basic confidence in the main teachings of Buddhism.

Our confidence then leads us to a firm decision to practice what is relevant to us now, at our particular stage of the path, for the sake of our own well-being, and also for the well-being of others around us. This commitment to practising the teachings that we need at our present stage of progress is probably the most important part of going for refuge to the Dharma. For one person it might be a commitment to meditate every day, to express less negativity in speech, or to spend time with other Buddhists. For someone else it might take a different form because of different needs; and even in the case of a single individual it will change over time.

‘Sense of rightness’

Beyond this everyday commitment to putting the teachings into practice, Going for Refuge to the Dharma may, for some people, involve an intuitive, heartfelt sense of the rightness of the teachings. We may experience a sense of certainty that can seem too deep for words, a sense of the profound importance of what we have come across, or a sense of personal connection, almost as though we were remembering the teachings rather than coming across them for the first time. We may have a sense that what is essential in the Dharma does in fact emanate from a consciousness higher than our own, and a commitment to approach it with the respect

and even reverence it deserves. It may involve a sense of gratitude, fuelled by a recognition that without a viable spiritual path life would be meaningless. And this gratitude may express itself in a desire to help make the Dharma available to others, knowing that other people need the Dharma just as much as we do.

The mythic dimension

To go for refuge to the Dharma in the fullest way we need to get rid of any sense that the Dharma consists of normal (if rather clever) ideas, stemming from people much like ourselves – on a similar level to the books on self-improvement we can find in any bookshop. Much of the written Dharma emanates from the historical Buddha himself. Other parts originate from other individuals who were also Enlightened, or perhaps were able to contact the Enlightened Mind in deep meditation. In each case the origin is the Enlightened Mind, a level of consciousness far beyond our own.

Recognising that the Dharma comes from a higher consciousness or level of being can open us up to a more poetic or mythic vision, which will enrich our experience of going for refuge to the Dharma. The Dharma is sometimes spoken of as ‘the voice of the Buddha’, with ‘the Buddha’ here standing not just for a historical individual, but for a principle at work both in the universe and in the depths of our being – a principle that is seeking to help us to grow and evolve. This ‘voice of the Buddha’ is sometimes traditionally said to speak to each individual in their own language, telling them exactly what they need to know at their present level of development.

Sangharakshita has spoken of the Dharma as the action of the Enlightened Mind as it seeks to communicate with unenlightened beings like ourselves. He goes on to say that concepts and language are not the only way the Enlightened Mind communicates with us. In fact words are the grossest form the Dharma can take – symbols and images are a richer form of communication:

The Enlightened mind comes down a step, as it were, to the level of ...images. On this level are... images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas... images benign and wrathful; images, perhaps above all, that are brilliantly coloured and luminous, arising out of the depths of infinite space. They are not created by the individual human mind, nor by the collective consciousness, nor even by the collective unconscious. Perhaps these images are not created at all, but are as it were, co-eternal with the Enlightened consciousness itself... These images... reveal everything. They reveal it in terms of form or colour. On this level, no thoughts, no ideas, or words are necessary.³

Other Buddhist teachers have also emphasised that the Dharma need not be limited to words and ideas:

The language of religion is not the language of concepts but of symbols. When these symbols are conceptualized, they lose their vitality, their multi-dimensionality, and are reduced to mere clichés. The multi-dimensionality of a symbol makes it the representative of a higher reality, in which the religious person, like a true poet or artist, is at home. Symbols are the key to the “other reality”, they open up for us new dimensions of experience. Wherever Buddhism established itself, art and literature flourished. Sculpture, painting and architecture, poetry and philosophy, music and dance-drama became forms of expression for a religious world-feeling, and nature

3 Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, p72.

herself became a living textbook for inner vision, as the Zen landscape painters and poets of the Far East show us. The “other reality” cannot be described using the categories of our everyday consciousness, it can only be discovered by means of certain symbols or archetypal forms.⁴

This more poetic way of talking about the Dharma will not appeal to everyone. Many people will prefer a more down-to-earth approach, and will be quite happy to relate to the Dharma as the written teachings. But for those who think more in terms of symbols and images than words and concepts, this way of seeing the Dharma can bring a greater depth to our Going for Refuge. And even for the most rationalistic a little of this approach can be helpful. If we can relate to the Dharma imaginatively in this way, our Going for Refuge to the Dharma becomes a commitment to be responsive to the promptings of what is higher in the universe and in ourselves, whatever form this takes - whether this be an intuitive sense of faith, a heartfelt response to a Buddhist image or mantra, our admiration of a spiritually developed person, or our strong sense of rightness and certainty about a piece of Dharma expressed in words.

What Going for Refuge to the Dharma is not

Not limited to one formulation

The Dharma is mainly a set of methods for spiritual growth, rather than a statement about the nature of reality. The Buddha was very reluctant to say much about reality or Enlightenment, knowing that people would only misunderstand if they had not experienced it for themselves. Nevertheless, we humans need some basic statements about the nature of truth to put us on the right track. So the Buddha did on occasions try to convey certain truths about reality in words – although these usually related to the human condition rather than to abstract metaphysics.

The Four Noble Truths, which we looked at last week as a basic formulation that in some ways underlies the whole Dharma, are one such statement. But no set of words or ideas can ever truly communicate Enlightenment, and even the Four Noble Truths are no exception. The Four Noble Truths give us a concise and helpful concept to start us off, but in our desire for understanding and clarity we must not think that they, or any other idea expressed in words, could ever sum up the Dharma. The Four Noble Truths just express one angle on Enlightenment, the fact that it is the ultimate cure for dissatisfaction. But the Buddhist tradition makes it clear that Enlightenment is much more than that. Certainly, when we get close to Enlightenment we will rise above all suffering and dissatisfaction. We will experience true happiness, even bliss. But that does not begin to fully describe what it would be like. In reality Enlightenment is a higher state of being with many dimensions, arrived at by a process of growth and evolution, and it is quite beyond our present imagination

Not dogmatism or fundamentalism

So Going for Refuge to the Dharma does not mean blind faith or dogmatism. Neither does it mean accepting uncritically everything that is in the Buddhist scriptures. The scriptures were passed down as an oral tradition for hundreds of years, then written down and copied over and over, as well as being translated from one language to another. In the process parts were no doubt left out or added, and parts were misunderstood and distorted. So we need to check the written words against experience – we need to ask, ‘what actually works’? This is another reason why we need to practice within a living tradition, learning from other people who have

⁴ Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Creative Meditation and Multidimensional Consciousness*.

been practising longer than we have, who have had a chance to find out from experience what works in our situation, and who in their turn learned from others before them.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Has practising the Dharma had a positive effect on you so far? What practices or teachings have had most effect?
2. Which aspects of the Dharma do you have most confidence in? Which parts are you sure are right?
3. If you were to sum up your commitment to the Dharma in a few points you are committed to practising on a daily basis, what would these be?
4. Are there any aspects of the Dharma that particularly inspire you?
5. How do you relate to the idea that the Dharma can also be communicated through symbols and images? Have any symbols or images had an effect on you? Are there any other ways the Dharma can be communicated?

Introduction

The Triratna Buddhist Community has a strong tradition of emphasising the crucial importance of the spiritual community, or Sangha. Experience shows that we need the Sangha to practice effectively. The people we mix with have a profound effect on us. We need the support and encouragement of like-minded people. We need advice and inspiration from people who are somewhat further along the path. And we need a social context of trust, honesty, and friendship if we are to open up and develop the emotional warmth that is an essential part of spiritual development. This crucial importance of the Sangha has always been recognised in Buddhism, and in these individualistic times it is more important than ever.

So the Sangha is important as a means to an end – the end being our own spiritual progress. But it is also important as an end in itself. For many people the most attractive thing about being a Buddhist is the Sangha itself. And the ideal of helping to build a community of people who relate to each other on the basis of warmth, generosity, and openness can be one of the most inspiring aspects of the spiritual life.

The texts covered in the last two sessions of Part 1 of the course are meant to bring out these two aspects of Sangha. In the first, we look at a story from the Pali Canon that illustrates the need for a spiritual friendship as an essential part of our own development – and gives us a clear warning against spiritual individualism. In the last session two modern Buddhists use some other characters from the Pali Canon to illustrate how the ideal of Sangha can be an inspiring goal in its own right.

‘Sangha as a means to an end: the story of Meghiya’

Text from The Udāna, The Meghiya Chapter, based on the translations of Woodward and Ireland.

‘Thus have I heard. Once the Buddha was staying at Cālikā, on Cālikā Hill. Now on that occasion the venerable Meghiya was in attendance on the Buddha. The venerable Meghiya came to the Buddha, saluted him, stood at one side, and said to the Exalted One:

“I desire, sir, to go to Jantu village for alms food.”

“Do whatever you think it is time for, Meghiya.”

So the venerable Meghiya, robing himself and taking his bowl and robe, went to Jantu village in search of alms food, and after making his rounds and eating his meal he went towards the bank of the river Kimikālā. And on reaching it, while taking exercise by walking up and down, he saw a lovely, delightful mango-grove. At the sight of it he thought:

“Truly lovely and delightful is this mango-grove! Surely this would be a good place for a clansman to work on his meditation. If the Exalted One will give me leave, I would like to come here to this mango-grove to practice meditation.”

So the venerable Meghiya went to the Exalted One and sat down at one side, and told the Exalted One what he had thought, saying:

“If the Exalted One will give me leave, I would like to go to that mango-grove to practice meditation.”

At these words the Exalted One said to the venerable Meghiya:

“Wait a little, Meghiya. I am alone until some other monk arrives.”

Then a second time the venerable Meghiya said to the Exalted One:

“Sir, the Exalted One has nothing more to do, he has nothing more to add to what he has done. But for me, sir, there is more yet to be done, there is more to be added to what I have done. If the Exalted One will give me leave, I would like to go to that mango-grove to practice meditation.”

Then a second time the Exalted One replied:

“Wait a little, Meghiya. I am alone until some other monk arrives.”

Then yet a third time the venerable Meghiya made his request, and the Exalted One replied:

“Well, Meghiya, what can I say when you talk of practising meditation? Do what you think it is time for, Meghiya.”

So the venerable Meghiya rose from his seat, saluted the Exalted One, and went to that mango-grove, and on reaching it he plunged into it and sat down at the foot of a tree. But while Meghiya was staying in that mango-grove there habitually came upon him three unskilful forms of thought, namely, lustful thoughts, malicious thoughts, and harmful thoughts. Then the venerable Meghiya thought:

“This is certainly strange! This is certainly surprising, that I, who went forth from home to the homeless life so full of faith, should be assailed by these unskilful forms of thought, namely, lustful thoughts, malicious thoughts, and harmful thoughts!”

So he left his solitude and went to the Exalted One, and said:

“Sir, while I was staying in that mango-grove there habitually came upon me three unskilful forms of thought. Then, sir, I thought: This is certainly strange! This is surprising, that I should be assailed in this way!”

The Buddha replied:

“Meghiya, when the heart's release is immature, five things lead to its maturity. What are these five?

Meghiya, a monk needs spiritual friends, good associates, he needs the companionship of good people. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the first thing that leads to its maturity.

Then again, Meghiya, a monk should be virtuous, keeping to his vows, practising ethical behaviour, seeing danger even in small faults, training himself in the precepts. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the second thing that leads to its maturity.

Then again, Meghiya, a monk should be surrounded by talk that is serious and opens up the heart, that conduces to detachment, to dispassion, to calm, to understanding, to insight, to nibbāna; that is to say, talk about having few wants, about contentment, about avoiding worldly company, about arousing energy; talk about ethics, meditation and wisdom; talk about liberation, knowledge and insight. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the third thing that leads to its maturity.

Then again, Meghiya, a monk needs to be firm and energetic in abandoning what is unskillful and acquiring what is skillful. He should be stout and strong in effort, not laying aside the burden of pursuing what is skillful. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the fourth thing that leads to its maturity.

Finally, Meghiya, a monk should have insight, he should be endowed with the penetrating insight that sees all things rise and fall, and leads to the end of suffering. When the heart's release is immature, Meghiya, this is the fifth thing that leads to its maturity.

Now, Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship can be expected to become virtuous, he will keep to his vows, he will practice ethical behaviour, he will see danger even in small faults, he will train himself in the precepts. Also Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship will be surrounded by talk that is serious, about meditation, insight and liberation. And again Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship can be expected to be firm and energetic in abandoning what is unskillful and acquiring what is skillful. And finally, Meghiya, a monk who has spiritual friendship can be expected to develop the penetrating insight that leads to the end of suffering.'



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What can we deduce about Meghiya's character from this story?
2. Why do you think that Meghiya is plagued by unskillful thoughts when he is alone in the mango grove?
3. Why is he so surprised by this? Why didn't this happen when he was with the Buddha?
4. What is the connection between spiritual friendship and the other conditions that the Buddha says lead to "the heart's release"? (You could draw a diagram of how these lead to each other.)
5. Meghiya learned a valuable lesson from his 'bad' meditations, about how the conditions in which we live affect our meditation practice. How could we reorganise our lives to improve our meditation practice?

The 'horizontal' dimension of spiritual friendship

Text abridged from Buddhism and Friendship, Subhuti with Subhamati, Chapter 2: One in Mind: Friendship as the Goal.

In the story of Meghiya, we see his selfishness and naivety contrasted with the Buddha's tactful wisdom. In this sense the friendship we are shown is unequal, for one of the partners is spiritually more advanced than the other. This is an important kind of spiritual friendship, but it is not the only one.

There is also a kind of friendship that exists between those who are approximately on the same level. These friends are like spiritual brothers or sisters, or, if you prefer, fellow wayfarers. Although friends of this kind are more easily found than guides, they too are precious. The spiritual path is long, arduous, and easily lost. Our guide, if we are lucky enough to have one, is likely to have many other claims on his or her attention, and won't always be at hand to resolve our doubts, revive our flagging spirits, or steer us past the byways that tempt our erring feet. It is important to have not just a guide but also companions on the path. Such companions represent the 'horizontal' dimension of spiritual friendship.

In Buddhism spiritual friendship (*kalyāṇa mitratā*) was originally understood to include not only teacher-disciple relationships, but also any friendship between good people who revere the Buddha and his Dharma. This emerges clearly from, for example, the Buddha's teaching to the lay disciple Dighajanu:

And what is friendship [*kalyāṇa mitratā*]? Here... in whatever village or town a family man dwells, he associates with householders or their sons, whether young or old, who are of mature virtue, generosity and wisdom; he converses with them and engages in discussion with them. He emulates them in regard to their accomplishment in faith, virtue, generosity, and wisdom. This is called good friendship.

Although these words were spoken to a layman, we should not conclude that horizontal friendship was only relevant to lay disciples. One could ask for no better example of it than the friendship between Sāriputta and Moggallāna, who were foremost among the Buddha's monks. For me the most interesting aspect of their relationship is that Sāriputta and Moggallāna remained friends even after their Enlightenment. It seems that friendship belongs not only to the path but also to the goal of the spiritual life. It is important to grasp this point, because when we understand spiritual friendship only in terms of the path, we are in danger of cultivating friendship not for itself, but 'for the sake of my spiritual development'. Thinking in this way, we could end up thinking of our friends as 'equipment' in the service of our own spiritual ambitions, in which case they wouldn't really be friends at all. We can only

experience genuine friendship when we see it as an end in itself, or at least as an intrinsic part of some larger end.

Three Friends

The vision of friendship as part of the goal is expressed in a *sutta* (or discourse), which tells the moving story of Anuruddha and his friends.

Anuruddha, Nandiya and Kimbila are staying together in a quiet forest grove, where the Buddha goes to visit them one evening, after emerging from solitary meditation. On becoming aware of their teacher's arrival, the three monks hasten to welcome him, one relieving him of his bowl and outer robe, another making a seat ready, the third bringing water to bathe his feet. When they are all seated the Buddha first checks that they are in good health and adequately supplied with food. He then begins to ask them about their way of life together. His first question is, in essence, whether they get on well with one another. Anuruddha confirms that he and the other two are 'living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes.'

The Buddha (who knows very well that not all his monks get along so cordially) enquires how they manage to do so. Anuruddha explains that he considers himself fortunate to be living the spiritual life together with such companions as Nandiya and Kimbila. To do so is, in his opinion, a 'great gain' for him. The way they live together is an expression of *mettā*. Accordingly he maintains a positive attitude towards the other two in every possible way - kindly deeds, affectionate speech, and loving thoughts. Anuruddha's words suggest that he has been developing *mettā* towards his companions as a practice, something nurtured through mindfulness, a conscious part of the spiritual life.

However what began as a practice has now become second nature. He has reached the point of routinely putting the others' desires before his own. He simply asks himself, 'Why should I not set aside what I wish to do, and do what others wish to do?' And then he does precisely that. In conclusion, he tells the Buddha, 'We are different in body, venerable sir, but one in mind.'

Nandiya and Kimbila, for their part, reply to the Buddha in the same way, each saying that he has surrendered his own inclinations and is living according to the will of the other two. They all agree that they are 'different in body, but one in mind.' As they have all given up their wills to each other, there is no question of one dominating the other two. It seems that they experience a shared will, or rather a mysterious coincidence of wills, based on a deep mutual awareness and harmony.

The Buddha expresses his approval of the three friends' way of life, and enquires what spiritual fruits it has produced. He asks them, 'But while you abide thus... have you attained any superhuman state, a distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones?' Replying on behalf of the others, Anuruddha now reveals that all three of them have passed through the whole range of spiritual and transcendental attainments. In other words they are all Arahants - fully Enlightened. The Buddha is delighted by this wonderful news.

Eventually, after some further talk, he leaves them. At this point, Nandiya and Kimbila have a question for Anuruddha: 'Have we ever told you that we have achieved all those things that you have credited us with? In reply Anuruddha admits that the other two have never actually told him as much. Nevertheless he knows their 'abidings and attainments' by 'encompassing' their minds with his own. In other words, he has direct knowledge of their inner states, without any need for words. The fact that Anuruddha can speak confidently of Nandiya's and

Kimbila's spiritual attainments, without having heard anything on the subject, suggests that the expression 'one in mind' is not just a figure of speech, but more literally true than we might have guessed.

The story of the three friends shows us spiritual friendship as simultaneously belonging to the path and the goal. Indeed, the discourse seems to suggest that there is a kind of ascending spiral, in which a life lived in friendship leads upwards to spiritual realization, which in turn bears the fruit of deeper friendship and fuller mutual communion.

Sangha as networks of friendship

In the example of Anuruddha, Nandiya, and Kimbila, we see *kalyāṇa mitratā* uniting a group of three disciples so that they form a circle of friendship. This reminds us that, while friendship is essentially a relationship between two people, it is by no means an exclusive relationship. A friend is free to have other friends, and two friends may have mutual friends. Among people who are committed to the same spiritual ideal, this interlocking pattern of friendship is the natural state of affairs.

It seems to me that such a network of spiritual friends, united by their common orientation to the Buddha and the Dharma, is intrinsic to the meaning of what Buddhists call sangha. The word sangha signifies the Buddhist spiritual community. It is often said or implied that only monks count as part of the sangha. Actually it would be more correct to say that monks constitute one section of the spiritual community. Tradition also recognises a wider *mahā-sangha* or 'great community', including the Buddha's lay disciples.

Friendship is intrinsic to the meaning of sangha. It is not usually possible (even within a single locality) for every member of the sangha to be a personal friend of every other. Nevertheless it seems to me that an individual only truly participates in the sangha by means of friendship with at least some of its members.

The friendships that make up a sangha naturally tend to grow. They grow in depth as friends get to know each other better, and as they tread more and more of the spiritual path in one another's company. Such friendships also tend to grow in number: new friendships are formed within the existing sangha, and the sangha naturally attracts new members. The real growth of a sangha consists in the entry of individuals into this web of friendships.

The description of the life of Anuruddha and his friends offers a kind of snapshot of an ideal sangha in miniature. To participate in the Sangha (at its highest) is to lead a life like that shared by these three: to dwell in such harmony with spiritual friends as to become 'one in mind' with them. This is indeed a high ideal - perhaps one that we don't find easy to imagine as a living reality. But while the loftiness of the ideal may be a little daunting, it does serve to show clearly the direction in which we need to go if we want to know for ourselves the deeper meaning of sangha.

The Three Jewels

The enlightened members of the spiritual community, such as Anuruddha and his two friends, are a kind of higher Sangha within the sangha. This higher Sangha (sometimes distinguished by writing it with a capital S) is in fact one of the Three Jewels, the three most precious things in Buddhism, along with the Buddha and the Dharma.

The fact that Buddhism chooses to honour three things as centrally important suggests that the essential core of Buddhism cannot be satisfactorily encapsulated in a single image or idea,

and that we will only understand it when we have looked at it from three viewpoints - viewing it 'in the round' so to speak. The Buddha jewel represents the spiritual ideal as embodied in a human individual. The Dharma jewel is the spiritual ideal viewed in the abstract as ultimate truth and spiritual means. The Sangha jewel is the spiritual ideal as embodied in those who are advanced on the spiritual path. But I think we will miss the full significance of the Sangha jewel if we think of it merely as a category or class of individuals. To my mind the Sangha (with or without a capital S) is a living organism, and its lifeblood is spiritual friendship.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What was your first impression of the Buddhists you met when you went along to a Buddhist Centre? How important was this in your decision to get more involved?
2. What qualities do you particularly value (or not!) about the Sangha you have come into contact with so far?
3. Do you notice a difference in the quality of the friendships you see among Buddhists, as compared to most other people?
4. Do you find the idea of being 'many in body, but one in mind' attractive, or unattractive. Do you think it would be possible to be like this without sacrificing your individuality?
5. How important is the Sangha to you, as a factor in your becoming a Buddhist?
6. Having gone into a bit more depth about each of the Three Jewels over the last few weeks, which do you find most inspiring or important to you now?

1.2

Exploring Buddhist Practice The Five Precepts



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Introduction

As we saw in the first part, this course is designed to help us explore the three declarations we make when we become a mitra:

- I think of myself as a Buddhist.
- I am trying to practice the Five Precepts.
- The Triratna Buddhist Community is the context in which I want to practice, at least for the foreseeable future.

In this second section of the course we move on from looking at what it means to be a Buddhist, to looking at what it means to practice the Five Precepts. This week we will look at why ethics is such an important part of the spiritual path. Then in the next five weeks we will look at each of the Five Precepts one by one. In later parts of the course we will broaden the way we look at the second declaration, to include other ways we put Buddhism into practice in daily life, including the practice of meditation, and the practice of applying Buddhist ideas to the way we think about life.

The Threefold Path

The simplest traditional description of the Buddhist path divides it into three stages:

- The stage of ethics
- The stage of meditation
- The stage of wisdom

Practising the precepts belongs to the stage of ethics, so according to tradition it is logical that we should look at this first, before we look at meditation or wisdom. But although this approach is logical according to tradition, it does not fit with the way many of us in the West start to practice Buddhism. Many of us start with meditation, and only begin to think about our ethics as a result of our experience of meditation. Some of us start with a fascination for Buddhist ideas, and only later start to put these into practice in our lives.

With this in mind it is important that we don't see this threefold path too rigidly. We should not take it to mean that we can't make progress with our meditation until our ethics are perfect, or that we can't align ourselves more closely with reality until we are great meditators. We might be better to see our progress as less like following a path – where you must finish one section before setting foot on the next – than like the unfolding of the petals of a flower, where the different petals open together, but the inner ones cannot open faster than the outer ones allow.

But although it is true that many people can make good progress with meditation for some time without paying much attention to their ethics, most people who have been practising for longer come to see that the idea of the threefold path contains an important truth. There is not much point in trying to develop positive mental states for an hour or so each day in meditation if we are developing negative states in most of the other hours of our lives by the way we act and speak. And often the way to improve our meditation is not so much to look at what we do in meditation, as to look at what we do outside it, in the rest of our life. Unless we take our positive mental states off our meditation cushion and start expressing them in our daily activities, after a while our meditation will hit a plateau – or even a brick wall.

The problem with ethics

Many people in the West have negative associations with the whole idea of ethics, because this has become mixed up with ideas of ‘good’ behaviour that can limit our individuality and be unhelpful for our development. But a true practice of ethics is not about limiting our individuality – it is about expressing it. The word ‘ethic’ is derived from the Greek word ‘ethos’. To be truly ethical is to live by our ethos: to live by a set of principles and values we have freely chosen, because they reflect our deepest aspirations and sense of meaning. For many of us this idea has become confused with distorted versions of ethics, the most obvious of which are authoritarian ethics and conventional ethics.

In an authoritarian system of ethics, a code of behaviour is imposed on us from outside – rather than springing from our own sense of the deep meaning of life – and then enforced by a system of reward and punishment. Any ethical system based on the idea of a judging, punishing God, who demands that we obey his commandments (or else!) is bound to be authoritarian. This is not to say that all Christians, Jews, or Muslims practice ethics at this low level, but many of us have been exposed to a crude version of theistic religion in childhood, and this has affected our perceptions of what ethics is about.

Another distortion of true ethics is what we might call conventional ethics. These are rules about how we should behave that are mainly about conforming to what is normal in a particular culture, rather than about spiritual values. Such rules are not universal, and will differ from place to place and time to time, but because they are so widely accepted by everyone around us it is easy to take them on them unthinkingly. Examples of conventional ethical values in the Anglo-Saxon and Northern European cultures include the ‘Protestant work ethic’, the extreme importance given to money and livelihood, beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and the nuclear family, aspects of political correctness, and many of the unconscious taboos that prevent us from expressing our individuality, creativity, zest for life, and warmth for others.

Authoritarian ethics and conventional ethics often go hand in hand. Society persuades us to conform by rewarding us when we do so, and by punishing us when we don’t – usually by the approval or disapproval of the people around us. We all get a necessary dose of this socialisation in childhood, before we have developed much of an ethical sense of our own. But later in life, when we are trying to develop our individual identity, we often need to rebel against the rules that have been imposed on us. And because the rules we reject are connected with what we think are religious ethics, many of us are wary of anything that goes by the name of ethics.

Buddhist ethics

We therefore need to be clear that the Buddhist idea of ethics is very different from our normal Western view. Buddhist ethics are not about restricting our freedom. They are about liberating

ourselves from the slavery of unhelpful habits, conditioning, and ways of being, and becoming potent individuals with control over the direction of our own lives. They are about behaving in ways that encourage positive emotions, and calm negative states. They are about acting in a way that gives us a sense of wholeness and self-esteem, because we are honestly trying to live up to our vision of what we could become.

In the absence of a judging God we must obey, the words 'right' and 'wrong' are inappropriate to the Buddhist idea of ethics. Instead Buddhism classes actions as either 'skilful' or 'unskilful'. Skilful behaviour is intelligent behaviour, in that it contributes to our own happiness and the happiness of others. Unskilful behaviour has the opposite effects, but it comes about because we do not see reality as it is, not because we have disobeyed some cosmic authority figure, or because we are 'bad'.

The law of karma

In traditional Buddhism, the need for ethics and the idea of karma go hand in hand. The Sanskrit word 'karma' means simply 'action'. The law of karma extends the idea of cause and effect into the area of ethics, pointing out that all our actions have consequences, for us and for others. To the extent that we behave in skilful ways, our experience in the future will be happier and brighter. To the extent that we behave in unskilful ways, our experience in the future will be unhappier and darker. Traditionally this idea of karma is connected with the idea of rebirth, so that a skilful life is seen as leading us to be reborn in beautiful, pleasant states of existence, whereas an unskilful life leads to rebirth in painful states of suffering. These effects do not happen as a reward or punishment, but simply because the world we experience around us is a reflection of our state of being. If we make ourselves into a heavenly being, we will experience a heavenly state; if we make ourselves into a hellish being, our experience will literally be hell.

Many Western Buddhists accept these traditional ideas of karma and rebirth as embodying important truths that transcend our present understanding of the world. However others find it difficult to accept the idea of rebirth, so it is important to be clear that we don't have to believe in rebirth to accept the idea of karma. It is easy to show that the law of karma operates just as much in this life as in future lives. Even in this lifetime the way we act now determines the world we will experience in the future.

We all have many strands in our being. Sometimes our thoughts are skilful, sometimes they are unskilful, and usually we have a jumble of different thoughts coming up almost at the same time. If, for example, someone asks us for money for a good purpose, we are likely to have a range of thoughts and feelings. Sometimes there will be generous thoughts, and we will have the impulse to give. Sometimes, even though we can afford to give, our thoughts will be stingy, and we may resent the fact that we have been asked. These two strands in our being may seem to pop up of their own accord, like mental weather. They are the result of our past actions and conditioning, and we have no choice about which comes up at any one time. But we do have a choice about which type of thought we put our will behind, which we identify with, which we give our energy to, and which we act upon. If we give our energy to the generous strand, this will become stronger, and the stingy strand will become weaker. If on the other hand we put our will behind the stingy strand, this will become stronger, and our generous impulses will become weaker in the future.

We are making this sort of choice – and forming our future selves – all the time. Our minds constantly throw up all sorts of thoughts and feelings. We constantly choose which of the many strands in our being we identify with and act upon. In the process we are constantly

choosing to make ourselves either larger, more expansive, and more whole, or else smaller, more cramped, and more fragmented. We are constantly forming the person we will be in the future, and this in turn determines the sort of world we will experience, just as surely as if we were choosing a realm in which to be reborn. We all see the world through the spectacles of our mental states. Even though we humans apparently all inhabit the same physical space, and are subjected to the same range of pleasant and painful experiences, we experience this very differently according to the nature of our being. If we make ourselves into a larger, more positive and expansive being, then we will experience a deep happiness which does not depend on outer circumstances. But if we make ourselves into a smaller, more negative being, then we will have a cramped, dark, unhappy experience, even if our outer circumstances are very pleasant.

It will be obvious from this discussion of the law of karma that the practice of ethics is a crucial part of our path. Choosing skilful rather than unskilful actions is an essential part of the way we change in positive ways, so that we come to express more and more of our spiritual potential. Meditation without a conscious practice of ethics is not enough to allow us to do this, and nor is even the most sophisticated understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

Aspects of Ethics

Beyond the terrible trio

In fact the importance of ethics is so central to the path that it has many different aspects, and can be expressed in many different ways – although in a sense these are all just different ways of saying the same thing. One way of putting it is simply to say that when we act skilfully we encourage skilful mental states in ourselves, whereas when we act unskilfully we encourage negative states based on ill-will, craving, and delusion. As the whole point of the Buddhist path is to move beyond this terrible trio, it is obvious that acting skilfully is not an optional extra.

Acting ‘as if’

Another way of putting it is to say that part of the way we become an Enlightened being is to act as if we were already an Enlightened being. A Buddha is spontaneously skilful, naturally living on the basis of solidarity with others, generosity, freedom from craving, straightforward integrity, and clear awareness. For us these qualities don’t yet always come naturally, although we all carry the seeds of them inside us. So at the moment we often need to make a conscious effort to act on these qualities – acting as if we were Enlightened – to help these seeds to grow. In this way over time it becomes more and more natural and effortless for us to act skilfully, as we grow towards our own Enlightenment.

Connecting with our higher self

Another way of putting it is to think in terms of acting on the impulses of our higher self, so that in acting skilfully we strengthen our connection with our own deepest nature. Many people have a sense of having a sort of higher self, which can act as a guiding voice and a source of strength and wisdom. When we are in contact with this higher aspect of ourselves we feel supported and on the right track, whereas when we are cut off from this source of strength we feel adrift and out of harmony with ourselves. Some schools of Buddhism speak in terms of us all having ‘Buddha Nature’, which is usually covered over by the grime of our unskilful habits. When we act unskilfully we cut ourselves off from this higher self, which leaves us weak and miserable. But when we express more of our higher self – when we act skilfully – we strengthen our connection with what is best in ourselves, so that we naturally feel stronger and happier. By consistently acting skilfully, we gradually come to express more

and more of this higher self, so that over time it comes to be a larger and larger part of our being.

Ethics, self-transcendence, and wisdom

So far in considering why we need to practice ethics we have talked mainly in terms of how we ourselves benefit. Acting ethically promotes enjoyable positive states, protects us from painful negative states, and helps us to grow and develop, which is the ultimate source of happiness. But this explanation is one-sided, and could give the impression that Buddhism encourages a self-centred attitude to the spiritual path. We do not avoid harming others – for example – because this would harm us. We avoid it because it would harm others! Acting ethically is not just about our own happiness, our own development, or our own mental states. It is about expressing – and therefore strengthening – our sense of interconnectedness and empathy with other beings. This sense of deep connection with the universe around us is an integral part of the experience of Enlightenment.

To see with the eyes of wisdom is to see that we cannot separate ourselves from others and the world around us. We are all part of each other. When we hurt another we hurt ourselves, and when we benefit another we benefit ourselves. Ultimately Buddhist ethics are about cultivating and expressing self-transcending wisdom in our daily lives, which means rising above our own small personal point of view, and acting from a more universal, more spacious, less self-centred perspective. This is to express our 'higher self'. It is to act in the best interests of our own real self, and in the best interests of other beings and the universe as a whole.

The five precepts

To help us act skilfully in the hurly-burly of everyday life we need some simple guidelines we can carry constantly in our mind. The simplest and most general set of ethical guidelines in Buddhism are the Five Precepts. These are guides to how an Enlightened being would behave, which we can follow in order to act as if we were an Enlightened being, and therefore to develop our own potential for Enlightenment.

The Five Precepts express a set of fundamental spiritual principles: kindness, generosity, contentment, integrity, and awareness. Obviously they are not 'commandments', and it is important that we don't take them on as though they were imposed on us from outside. We need to think for ourselves about the principles involved, and to decide whether we agree that they express our own deep values. In doing this it might help to think about what it would be like to aim for the opposite – cruelty, stinginess, craving, dishonesty, and escapism. It is possible that someone might take one of these as a guiding value, but it is very difficult to see how such a person could be a Buddhist! In fact the principles behind the Five Precepts are so basic to any sort of spiritual life that they probably seem self-evident. Accepting these principles as reflecting our own deep values is fundamental to becoming a Buddhist.

Each of the Five Precepts has a 'positive' and a 'negative' form. The negative forms advise us what not to do – they set alarm bells ringing when we are about to do or say something unskilful. The positive forms express the general principles we should be aiming for, and are the more general and important of the two sets.

Pitfalls

There are at least two dangers we need to watch for as we practice ethics. The first is importing concepts of obedience and 'sin' from other religious traditions, which can feed a sense of guilt and unworthiness. The second is being unrealistically hard on ourselves. The Precepts are guidelines about how an Enlightened being would behave. We are not Enlightened, and until

we are it is impossible for us to keep the Precepts perfectly. (Imagine, for example, what it would be like to be totally generous, with no sense of anything being ‘mine’.) The Precepts are sometimes called ‘training principles’ and it is important that we see them in this spirit – as practices we train ourselves with, so that we gradually get better at them. Acting ethically is a skill. If with any other skill – say playing the piano – we expected to be perfect from the start, and then mentally beat ourselves up whenever we hit a wrong note, we would soon give up.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What first interested you in Buddhism – ethics, meditation, or wisdom? Which did you practice first?
2. What were your associations with the word ‘ethics’ before you started this course? How had this been influenced by authoritarian or conventional versions of ethics?
3. Do you believe that whether we act skilfully or not now determines whether our future experience is bright or dark? What other factors might contribute?
4. We could see ethics as about developing positive states and avoiding negative ones, about acting ‘as if’ we were Enlightened, about connecting with our “higher self”, or about expressing our interconnectedness with others. Which explanation appeals to you most? Do you think they are connected?
5. Do the principles expressed by the Five Precepts reflect your own values? Are there any you don’t relate to? Are there any other principles you would add to make your own set of precepts? (In thinking about this you might bring to mind someone you admire for their spiritual qualities, and think about what qualities they exemplify.)
6. Do you know the Five Precepts by heart? Do you think this helps us practice them?

Positive form: *With deeds of loving kindness I purify my body.*

Negative form: *I undertake the training principle of not harming living beings.*

Pāli: *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

Introduction

In this text Sangharakshita looks at the First Precept – the ethical guideline that in a sense underlies all the others. The text we are using is condensed from a book on the ten precepts taken on by members of the Triratna Buddhist Order, so Sangharakshita does not pull his punches – he presents the precept as a challenging practice, which at the highest level expresses our solidarity and interconnectedness with other beings. In the process he introduces the idea of the love mode and power mode – terms which have entered the vocabulary of Triratna – and makes some practical suggestions that may be controversial for some people.

One point that is worth noting is that here Sangharakshita talks about the precept in its negative form as not killing other beings, whereas it is perhaps more normal to talk in terms of not harming. The principle is the same – killing is the most extreme form of harming, but whenever we do either we give priority to our own egocentric desires over our solidarity with other beings.

The Principle of Abstaining from Killing Living Beings; or Love

Text condensed from The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Sangharakshita, Part 2, Chapter 1

The more important an ethical principle is, the more likely it is to be overlooked. Even Buddhists tend to think that they are observing the First Precept anyway, so there is no need for them to think about it. After all, there are much more interesting and important aspects of the Dharma, and simple and obvious things like the First Precept can safely be left to the dull and unintelligent while one explores the secrets of Tantra or the mysteries of Zen.

But the truth is the First Precept is not to be disposed of in this way. The principle of abstention from killing living beings, or Love, in fact runs very deep in life, both social and spiritual, and its ramifications are not only very extensive but enormously significant. It is the most direct and important manifestation of the act of Going for Refuge. Moreover it is a principle that finds expression in all the other precepts.

Why is killing unskilful?

Firstly, why should killing be wrong? One explanation, of course is that as the expression of a mental state rooted in greed, hatred and delusion (or at least two of these), killing is an unskilful act in that it brings suffering to the doer and prevents him from attaining

Enlightenment. But we can go deeper than that. Killing is the absolute negation of the solidarity of one living being with another. It represents the most extreme form that the negation of one ego by another, or the assertion of one ego at the expense of the other, can possibly take.

The principle of love

Killing is tantamount to the rejection of the most basic principle of ethics, just as the cultivation of love represents this principle in its positive form. As Shelley so finely says:

The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his own species must become his own.

In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, or 'Entry into the Way of Enlightenment', Śāntideva gives this principle what is probably its highest expression in Buddhist literature. In his chapter on 'Meditation', after describing how a man stills vain imaginings and strengthens his 'Will to Enlightenment' (*Bodhicitta*), he proceeds:

First he will diligently foster the thought that his fellow creatures are the same as himself. "All have the same sorrows, the same joys as myself, and I must guard them like myself. The body, manifold of parts in its division of members, must be preserved as a whole; and so likewise this manifold universe has its sorrow and its joy in common...I must destroy the pain of another as though it were my own...I must show kindness to others, for they are creatures as I am myself...Then, as I would guard myself from evil repute, so I will frame a spirit of helpfulness and tenderness towards others."

...I will cease to live as self, and will take as myself my fellow creatures. We love our hands and other limbs, as members of the body; then why not love other living beings, as members of the universe?...Thus in doing service to others pride, admiration and desire for reward find no place, for thereby we satisfy the wants of our own self. Then, as thou wouldst guard thyself against suffering and sorrow, so exercise the spirit of helpfulness and tenderness towards the world.

This is what is known as the practice of equality of self and other, and the substitution of self and others. Blake gives succinct expression to the same principle when he declares 'To put another before you is the most sublime act.'

The Love which is the positive expression of the First Precept is no mere flabby sentiment, but the vigorous expression of an imaginative identification with other living beings. 'Love' is in fact far too weak a word for the positive counterpart of non-killing or non-violence, and even *maitrī*, (*Pāli mettā*) is not altogether satisfactory. Just as killing represents the absolute negation of another's being, 'Love' in this sense represents its absolute affirmation. As such it is not erotic love, or parental love, or even friendly love. It is a cherishing, protecting, maturing love which has the same kind of effect on the spiritual being of others as the light and heat of the sun have on their physical being.

The love mode and the power mode

To operate according to the power mode means to relate to other living beings in such a way as to negate rather than affirm their being. To operate in accordance with the love mode is the opposite of this. Observance of the First Precept means that, as a result of our imaginative identification with others, we not only abstain from actually killing living beings, but operate more and more in accordance with the love mode and less and less in accordance with the power mode. In this way there takes place within us a change so great as to amount to a change in our centre of gravity.

It will not, of course, be possible for even the most faithful observer of the First Precept to operate totally in terms of the love mode, eschewing the power mode completely. We live in a world dominated by the power mode. In this connection two principles may be laid down:

- a. Whenever one has to operate in the power mode, the power mode must always be subordinated to the love mode. A simple everyday example of this is when the parent, out of love for the child, forcibly restrains him from doing something that will harm him.
- b. Within the spiritual community it is impossible to act according to the power mode, for by its very nature it is based on the love mode. Should an Order member so far forget himself as to relate to another Order member in terms of force he places himself outside the Spiritual Community and ceases, in fact, to be an Order member.

Practical implications

Buddhists should do their best to switch from the power mode to the love mode in as many different ways as possible, and to extend the principle of Love into as many different areas of life as possible. Observance of the First Precept will naturally result in one's being a vegetarian⁵; in one's refusing to have oneself, or to assist or encourage others in having, an abortion⁶; in one's feeling concern for the environment; and in one's being opposed to the manufacture of all armaments whatsoever – as well as many other things.

Not that the observance of the First Precept consists simply in doing or not doing a certain stated number of things of this sort. Non-violence, or Love, is a principle, and being a principle there is no limit to the number of ways in which it can be applied. No one is so skilful in his conduct that his practice of this principle could not be better. As the most direct manifestation of one's Going for Refuge, the potentialities of Non-Violence, or Love are infinite.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Think of some everyday examples of “one ego asserting itself at the expense of another”, or “negating rather than affirming their being” – in other words, of people operating in the power mode.
2. Think of some examples you have observed recently of people acting from an “imaginative identification with others” – in other words, operating in the love mode.
3. Think of some situations where it would be impossible or undesirable to act in the love mode.

⁵ See Appendix 1 below for a fuller discussion of the ethics of vegetarianism.

⁶ See Appendix 2 below for a discussion of this potentially emotive issue.

4. Do you agree that following the First Precept is “the most direct and important manifestation of the act of Going for Refuge?” Why, or why not?
5. How could you extend the love mode into more areas of your life? What specific changes could you make?
6. What is the connection between the first precept and insight or wisdom?



Appendix 1: Vegetarianism and Buddhist ethics

Edited extract from: Vegetarianism (3rd edition), Bodhipaksa, Windhorse Publications.

Non-harm

The Buddha often taught compassion in a very straightforward, direct way. In the Dhammapada, for example, we read:

All (living beings) are terrified of punishment; all fear death. Making comparison (of others) with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.

All (living beings) are terrified of punishment; to all, life is dear. Making comparison (of others) with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.

These words are easy to understand. But behind their simplicity lies a deep, radically transforming, and challenging vision of a life lived with compassion, empathy, and respect for the welfare of all sentient beings.

Killing is the absolute assertion of ego, and of indifference to the well-being of others. It involves taking a stance that could be summed up as ‘My desires are more important than your well-being or continued existence.’

We often wish to ignore the inescapable fact that meat-eating requires killing to take place but, in order for meat to appear on a plate, an animal must die. Our appetites drive a chain of events resulting in suffering and death, and meat-eating inevitably entails the violence of the slaughterhouse and farm.

Maybe eating meat is a source of pleasure, and changing our diet seems like a sacrifice we are reluctant to make. However, once we are truly aware of the consequences of our actions, we are in a dilemma. Our deeper, more ethical response is one of compassion for the animals that are harmed in order for us to have meat. This sense of compassion is in conflict with our habits and our desire to keep on doing what seems pleasurable.

In dilemmas of this sort the only effective remedy is to go to the root of the problem and sort out on an ethical level the conflict that exists between our actions and our conscience. We need to remove the source of ethical discomfort by deciding to give up actions that cause harm and by following through that resolution as best we can. Once we have decided to align ourselves with what is best within us and act in accord with it, we’ll find our lives changing for the better.

When, after my visit to an abattoir, I decided to become a vegetarian, my remaining attachment to eating meat withered away very quickly. Many other people have had the same experience. We find that our tastes change. Meat stops looking attractive and starts to look distasteful. We'll find that our friends begin to respect us for having taken an ethical stance – although some may be unsure at first. We may even find that we become more confident having taken a decision that is courageous, going as it does against the norms of our culture. And we may feel a positive pleasure as we eat; knowing that what we're eating did not require an animal to be slaughtered. Giving up meat can prove to be a positive relief.

Interconnectedness and metta

Underlying the Dhammapada verses above is a phenomenon that the Buddha called *anukampa*. A very literal translation would be 'vibrating together', but the closest term in English is 'empathy'.

When we have empathy we're emotionally receptive to others. We are affected by their joys and sorrows – stirred by them, moved by them, touched by them. We are able to put ourselves in their skin and to walk a mile in their shoes or, in this case, hoofs.

Once we see that another being's happiness and suffering are as real to them as our own are to us, there is a part of us that naturally and spontaneously wants to support their well-being and help them escape suffering. This emotional interconnectedness is intrinsic to the goal of spiritual Awakening to which the Buddha's teaching leads us. It isn't an optional extra.

Denying that others suffer as a consequence of our actions, or deeming those consequences to be unimportant or irrelevant, sets up tensions and conflicts in our own mind. Those tensions and conflicts lead to unhappiness. On some level we always know when we're in the wrong. When we act in a way that harms others, or requires others to be harmed on our behalf, we inevitably find ourselves resorting to evasion and self-justification. Every attempt to justify our own wrongness leads to a painful sense of inauthenticity, conscious or subconscious guilt, and conflict. A lack of empathy for others also leads us to act in ways that are insensitive, causing hurt and resentment. Inevitably this rebounds upon us, bringing painful conflicts into our lives.

We exist only in relation to the world, as part of a web of interconnectedness, and there is no part of us that does not exist in a state of relatedness. Our happiness, in fact, depends on the quality of that relatedness. It's impossible for us to be truly happy without recognizing the fact of our interconnectedness and, just as importantly, without changing the way we relate to the world. We can either align ourselves with others' desire for well-being or choose to be in conflict with that desire. The only way in which we can live at a deeper level of happiness and fulfilment is to bring our relationship with the world into harmony, so that we experience the peace that comes from living with mindfulness and compassion, rather than the disharmony that comes from denial and conflictedness.

Although we can't ask them, it's clear that animals don't want to be mistreated, killed, and eaten – any more than we would if we were in their situation. They run away from danger, fight if cornered, and try to escape pain. Once we are empathetically aware that animals desire life and freedom from suffering (and maybe contentment, if not happiness), then the most creative way to remove conflict from our lives is to stop causing harm and to encourage the development of empathic feeling.

To have empathy requires that we understand that another being's suffering is as real as ours. Seeing in this way can be a revelation or a shock, since one of our most persistent and deep-rooted delusions is that there is something uniquely special about our feelings and our suffering. The attitude that can be expressed as 'your suffering is unimportant when compared to my desires' is symptomatic of this delusion. When we approach life empathetically, something begins to shift in our feelings and actions. With the arising of empathy we become more ethical in our actions. Without empathy, true ethics are not possible.

It's easier for us to empathize with humans than with animals. We may have to make a bit more effort to relate to animals in the way I'm suggesting, especially since we've been trained to suppress our empathy for them. But we do, as I've said, have much more in common with animals than not. In evolutionary terms we are animals ourselves, and fundamentally we share most of the drives, instincts, and emotions of other higher mammals. Empathy is itself one of the instincts that we've inherited, and that we share with all mammals. Empathy has been observed not only in more complex creatures such as apes and monkeys, but also in animals as simple as rats and mice. Unlike those creatures, however, we can consciously train ourselves to become more compassionate.

According to Buddhist teachings, we can learn to empathize to such an extent that we no longer see the world in terms of 'self' and 'other'. In this full realization of our interconnectedness we don't act to relieve other beings' suffering in order to make ourselves feel better, but simply because suffering exists, and because those beings desire to be free from it. When we start practising ethics, our approach is bound to be somewhat self-referential, but supported by meditation and deep reflection on the nature of reality we can learn to be more truly selfless. Giving up meat and fish – knowing that it will relieve the suffering of living beings – is a simple and practical step that we can all take to help us move towards that ideal.



Appendix 2: Abortion and Buddhist Ethics

Edited article from: The Ethics of Abortion and the Buddhist Perspective, Vishvapani.⁷

In recent years, abortion has been debated in western countries with perhaps more passion than any other ethical issue. On one side the feminist lobby argues that a foetus is part of a woman's body and she should have the right to choose what happens to it. On the other side anti-abortionists in the US have even killed doctors who perform abortions, while abortion is against the law in Ireland unless the pregnancy endangers the life of the woman.

While many political debates are abstract and can seem remote from ordinary experience, abortion concerns the mysterious stirrings of life in the deep intimacy of the womb. It involves flesh, blood and tissue. It touches strong feelings, and choices made around it alter the course of lives. Readers of this article may have had an abortion, or considered having one, or have been closely involved with a friend or partner who faced the issue. It is perhaps the most acute ethical problem that many of us are likely to confront in our personal lives. I also think men can and should engage with the abortion issue. It affects men, too, and while the choice will be a woman's, the issues it raises are human, not just personal and subjective.

⁷ Complete article at: <http://vishvapaniswriting.blogspot.co.uk/2007/02/ethics-of-abortion-and-buddhist.html>

Disagreements about the ethics of abortion point up deeper uncertainties in post-Christian societies. When is the start of life that we can recognise as human? What is life anyway? How do we balance 'the woman's right to choose' against 'the child's right to life'? And in the absence of consensus on these questions, who decides? Political debate about abortion has tended to polarise, but between the opposing stances stand ordinary people, including Buddhists, trying to act ethically, wanting lives that are free and fulfilling, yet do not cause suffering.

Sometimes reasons for having an abortion are intensified by issues of rape, sexual abuse or severe disability. But in the space of this article I want to focus on basic ethical principles. These, however, are not rules, and must be applied in individual circumstances with compassion and imagination. For those who look to Buddhism as a source of wisdom, can the Buddhist approach to ethics point out a path through the maze?

I want to know what these teachings have to say to a woman experiencing the pain of an unwanted pregnancy and contemplating the hardship and thwarted hopes an unwanted child would bring. What can they say to the guilt and confusion of many who have had abortions? Do these teachings simply compound that guilt with yet more religious disapproval? And do they imply that abortion should be made illegal, when doing so pushes it into an unregulated, inequitable back-street economy?

The key question in the abortion debate is, when is the start of life that we can recognise as human? Since Christian morality ceased to define a consensus, western societies have looked to science for guidance and to the law for judgement. The challenge for the law is to define a point at which a foetus should be under its protection. Before this a foetus is considered part of a woman's body, and abortion is equivalent to surgery. After it, the foetus is considered an independent identity and it may not be aborted.

But when should that point be? Virabhadra, a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order and a consultant gynaecologist, is aware of current scientific understanding such as when the brain can support a consciousness that can feel pain, and when a foetus is capable of surviving outside the womb. However, he emphasised that science cannot decide when a foetus is a being in its own right. For example, he said, 'an embryo can't survive without the mother until quite late in the pregnancy, but the point at which a foetus can survive independently has come down as technology has advanced.'

Whatever point one chooses in the embryo's development as constituting life seems arbitrary and artificial. It is one thing to describe changes, another to evaluate their significance, and yet another to decide how one should act upon them. As Virabhadra said, 'Science cannot tell us what life is, nor whether it should be taken.'

The traditional Buddhist answer is more clear-cut. Mainstream Buddhist tradition teaches that life starts with the conjunction of sperm, egg and the gandhabbha (consciousness that is reborn). For most Buddhist commentators and for some western Buddhists, that decides the issue. But I wonder if this is adequate. If the Buddhist position on abortion depends on belief in rebirth, it will have nothing to say to those who do not share a conviction that rebirth occurs. This includes western society at large and western Buddhists who are uncertain, agnostic or sceptical about rebirth.

The more one studies what Buddhist traditions have said about rebirth the more mysterious it seems. How can a very simple organism, such as a recently fertilised egg, be conscious in any

recognisable sense of the term? And is it meaningful to speak of a consciousness that is seeking to express itself through such an organism? An embryo is a potential human being, but this is different from saying that something has been reborn. So Buddhists use metaphors that combine ideas of presence and potentiality, such as saying there 'is' a 'seed' of consciousness. However an alternative Buddhist tradition (described in the Theravadin *Katthavattu*) argues that rebirth is a progressive process lasting eleven weeks, that occurs as the foetus develops. So what implications might this have for abortion during this time?

It seems best to say that consciousness and human life are mysteries, and one looks in vain to Buddhism for explanations that clarify them. Both Buddhism and science assert that the life of a human is a process that starts with conception. But to draw ethical conclusions one must consider the significance of the stages in that process. A plant is a form of life, and one's finger is 'alive'. But it isn't unethical to dig up a potato, nor to cut one's finger. The issue is not so much whether it is life but whether it is something we call 'human'. The ethical question turns on when this 'life' becomes an 'individual' that will be affected by our actions.

Reflection on Buddhist teachings may suggest why the topic is elusive. If there is no soul or permanent, abiding self, and consciousness is a flux, then how can one speak of what it is to be alive and conscious? One can formulate cogent doctrinal descriptions, but there is something irreducible in the experience of being an individual separate from others, yet connected with them. What is it to think, to experience, to live? How, then, can one say what is reborn? When I reflect on the process of conception, gestation and birth, I feel amazement and – to be honest – fear at nature's mysterious power.

From this perspective one plainly cannot pin down questions of selfhood and identity. Similarly the question of when one should start to treat the foetus as human depends on conscience or moral sensibility.

I have asked many Buddhists from various traditions about their views on abortion and, while the overwhelming majority felt abortion was an ethical breach, their reasoning turned on a gut-felt, intuitive response to the question of when life starts. Within Triratna, *mitras* undertake to follow the five Buddhist precepts, including the precept of not taking life, with its implications for abortion. At the London Buddhist Centre Vimalachitta [women's *mitra* convenor at the time of this article] reported that in her many conversations on abortion, rebirth rarely figures. She told me, however, that because of intuitive factors the issue is rarely a problem.

'When people start meditating they almost always come to feel that an abortion would be taking life. There are concerns about what would happen in an extreme case (such as pregnancy resulting from rape), but that is understandable. It helps when I explain that this is not a political statement and when I say it doesn't mean you're condemning people who do choose to have abortions.'

This intuitive ethical response seems to me to point to a dimension that has been missing from the debate in the West. Buddhism can learn from the western tradition of ethical reasoning. Learning to think about ethical issues seems to be an important aspect of preparing ourselves to meet them: a crisis such as an unwanted pregnancy is probably the worst time to try to think clearly about right and wrong. But ethics usually concerns human relationships, and understanding these require intuition, sensitivity and an emotionally integrated awareness of others. Then we need clarity and courage to draw conclusions and stick by them.

While researching this article I spoke to women who have had abortions, and I think their testimonies are important. I have space just for one case study. One dharmacharini had an abortion aged 28, before she became a Buddhist. 'I was a student and a committed feminist trying to understand what it meant to be a woman at that time, the 1970s. I had no desire for kids, and 'the woman's right to choose' was an article of faith for me; and for medical reasons there was also a chance that I would have a spontaneous abortion. So I immediately decided to have one. Moral considerations did not enter at all.'

However, the abortion affected her in unexpected ways. 'I really underestimated the emotional impact. After the operation my response was, "Oh no, how dreadful." The emotional distress I felt stayed with me a long time. I had made my decision intellectually, but in retrospect I think I cut off from my emotional responses. I hadn't anticipated that I would feel grief, and that there had been a death.'

Talking to other women who have had abortions I found frequent echoes of this dharmacharini's experience. They were unprepared for the actual experience of having an abortion, the instinctive sense that the foetus was alive. One person's experience can never represent everyone's, and responses to having an abortion do vary. Some women feel sadness, but not regret. Some say they would do the same thing again, given similar circumstances. Others would not. Intuitions are not arguments, but it seems important to value emotionally-aware responses such as this dharmacharini's and I wonder what happens when political views overlie them.

Ethical decisions involve value judgements, so it is inevitable that subjective factors enter. Scientists' descriptions and legal definitions cannot tell us when humanity starts and the doctrines of Buddhism will persuade us only if we already have faith in them. But perhaps the feeling that abortion is wrong helps us to draw closer to a truth. For Buddhists it is ironic that the law seeks to define identity through separateness. Buddhist ethics are based on the idea that we are not separate, all life is dependent on other life, and for that very reason it is natural to care about each other. Even after a baby is born it could not survive without sustenance and protection of its mother. The language of rights and legal identity in which the abortion debate is framed seems inadequate to the subtle connections between mother and foetus, foetus and baby.

If reality is subtle and changing, then our understanding of it cannot be definitive or absolute; yet it seems wise to err on the side of ensuring that one is not causing harm. I do not know to what extent animals can suffer, but I choose to be vegetarian because I feel that they can, because there is some evidence that they do, and because I know that they might. So while I may not be able to prove that a foetus has consciousness, can experience pain, or should be regarded as a human individual, the fact that this may be the case is a decisive consideration for me.

Western discussions of abortion have been bound up with the legal questions of whether abortion should be permitted. This pulls it into a political arena, which is hardly suited to open-hearted reflection on the nature of life. It also mixes legal and moral issues. We tend to think that if abortion is legal that means it is right, but in fact all it does is merely move moral responsibility from the state to the mother. We speak of an individual's 'right to choose' whether to have an abortion, but we speak too little of what the choice involves.

I like the suggestion of the Buddhist commentator, Robert Thurman, in his book *Inner Revolution*. 'Aware of the serious moral, physical and psychological consequences [of abortion],

we should offer every facility and advantage to the woman who chooses to bring her baby to term ... great honour and respect, excellent health care, good adoption programmes ...'. This seems more constructive than the violent protests of American pro-lifers, but I am also aware that the facilities which Robert Thurman advocates are not available to many of those confronted by an unwanted pregnancy.

Abortion presents a challenge to our compassion. This compassion must include the baby and the aborting mother, holding together their conflicting perspectives and their sad collision. So I would add to Thurman's wish-list the kind of sensitive counselling for women considering abortion that helps the decision to be made in an atmosphere free from panic, fear and guilt. The days of 'coffee-break abortions' are long gone, and the decision to have an abortion is rarely taken without strong reasons. I am not arguing for making abortion illegal. The fact that debate has continued unresolved suggests there is genuine room for disagreement.

Buddhism gives us what seem like a clear, simple principle - the ethical precept of not taking life. But as I have explored this issue, spoken to those who have views on it, talked with women who have faced abortions, and considered the traditional teachings, I have understood more fully that the way this principle is implemented is as important as the principle itself. Perhaps the most important thing Buddhism can contribute to this ethical debate is a compassionate and engaged sensibility that seeks to be true to life's difficulty and complexity.

Positive form: *With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.*

Negative form: *I undertake the training principle of not taking the not-given.*

Pāli: *Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

The fundamental Buddhist virtue

Generosity – *dāna* in Pāli and Sanskrit – has been called the fundamental Buddhist virtue.

Giving to others is a direct way of opening up our tight, painful focus on our own desires, and it can be practised by people whose lives leave them little time for more formal practices like retreats or meditation. For these reasons many traditional Buddhist schools see cultivating generosity as the essential first stage of the path. But at the same time generosity is also in a sense the culmination of the whole spiritual life – the Enlightened person is spontaneously generous, because they don't see the world in terms of self and other, but instead act from a deep sense of interconnectedness with other beings. As our spiritual life develops, our actions gradually come to express more and more of this self-transcending spirit of generosity.

The practice of generosity attacks our deluded world-view from two directions. On the one hand it undermines our neurotic attachment to possessions – and the anxious poverty mentality this gives rise to. At the same time it expresses and deepens our empathy for others.

Generosity is also the basis on which we build the spiritual community – it allows us to relate to each other on the basis of *mettā* rather than economics, from the 'love mode' rather than the 'power mode'. And generosity is highly contagious – when we are generous this releases generosity in others, which in turn releases generosity in an ever-widening circle. This is one of the most important ways we create the Sangha, the spiritual community.

What *dāna* is not

The Buddhist practice of *dāna* is not about punishing or martyring ourselves. It is about developing and expressing expansive, warm, liberated states of mind which are highly pleasurable. To move in this direction we may sometimes need to push ourselves out of our present cramped, ungenerous habits, and this process may feel uncomfortable or even painful. A good analogy here might be the effort we need to make to do exercise, give up an addiction, or rise to a challenge – we push through the short term discomfort because we know this will make us happier in the longer term. But if we feel that we are punishing or martyring ourselves, or if we feel resentful about our giving, this tends to indicate that we are seeing our ethical practice in terms of obeying an external authority – maybe 'God' or some human authority – rather than seeking to express our own deep values. If so we need to take an honest look at our motivations, scale down or even drop our practice, and then perhaps re-engage with it in the future on a different basis.

Not taking the not-given

In the 'negative' sense this precept advises us to avoid actions that express the opposite of generosity – our tendency to grab what we can for ourselves. This implies much more than simply not stealing. The Pāli words clearly mean not taking that which has not been freely given to us. So if an action involves any element of manipulating someone else to get something we want – but which they would rather keep – then this is taking the not-given. So driving a hard bargain or extracting the maximum profit for ourselves from a situation is likely to be taking the not-given. So also is getting what we want by playing on others' greed or fear, manipulating their emotions, wielding our power or authority, exploiting their weaknesses, or just by outwitting them.

In fact many ways of seeking our own advantage that might be seen as normal behaviour – for example in the business world – actually constitute taking the not given. Much of our economic and social behaviour is governed by the 'power mode', and getting what we want at others' expense within the limits set by custom and the law is seen as an acceptable approach in many of our activities. This is not surprising. As long as we see the purpose of life as satisfying our own desires this inevitably brings us into competition with others – who would like to satisfy their own desires instead – and we are likely to find ourselves tempted over and over again to take the not-given. For this reason making a conscious effort to practice this precept is a difficult and transformative practice. It constantly confronts us with our fundamentally egocentric approach to life, and challenges us to step out into new territory, where we give priority to expressing our connectedness with others rather than to grabbing what we can for ourselves.

Down-to-earth

At a more down-to-earth level, we can start to make an everyday practice of not taking the not-given by becoming conscious of the many small ways we express our grabbiness and attachment, not just for money and material things, but also for pleasures, leisure and attention. Some obvious examples of ways we can practice the precept might be:

- Making sure we scrupulously pay everything we owe, for example for the goods and services we use, or to the tax man – even when we could easily get away without paying.
- Making sure we are completely honest in things like claiming expenses or benefits.
- Making sure we return anything we borrow promptly, especially things that we would really like to keep – books might be an example.
- Making sure we do our share of the chores – at home, at work, and wherever else we are involved – rather than expecting other people to do our part of the work.

Ways of giving

As a positive spiritual principle generosity gets a lot of attention in traditional Buddhist texts. As usual this involves lists – including lists of the various things we can give. For example it is said that we can express our generosity by giving:

1. Material things (including money),
2. Time and energy,
3. Knowledge,
4. Fearlessness,
5. Life and limb, and
6. The Gift of the Dharma.

Material things

Usually when we think of generosity we think just of the first of these – giving money and material things. This is an excellent place to start, and for many of us this will be the main working ground for some time. However some people don't have much material wealth to spare, and for them the second sort of generosity – giving time and energy – may be a more appropriate practice.

Knowledge

Knowledge is perhaps singled out because making a profit from our knowledge is such a common tendency – but not one we always notice. We think it is quite normal for an 'expert' to charge a high price for advice, consultancy, or training, but this is another manifestation of the power mode. In contrast the teacher or adviser who takes delight in sharing their knowledge – and in the benefit it brings to others – is practising a powerful form of generosity.

Fearlessness

The idea of giving fearlessness may seem strange. But we could see fearlessness as standing for any positive mental state. Our mental states have a powerful effect on those around us, and to make the effort to be in a good mental and emotional state is a valuable gift. Many people find that this can be a more powerful motivation for staying in a good state than focussing on their own well-being, and it has the advantage that – because it is an inherently unselfish motivation – it has a natural tendency to expand our small-minded focus on ourselves.

Life and limb

The fourth of these forms of giving – life and limb – might seem impossibly challenging when we first hear about it. But we can probably all imagine a situation where – if we were really pushed to it – we would risk ourselves to save the life of someone we loved. This sort of giving can only spring from a deep sense of relatedness, which at our present level of development we perhaps only feel for a very few 'special' people. But one goal of the spiritual life is to increase our awareness to the point that we feel this sort of relatedness to all beings, and there are many stories of advanced spiritual practitioners giving to others in a way that seems almost incredible – until we remember that we would do the same for someone we really loved. In fact love underlies all generosity, to the point that when our sense of relatedness is strong enough we do not think of ourselves as being generous, however much we give.

The gift of the Dharma

It might seem odd that 'Giving the Gift of the Dharma' is the last in this list of ways of practising generosity, implying that it is the highest form of giving. This expresses the fact that Buddhists generally see spiritual ignorance as underlying all our suffering. Ultimately the only way to help someone towards real lasting happiness is to help them to discover their spiritual potential, so that they start to look for happiness in the right place. This is what 'giving the gift of the Dharma' does, and for this reason it is seen as the highest expression of generosity. To give the gift of the Dharma we don't necessarily need to give Dharma talks – we can do it by befriending people, by setting a positive example, and by staying in a good mental state.

This does not mean we should ignore formal teaching of the Dharma. For many people contact with the Dharma is a lifesaver, and helping to provide the classes that bring people to Buddhism is a very effective form of generosity. But it isn't just those who actually teach or write who are giving the gift of the Dharma. Their efforts depend on the efforts of many other people who support the Dharma and Sangha financially, or give their time, energy and expertise in many ways to all sorts of activities related to Buddhism. All these people are an

integral part of the making the Dharma available to people, and all are giving the gift of the Dharma.

Practical ways of developing generosity

Buddhist ethics are about intention – about expressing and developing positive states of mind, not about keeping to the letter of a set of rules. But does this mean that if we don't feel like giving, there is no point in giving? Generosity is not real when we give out of a sense of obligation, or because we 'ought to'. But this does not mean we cannot work to develop our generosity when it is still not fully spontaneous. We all have generous impulses. There are many strands in our being – generous strands as well as stingy strands – and we have a choice about which parts of ourselves we put our energy behind. If we put our energy behind our stingy impulses these will become stronger – we will become narrower, more constricted beings, and we will become less happy. If we put our energy behind our generous impulses these will grow and develop, they will become stronger in the future, and we will feel more open and expansive.

The traditional Buddhist literature is full of suggestions about practical ways to develop our generosity by putting energy behind the generous parts of our being. One suggestion is simply to notice when we have a generous impulse, and then always to follow it through. Because we have both generous and ungenerous strands in our beings, a generous impulse is usually followed by second thoughts. But if we go along with these we put our energy behind the meaner parts of ourselves – we identify with them and strengthen them. On the other hand if we simply act on the generous impulse we strengthen the generous part of ourselves by putting our will and energy behind it. So if we get the impulse to give someone some money, or to offer help in some way, then we just do it, with no second thoughts, and no regrets after the event.

One of the things that stops us giving is simply that we aren't used to doing it. We are just not in the habit, and we are creatures of habit. We can start to develop the habit by making a point of regularly giving away small, inexpensive things as often as possible. If you spend time around Buddhists you will almost certainly notice that many people have taken this advice to heart – giving cards and small gifts is usually very much part of the general culture around a Triratna centre.

This idea of making a point of regularly giving small gifts can be taken a stage further. Traditionally many Buddhists make a point of giving something away every day. Others – at a slightly more challenging level – make a point of giving away any small personal article that someone says they like. So if someone says, 'that's a nice poster, where did you get it', you simply give it to them then and there. Practices such as this give us a conscious framework for putting energy into generous acts in a way we probably would not do if we simply decided that generosity is a good idea, and left it at that.

The importance of generosity

As with all the Precepts, generosity is not just an elementary practice we need to get out of the way so we can get on with the more advanced parts of the Dharma. Generosity runs right through the Buddhist path, and we can practice it at many levels. Developing as a spiritual being is about transcending our narrow ego. As we do this we gradually move from seeing life as being about what we can get for ourselves, to seeing it as about what we can contribute to others and the universe. Spiritual progress and generosity go hand-in-hand. At the moment we may only be able to be generous and transcend our ego in small ways, but ultimately generosity is an expression of the highest wisdom, and the sense of connectedness with all

beings which this brings. An Enlightened being is totally and spontaneously generous, because they see beyond the duality of self and other.

The centrality of generosity in the Buddhist path is brought out very strongly in the spiritual ideal of the Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva is a being who is following the spiritual path in order to be of use to others. A Bodhisattva sees their whole life as an act of generosity – a way to contribute to the universe – but without any sense of regret or acting against their own best interests. To quote Sangharakshita:

Love is, in the last resort, incompatible with the sense of ownership and, therefore with property, and thinks not so much in terms of Generosity as in terms of common ownership or sharing...

Ultimately, as in the case of the Bodhisattva, Generosity reaches the point where the giver, the gift, and the recipient of the gift, cease to be distinguishable. It is this kind of Generosity which constitutes the positive form of the Second Precept.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you agree that it is “better to give than to receive”? Why, or why not?
2. Are there any circumstances in daily life when you tend to take the not-given? (There are for almost everybody!) Is there one area where you could focus on practising the 'negative' form of the precept in the week ahead?
3. What tends to stop you from being generous? (A traditional list cites not seeing the benefits, attachment, a poverty mentality, and not being in the habit of giving, as among the hindrances to generosity – you might think in terms of these.)
4. Are there any particular things you find it difficult to be open-handed with, or particular circumstances that block your generosity? What attitudes, fears, or objective circumstances underlie these limitations? How do they affect your mental states?
5. Could you take on a personal precept about generosity for the week ahead – for example to give away something small every day or to do one generous act next week you would not otherwise have done?

Positive form: *With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.*

Negative form: *I undertake the training principle of refraining from sexual misconduct.*

Pāli: *Kāmesu micchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

Introduction: sex is just one craving

This guideline is about freeing ourselves from the addictions and cravings that keep us from experiencing peace of mind – it is not about taking a puritanical view of sex. In the traditional negative form of the precept, sex is singled out as probably the most powerful human craving, and therefore potentially the greatest obstacle to contentment. But really we are being advised not to let any desire turn into the sort of neurotic craving that can keep our mind in a whirl – and sex here stands for all our desires. In the negative form of the precept, the idea of 'sexual misconduct' does not imply any moralistic attitude to particular forms of sexual activity, such as sex outside marriage, homosexuality, or masturbation. The sort of 'misconduct' the precept is advising us against is sexual behaviour that harms others, or ourselves.

Neurotic craving

Practising this precept involves exercising some control over our desires and appetites, to help us experience 'stillness, simplicity and contentment.' Buddhism sees 'craving' as the enemy of contentment, but it does not see all desires as 'bad'. Many desires are healthy and necessary. When we are hungry, thirsty or cold, then our desires for food, water or warmth are all natural and positive. Our desires for friendship, community, beauty, creativity, and for a productive outlet for our energies, are also positive. Finally, we seem to have an inbuilt desire to fulfil our spiritual potential, and without this we would never grow and develop.

To do away with all desire would condemn us to a life of stagnation. So we need to distinguish between healthy desire, which is necessary for life and growth, and neurotic craving, which keeps us bound to a cycle of never-ending dissatisfaction. Neurotic craving could be defined as desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we are trying to satisfy. For example, if we overeat, we are not eating because our body needs nourishment. Perhaps we are looking for comfort in food because we lack affection or self-esteem. But food can never give us either of these – in fact, overeating will make it more difficult for us to get what we really need.

Becoming creative

Unfortunately a lot of our desire is neurotic. Until we begin to manifest more of our spiritual potential we will experience a sense that something is missing in our lives. Usually we try to satisfy this sense of inner dissatisfaction by grasping at things in the outer world, like pleasures and possessions. But these can only distract us temporarily from our sense of inner need, just as comfort-eating can only distract us from our need for affection. This displaced neurotic desire is the force that drives the consumer society, and it also drives many people's

lives. It puts us on an endless treadmill, chasing an imaginary carrot. But happiness does not come from catching the carrot – it can never be caught. Instead it comes from getting off the treadmill, and looking for fulfilment where it actually can be found.

For most of us this would mean a radical shift in the way we approach life, and we are not likely to make this shift all at once. But practising this precept gives us a way to start, by beginning to leave behind our more obvious patterns of addictive behaviour based on neurotic craving. This can be one of the main ways we practice becoming creative, rather than simply repeating old comfort-seeking behaviours that deepen our reactive patterns. So for example when we feel the urge to escape from our sense of dissatisfaction by taking refuge in our normal distractions – food, cigarettes, shopping, drink, drugs, sex, or whatever – instead of responding in an unconscious way we can remain conscious, exercise our freedom, and choose to do something different and creative. At first this will mean that we have to face up to some discomfort, because changing old patterns is uncomfortable. But in the longer term – and perhaps quite quickly – we are likely to experience more and more positive mental states, and a growing sense of freedom and power in our lives.

The dangers of distraction

The ways we distract ourselves from our sense of inner dissatisfaction may not be ‘bad’ in themselves, but unless we keep them in their proper place, they can have at least three negative consequences. Firstly, if we orientate our life around them they stop us focusing our attention on what can really satisfy us, so that we waste our lives by constantly looking for fulfilment in the wrong place. Secondly these ways we distract ourselves often become addictive. The more we overeat, drink, smoke, take drugs, acquire property, shop, consume, masturbate, indulge in romantic fantasies, or whatever, the more difficult it becomes to disentangle ourselves from our habits and look for satisfaction in a different, more effective way. Thirdly, our addictive distractions often give rise to negative mental states, so that instead of helping us to be happy they actually separate us even further from the parts of ourselves that could give us real fulfilment. For example, when our desires are thwarted we may well feel anger or ill-will towards the people who stand between us and what we want. In fact our attempt to find happiness by consuming, owning or experiencing things in the outer world may cause a host of negative actions and mental states, including dishonesty, resentment, envy, and anxiety.

Sex

In its traditional negative form this precept focuses particularly on sex, as the most powerful craving for many people. Buddhism does not see sex in itself as ‘evil’, but sex can be a powerful focus for our neurotic desire, so we need to bring our creativity and ethical sense into our sexual lives.

For the lay Buddhist the negative form of this precept was traditionally taken to mean that we should avoid adultery, rape, and abduction. This is not much help as a guideline in present-day society, so we need to go back to first principles. The principle we need to apply is obviously that we should avoid harming others or ourselves through our sexual behaviour.

The following section has been written by a man, from a man’s perspective. For a fuller discussion of this issue from a woman’s point of view, see Appendix 1 below. Whatever your gender, both discussions are likely to have some relevance to you.

Not harming others

Our sexual desires are likely to harm others if we look for our own pleasure without taking other people into account. We should therefore try to see sexual partners as important in their own right, basing our relationships on mettā, and not exploiting others or treating them as sex objects. This would include not entering into unequal relationships where the partner has expectations we have no intention of fulfilling. We should also avoid causing pain to third parties for the sake of sex, for example by having sex with one member of a settled couple. In the present day, pornography too needs to be seen in the light of this precept.

Not harming ourselves

Our sexual desires harm us if we allow them to turn into neurotic craving, or if they are so demanding that they stop us experiencing peace of mind. We need to manage our sex drive so that it does not dominate our experience or set our life agenda – if we let it, sex can control our whole existence. Managing our sex drive means not stoking up our sexual desires unnecessarily. This involves what is called 'guarding the gates of the senses' – controlling how we use our senses to reduce the amount of sexual stimulation we receive. We have a choice about where we put our attention, and if we constantly choose to focus on what we find sexually stimulating, then we will find peace of mind very difficult to achieve. Guarding the gates of the senses also involves watching how we use our mind, so that we don't use sexual fantasies as a way of distracting ourselves from our experience. (In Buddhism the mind is seen as the sixth sense, as it is another gateway through which stimuli can enter our awareness.)

Managing our sex drive in an ethical way involves neither glorifying sex as something sublime, nor demonising it as something evil, both of which give it a power it does not deserve. Our sex drive is part of our animal inheritance – neither spiritual nor demonic.

Abstinence

Complete abstinence from sex has traditionally been seen as an important practice for monks, nuns, and other people seriously following the spiritual path. In the days before contraception this was partly for practical reasons. But celibacy is also an important practice in its own right. Freeing the mind from the constant disturbance caused by sexual desire is an enormous step towards contentment. Abstinence also makes energy available for other purposes, especially meditation. Because of this many Buddhists who are not normally celibate voluntarily refrain from sex for specific periods, perhaps for just a few weeks while on a retreat, perhaps for longer.

Stillness, simplicity, and contentment

The aim of this precept is to help us to become happier. By freeing ourselves from neurotic desires and slavery to biological urges we create a space in which we can experience peace of mind and positive mental states. But in the twenty-first century world craving is not the only enemy of contentment. Our society encourages a fast, hurried pace of life, which leaves little space for more expansive mental states. Many of us work too many hours, at jobs we do mainly for the pay cheque, at a pace that depletes our energies and causes high levels of anxiety. So much of our lives can be spent either earning money or spending it that we don't have the energy to use our brief periods of rest creatively. 'Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.' And our over-active states of mind can become addictive, so that we find it difficult to switch off, and spend our precious leisure time giving ourselves even more input, doing things like watching TV or surfing the web.

Cultivating simplicity

If we want peace of mind – what the precept calls stillness and contentment – then we need to see simplicity as a positive quality, and we need to cultivate it. We may need to make some decisions about our priorities, and to simplify our lives accordingly. We may need to see that having fewer things – and spending less time earning the money to buy them – can make our life richer rather than poorer. We may need to overcome the conditioning that tells us that simplicity equals poverty, and instead see it as beautiful and desirable. Simplicity in life, like simplicity in art, is an aspect of elegant good taste, because it gets rid of unnecessary clutter, and opens up a sense of space, light, and freedom.

Cultivating stillness, simplicity and contentment does not mean that we should sit around doing nothing. We have energies, and we need to use them, or they will turn against us. But in our prosperous societies many of us could live more simply than we do, and this would allow us to spend less time working for purely economic reasons. This is in fact what many practising Buddhists choose to do, reducing the time spent on economic work, in order to spend more time on spiritual practice, altruistic activity, and creative pursuits, as well as making life more relaxed and spacious. For many people this sounds like an attractive idea, but achieving it involves disentangling ourselves from the consumer society – which may not sound so attractive, and requires some determination and strength of character, because it often runs completely counter to the values of our present society.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you agree that a lot of the desires that drive human activity are ‘neurotic’? If so, think of some examples.
2. *“Happiness does not so much come from getting what we want, as from having fewer wants.”*
Do you agree? If so, what does this say about the approach to happiness offered by the consumer society?
3. What are some of your neurotic cravings and addictions (we all have them)?
4. How often do you think about sex? To what extent do you tend to seek out sense impressions that will increase your sexual desire, or on the other hand guard the gates of the senses to limit sex desire?
5. Do you see simplicity - in the sense of keeping what we own and consume down to what is necessary for a healthy life - as a positive or negative quality? How much scope do you have for simplifying your life?
6. Is your life too busy, or is it not busy enough? Either way, what could you do about it?

Suggested exercises

1. Give yourself at least an hour alone to do absolutely nothing this week – preferably longer. Notice any underlying sense of boredom, anxiety or dissatisfaction. Notice what you want to do to escape any discomfort. Instead, sit with the discomfort for a while, then do something skilful, such as meditating or exercising.

2. Consider taking a personal precept related to this ethical guideline for a week, for example:
 - To give up some minor addiction for the week.
 - To avoid television for the week.
 - To simplify your life in some small way, like giving away a possession.
 - To practice guarding the gates of the senses this week, avoiding sexual stimuli, or avoiding sense impressions that stoke up some other craving that is more relevant to your practice – desire for food might be an example.
3. Decide to go on retreat. Consult an Order member about which retreats might be appropriate, set aside at least a week, and make a reservation.



Appendix: Reflections on the Third Precept for Women

Written by Vajratara.

The introduction to the third precept gives a good overview of the underlying craving that gives rise to neurotic, addictive patterns of wanting, for example, food, cigarettes, shopping and sex. It also gives some suggestions of how we can work with that craving. Sex is used as the most powerful example of craving, and the third precept traditionally focuses on the area of unskilful sexual behaviour: rape, adultery and abduction. The question then arises, how can we practise the third precept in our modern situation, what does it mean for us now? Sex and sexual relationships are certainly a huge preoccupation for many people. This addition to week 4 of the course is from a women's perspective. In it I offer some suggestions of discussion topics based on themes that I have encountered while exploring how to live a Dharma life and practise ethics as a woman in the UK. From that point of view it is necessarily culturally and socially specific. It may be useful to talk to someone from a different culture about sex and relationships. In the West we can assume our way of multiple relationships is the best, but from another culture's point of view we can seem restless and unsatisfied. As the Dalai Lama said 'we have won our freedom, but we lack contentment'. The norms around sex and sexual relationships differ widely in different generations and cultures. This addition to week 4 is not intended to be the definitive answer to the questions that arise when discussing this area, but rather some topics to think about and explore. By their nature they will be more relevant to women, but whatever your gender identification, you may find something of interest to reflect upon.

What do you really want?

In the introduction, neurotic desire is defined as 'desire for something that cannot satisfy the need we are trying to satisfy'. Of course, sexual relationships don't always have to be neurotic, but we do have to examine what we really want and whether we are communicating to the other person what we really want. Is it pleasure we want, or comfort, or deeper communication? Do we want friendship or emotional support? Do we want excitement, or a sense of emotional wholeness or engagement? If we examine what we really want, the next question is can sex or a particular sexual relationship really satisfy that need, or are we expecting something from that relationship that it cannot possibly satisfy?

A major issue that has come up in discussion with other women is entering into relationships with unequal expectations. An example of this is when one person wants sex, one person

wants a long term relationship. To get what we want, it is tempting to be unclear about expectations or to agree to what the other person wants despite our own deeper desires. This leads to suffering in the long term as both partners have to face not getting what they wanted from the other person.

A topic that has come up in study groups I have led for women is being vague about contraception, having a buried desire to have a baby that leads to unconscious slips with contraception. We called this getting pregnant ‘accidentally-on-purpose’. Having a child is a huge responsibility and commitment and it is important that both partners are fully behind the decision to bring a life into being. If you want a child, it is better to be honest about that both with yourself and with your partner so that you can go about it in a conscious and careful way, setting up the best conditions possible.

In his book *The Noble Eight-Fold Path*, Sangharakshita talks about the positive counterpart to the third precept, contentment, as ‘a positive state of freedom from using sex to satisfy neurotic needs in general and, in particular, using it to satisfy the neurotic need for change’. It may be interesting to reflect on whether a need for change, or a dissatisfaction with our current situation, is underlying our desire for sex or a sexual relationship. Dissatisfaction with our current state can be very uncomfortable to experience, even painful at times.

Sangharakshita calls it ‘the flame of desire that burns unsatisfied from birth to birth until once and for all extinguished in the cool waters of Nirvāṇa’⁸. The Buddha made it clear that there is a certain kind of desire that can only be satisfied by spiritual fulfilment. He called this ‘dharmachanda’ which means desire for the Truth. We may look to sex or romance to fulfil that desire, but only spiritual practice can satisfy that deeper need. In this case devotional practice such as pūjā and mantra recitation can be better than looking for another person to fulfil what is essentially an existential problem.

Projection

We are often led to believe that sexual attraction is independent of our will, we are shot through the heart by a flowery bow and arrow! The Buddhist view is that everything that arises, does so in dependence on conditions. This includes sexual attraction. There is a volition to fall in love or be attracted to someone. Often we are attracted to someone because they embody our emergent qualities: qualities that we are developing or would like to develop. Sangharakshita describes this process of ‘projection’ in the following way: ‘Because one does not experience certain qualities in oneself, in the sense of not having integrated them into one’s conscious being, one is unconsciously drawn to finding them outside oneself.’⁹

An exercise that might be useful to explore is to examine why you are attracted to someone – is it their confidence, their spontaneity, their spiritual practice? Once you identify that quality, you can look for it in yourself. It is likely that you do possess that quality, at least in germinal form, and you would like to develop it more fully. The difficulty with getting into a sexual relationship with someone else who we are projecting those qualities onto is that we look to them to embody them, rather than developing them in ourselves. It may also be the case that they don’t embody them at all, it was something we projected onto them. When the projection fails one can experience deep disappointment with them. This doesn’t mean we should never get into a relationship with someone who embodies qualities we admire, but if we do, we should make sure they really do embody those qualities, and let them inspire similar qualities in us.

⁸ *A Survey of Buddhism*, Sangharakshita, Chapter 1.

⁹ *Living Ethically*, Sangharakshita, page 88.

Sex and Power

The traditional formula of the third precept clearly indicates abstention from forcing someone to do something against their wishes: rape and abduction. The examples are usually taken to be from a man's perspective. It is important we heed the advice to abstain from any form of violence, but we also need to look at the more subtle manifestations of violence in our own lives: exploiting someone or manipulating them to get what we want. Women are perfectly capable of doing this as well as men. One has to ask oneself honestly if we have ever used our sexual power over someone else to further our desires.

Power used in this way can indicate a deeper lack of self worth. If we lack confidence in ourselves we can habitually use sex and relationships to bolster our sense of self. It is easy to look to sex and sexual attractiveness to feel better about ourselves. If other people find us attractive or desire us in some way, this makes us feel we are worth something. In this way we look to others for approval and affirmation. We want other people to be attracted to us so that we can feel our place in the world. Through Buddhist practice, particularly the *Mettā Bhāvanā*, we can cultivate inner confidence and self worth that means that we no longer have to look outside of ourselves for affirmation. This means that our relationships are healthy; mutually appreciative rather than exploitative.

Cultivating Aesthetic Appreciation

Underlying sexual and romantic attraction is the tendency to make oneself a subject in a position of grasping an object. This can happen when we are first attracted to someone as well as when we are in a long-term settled relationship. If we identify someone as an object, we 'objectify' them. We enter into a relationship with someone as someone we can have or reject, rather than a person in their own right, independent of our own desires. The Buddhist tradition talks about this as pema, 'sticky attachment'. This means grasping onto someone as an object that we want, that somehow makes us feel complete as a subject. That attachment gives rise to painful mental states, particularly when we don't get what we want. We feel that somehow our self identification is threatened and we want to hang on to that person at any cost. We can experience jealousy even over quite trivial events if the object of our desire seems to move their attention to someone else. Our attraction can turn to hate if the object of our desires rejects us in any way.

The way to work against this tendency is to cultivate aesthetic appreciation for the other person. Aesthetic appreciation is neither a denial of attraction, nor an identification with it, seeing ourselves as a subject grasping an object. Aesthetic appreciation is akin to mettā. Mettā does not seek to own its object, but to delight in it. If we see a person with mettā we see them as beautiful, but we don't want to own that beauty. Because we see that person as existing independently of us with their own hopes and fears and qualities, we naturally want to help them to grow and develop, even if that means getting out of their way. As Sangharakshita explains: 'Metta is disinterested. When it's a question of lust you want to grab; when it's a question of aesthetic appreciation, you just want to stand back and contemplate.' We can relax around our attraction, we can relax with our long term partner. We can delight in them without trying to have or own them.

Conclusion

The main message that the Buddha and Sangharakshita give when exploring these issues is to take an honest look at the whole area of attraction, sex and settled relationships. What seems most important is clarity. What mental state are you expressing in your sexual behaviour? Are you really being free and non-conventional, or are you acting out of craving and fear?

What do you really want from the relationship? No one can tell you the answer to that, one has to look inside oneself for one's true motivation. We also need to examine the likely consequences of our behaviour. We may be attracted to someone who is already in a settled relationship, and they may be attracted to us, but what will be the consequences of following that attraction through? If we read sentimental romantic or erotic novels, or watch films with those themes, what will be the likely effect on our mind?

Sangharakshita advised the Triratna Buddhist Order to 'move towards complete brahmacarya', which means a state without sexual polarisation or objectification: celibacy. He said it isn't a case of some people being totally celibate, and some people being totally non-celibate, we all experience states without sexual polarisation, or more positively speaking, contentment. If we can make more space for contentment in our lives, for aesthetic appreciation and simple pleasures, we will find that we won't need to be so preoccupied with sexual relationships. They simply won't take up as much space in our lives. If we are in a settled relationship, it will mean we get into more satisfying, open communication with our partner based on mettā rather than grasping.

Eventually this may lead to periods of time without sex or sexual relationships, perhaps even a lifetime. Most people experience periods of time without sex as very satisfying, for example when we go on retreat, or between relationships. We experience ourselves in a different way. Perhaps we get more in touch with our deeper longings, or with what we really want in life. We put more energy into our friendships and other relationships. We become less preoccupied with our sexual and romantic desires.

This is a radical thing to do in this society where we are given the message that somehow we are not complete unless we are in a sexual relationship or having sex. Sexual relationships are taken as a sign of worth in society, and sexual attractiveness a validation of our femininity. We may be frightened that if we don't have sex, we will be cutting off our emotions. Emotional intensity and intimacy are associated purely with romance and sex, and if we give up on them, we may feel our emotions will become dry or stagnate. However, it doesn't have to be that way. We can feel our femininity, our sense of self worth and emotional intensity through other means, particularly through friendships. Perhaps it is better to think more in terms of cultivating deeper friendships than giving up sex. Celibacy, temporary or permanent, doesn't have to be a colourless state, but a state of contentment, delight and beauty.

Positive form: *With truthful communication, I purify my speech.*

Negative form: *I undertake the training principle of refraining from false speech.*

Pāli: *Musāvāda veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

Introduction

How we speak shapes the world we live in. Our speech has a strong effect on us, and on other people. Clearly we need some ethical guidelines about our speech. Of course these need to go beyond truthfulness – for example members of the Triratna Buddhist Order take on a total of four speech precepts – but these extra precepts could all be seen as aspects of other ethical principles, such as kindness, that are covered by other precepts. In the Five Precepts – the most widespread ethical formula in the Buddhist world – the need for truthfulness is the one aspect of speech that is singled out and dealt with separately.

Truthful speech is not an elementary, beginners' practice. As we shall see, it is a difficult practice that strongly challenges our usual egocentric approach to life.

The principle of truthfulness

We could define truthfulness as a courageous respect for reality, even when acknowledging and facing up to the truth goes against what we see as our self-centred goals, or when it might cause us discomfort.

So practising this precept is about developing the qualities of straightforwardness and integrity. This means facing and speaking the truth even when this goes against what our ego wants, and so undermining our tendency to give priority to our self-centred desires over reality. This raises an important side-issue – that the precept is about speaking the truth when this is uncomfortable for us, not when it is uncomfortable for other people. People often object to this precept on the grounds that speaking the truth can be unkind, as though our untruthfulness was usually about sparing other people's feelings. In fact, for most of us, most of our untruthfulness is about our own selfishness, and it is this we are trying to tackle. When it comes to speaking the truth about others we need to give priority to kindness, which will involve tact and consideration, although it will usually also include speaking the truth, at the right time. (Sometimes we tell ourselves we are lying to spare another's feelings, when really we are trying to avoid the discomfort we would feel if we told the truth.)

The dangers of untruthfulness

If we distort the truth in our speech we harm ourselves directly, we cut ourselves off from others, and we cut ourselves off from the spiritual community.

Untruthfulness harms us

We harm ourselves, because whenever we distort the truth we make it more difficult to be truthful with ourselves – to face up to reality and see ourselves as we really are – which undermines our whole spiritual practice. We undermine our integrity and sense of wholeness, cutting ourselves off from what is best in us, and alienating ourselves from our higher nature – which some traditions call our Buddha Nature.

Untruthfulness cuts us off from others

Distorting the truth also cuts us off from others. We cannot be in communication with others if we are not telling the truth. If we are untruthful, then what we are communicating is not real – so there can be no real communication. One important aim of ethics is to help us to behave in ways that reflect and increase our sense of connectedness with others. Communication is a powerful way of increasing this connectedness and breaking down the barriers between ourselves and others. By cutting us off from true communication, false speech increases our painful, deluded sense of ourselves as a hard, tight, separate ego, cut off from others and in conflict with the rest of the world.

Untruthfulness cuts us off from the spiritual community

Creating the spiritual community is an important part of our practice. We all need a spiritual community – a Sangha – to get far in the spiritual life. We need to be part of a community of people who share a common aspiration and support each other in their practice. We need friendships where we can be open and honest, with no fear that anything we say will be used against us. This sort of spiritual community can only exist when people trust each other, and trust is only possible when people speak the truth. Lying and distortion inevitably creates distrust. So when we lie or distort the truth in the context of the Sangha we cut ourselves off from the spiritual community, with disastrous consequences for our own progress, and we undermine the spiritual community for others.

The extent of truthful speech

In asking us to adopt truthful speech as an aspect of our spiritual training this precept goes beyond what would normally be called lying. Of course it covers the direct lie, but it also asks us to strive to make our speech give a true reflection of reality, avoiding the one-sided distortions that our ego-centred desires give rise to. This would include, for example, not exaggerating – to make ourselves look good, or important, or interesting, or hard-done-by, or to make others look worse than they are. It would include not putting the spin on events that puts us in the best light, or puts us in the right, or gets us what we want. It would include not looking for excuses so as to avoid blame, but owning up to our own responsibility. It would include presenting both sides of the story, and not just our own. It would include avoiding all the omissions and false emphases that give a false picture of what really happened, while staying this side of a direct lie. The precept asks us to be openly and courageously truthful as a spiritual practice, not to stick to the letter of any literalistic rule.

The benefits of practising truthfulness

Truthfulness is a demanding practice. Very often we hold a sort of press conference for ourselves through our speech, constantly trying to edit reality to make ourselves look the way we want to be seen. Often we are not even aware we are doing this – we actually believe our own distortions, and we can react angrily if they are challenged. To consciously set out to change these patterns is a difficult but powerful transformative practice. It makes us more aware of our unconscious motivations, improves our relationships with others, reduces our anxiety levels, and brings about a general improvement in our ethical practice, which is reflected in a general improvement in our mental states.

Developing awareness

To practice truthful speech we have to be aware of our speech. We have to be mindful when this can be most difficult – when we are interacting with other people, with all the reactions and emotions this involves. Often we are not really very conscious of our speech, or of the volitions behind it. So a lot of the time our dishonesty slips by unnoticed, and once some time has passed we may begin to believe our own distortions. But if we consciously decide to tell the truth, then we have to watch ourselves, we have to ask ourselves, as we speak, “Is this true?” This makes us more conscious of our mental processes, and forces us to examine the stories we tell ourselves. If we do not take up the training rule of truthful speech as a conscious practice, then we run the risk of staying in a fog, never becoming aware of the way we twist the truth to suit our own purposes. In which case it will be very hard for us to make any spiritual progress.

The Eight Worldly Winds

Most of the time we distort the truth to get what we want in some way. One useful framework for looking at the way we do this is the ‘Eight Worldly Winds’. These are four pairs of positives and negatives that tend to govern our egocentric responses to the world – we constantly try to get as much as we can of the ‘positive’ side of each pair, and avoid the negative.

The Eight Worldly Winds are:

gain (of money and possession)	<i>versus</i>	loss
praise or approval	<i>versus</i>	blame
pleasure or comfort	<i>versus</i>	pain or discomfort
fame or status	<i>versus</i>	loss of fame or status

The worldly winds are the ego’s scorecards, which determine whether it thinks it is doing well or badly in the game of life. Normally we distort the truth in the service of winning one or another of these games. We want to gain money or goods, and to avoid losing them. We want to be praised or liked, and to avoid blame. We want to have comfort or pleasures, and to avoid discomfort. And we want to increase our importance in other people’s eyes.

Because our tendency to distort the truth is so directly related to our self-centred motivations, the practice of truthful speech helps us to recognise our egotistic patterns, and to go beyond them. If we are consciously practising this precept, then over and over again in our daily interactions we will be confronted with the fact that we very much want to distort the truth for some self-centred reason, but that our ethical guidelines warn us against this. Usually the motive for untruthfulness will be connected with one of the Eight Worldly Winds, for example we will want to avoid blame or to make someone like us. Our practice of the precept will blow the whistle on this motivation, and we will be led to confront our unconscious volitions. Then, instead of doing what we usually do, we can take the skilful, creative option.

If we really take on this precept in a courageous way it can be a radical and transformative practice, because it tackles our unconscious egocentricity in a large number of everyday situations, making us aware of our real drives and helping us to confront them. The Eight Worldly Winds are so much part of our motivation that we may be tempted to distort the truth almost all the time when we are interacting with other people, so that practising this precept gives us a very fruitful way of bringing our practice into our daily life.

We can reinforce the way truthful speech makes us more aware by involving other people, and asking them to help us. They may point out to us when we drift away from the truth, which will have very positive effects on our mindfulness! Our spiritual friends can hold a mirror up to us, which can sometimes allow us to see our own untruthfulness clearly for the first time.

Better relationships

As we begin to practice the fourth precept more consciously we may also notice that our relationships improve. We start to be more genuine, revealing more about ourselves, and letting some of our defences down. People tend to like us more when we stop hiding behind a mask and reveal our vulnerability. And as we become more open, so others become more open with us. Over time the quality of our friendships can become deeper and more satisfying, and our whole life becomes richer and more rewarding as a result.

People value and respond to integrity. As we practice truthfulness people realise that we can be trusted. And because truthfulness allows real communication, people are much more eager to befriend people who practice truthfulness than those who don't.

Less anxiety

Practising truthful speech often helps us to feel more at ease, and less shy and anxious around other people. When we distort the truth to create an unreal image of ourselves, we fear that people will see through the mask we have created to the real person we are trying to hide. This can cause a sense of shyness, and an underlying anxiety in our interactions with others. Being more open and straightforward allows us to let go of this anxiety. We find that if we reveal ourselves more as we really are, people do not respond with disapproval – in fact they actually like and accept us far more.

A general improvement in ethics

Finally, if we seriously take on a practice of truthfulness we will probably find that our whole practice of ethics will improve, including areas that at first sight seem to have nothing to do with speech. For example we might realise that we have not been honest with the tax man, or that we have not been honest with some important person in our life, and that if we are going to speak the truth from now on we will not be able to carry on the deception, and need to sort the situation out. So our commitment to honesty will help us to tackle the legacy of past unskillfulness. This has the effect of reconnecting us with our sense of integrity, and putting us more in touch with our higher self. The process may cost us some money, or make us eat humble pie – of course the ego hates the idea of either – but this may be just what our spiritual life needs!



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you agree that distorting the truth has a harmful effect on us? Why, or why not?
2. Think of one occasion when you distorted the truth over the past week. What was the motivation for this? Can you relate your motivation to one of the 'Worldly Winds'?
3. Which pair of 'Worldly Winds' affects you most strongly? How does it affect your speech?

4. Do you agree that practising truthful speech helps to reduce anxiety and increase self-confidence? Why, or why not?

Suggested exercises

1. Own up and apologise for a distortion of the truth you have made over the past week. Notice the effect this has on your relationship with the person concerned, and tell the group about it.
2. Consciously take on the training principle of not distorting the truth this week, noticing under what circumstances you find this difficult, and its effect on you. Report back on your experiences.
3. Involve someone you trust and are close to – or more than one person – in helping you to practice the fourth precept. Ask them to point out when your speech distorts what really happened – and notice your reactions to this!

Positive form: *With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.*

Negative form: *I undertake to abstain from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.*

Pāli: *Surā-meraya-majja-pamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*

The importance of awareness in Buddhism

In Buddhism growth in awareness is seen as an essential part of spiritual development. The enlightened mind that Buddhists aim to develop is a more aware mind. Awareness of ourselves is what liberates us from our past patterns. Awareness of others and the world around us is what transforms our emotional life. Ultimately, awareness of reality liberates us from the delusion that is the root of all our suffering and dissatisfaction.

The meanings of mindfulness

The quality of awareness that Buddhists seek to develop is often called 'mindfulness'. But this one English word is used for three separate Sanskrit words, which have different shades of meaning.

1. *Smṛti* (Pāli *satī*) is usually translated as mindfulness or awareness, but its primary meaning is recollection or even memory. As with the English word 'recollectedness', *smṛti* is normally used to mean the state of being present in our actual experience, which is the opposite of distraction or absent-mindedness
2. *Samprajanya* (Pāli *sampajañña*) literally means 'clear knowing'. It is used to mean clearly knowing your purpose, and the relationship of what you are doing to your goal. Sangharakshita often speaks of *samprajanya* as 'mindfulness of purpose.'
3. *Apramāda* (Pāli *appamāda*) means awareness in an active, ethical sense – it is sometimes translated as vigilance. It means mindfully guarding against unskilful actions of body, speech and mind. (The Buddha's last words were said to be *appamādena sampadetha* (in Pāli), which is often translated as 'with mindfulness, strive on.') Its opposite is *pramāda*, which means among other things intoxication, carelessness, and laxity.

Taking these three words together we get some idea of the multi-faceted nature of the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, and its crucial importance for the spiritual life. Without *smṛti* we will not be present to our experience, we will not be aware enough to enjoy what we are doing or the world around us, and in our distraction we will have no hope of having either *samprajanya* or *apramāda*. Without *samprajanya* we will continually forget what our life is about, drifting along aimlessly at the mercy of external events, never achieving our goals or putting our decisions into effect. Without *apramāda* we will not be able to keep any of the other precepts, so mindfulness could be said to be the foundation of all our ethical practice.

Without mindfulness we are on automatic pilot. We have no real choice, and no freedom – life is living us, rather than us living life. As we develop more and more mindfulness we develop the ability to consciously choose our responses to circumstances, other people, and the workings of our own minds.

Classifications of Awareness

Awareness has many aspects or dimensions. In the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (The Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), the Buddha defines the Four Foundations of Mindfulness as:

- 1 Mindfulness of the body.
- 2 Mindfulness of feelings.
- 3 Mindfulness of the mind.
- 4 Mindfulness of reality.

Sangharakshita has expanded this traditional formulation, identifying what he calls the Four Dimensions of Awareness, which are

- 1 Awareness of things, or the physical environment.
- 2 Awareness of self including.
 - a. Awareness of body.
 - b. Awareness of feelings.
 - c. Awareness of thoughts.
- 3 Awareness of other people.
- 4 Awareness of reality.

1. Awareness of the physical environment

Many people notice that when they start meditating they become more aware of the world around them, and that this enriches their enjoyment of life enormously. The grass, the trees, the ever-changing sky, even the cityscape of buildings, engineering works and artificial light, all start to take on a new clarity, vividness, and beauty. The world we live in is very beautiful, but normally many of us are too distracted and preoccupied to pay attention to it. Learning to pay attention to the world and to take delight in it is one of the greatest favours we can do ourselves. Meditation helps, but we also need to apply our heightened awareness during the routine of our everyday lives. To some extent this is simply a matter of deciding to pay attention. We need to learn to look at the world, smell the world, listen to the world, feel the world, and even taste the world. To do this we may need to devote some time to it – giving ourselves the space to walk rather than taking the quickest way from A to B, and so on. We may also need to restrain our tendency to distract ourselves with artificial inputs, or by indulging our inner fantasies and daydreams.

2. Awareness of the self

a) Awareness of the body

This is some of what the Buddha has to say about developing mindfulness of the body:

Here a monk.... sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, having established mindfulness before him. Mindfully he breathes in, mindfully he breathes out... He trains himself thinking, "I will breath in, conscious of the whole body." He trains himself thinking, "I will breath out, conscious of the whole body..."

When walking, he knows that he is walking, when standing, he knows that he is standing, when lying down, he knows that he is lying down. In whatever way his body is disposed, he knows that is how it is.

When going forward or going back, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in looking forward or looking back, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in bending and stretching, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in carrying his robe and his bowl, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in eating, drinking, chewing and savouring, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in passing excrement or urine, he is clearly aware of what he is doing; in walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, in speaking or in staying silent, he is clearly aware of what he is doing.

Practising in this way can have a powerful effect, which is impossible to imagine unless we have experienced it. The body becomes suffused with awareness, our mental processes become calmed, our attention is taken away from the anxious chatter of our discursive mind, and is grounded instead in an awareness of our physical being that allows us to experience a sense of grace in even the most simple actions. We also appreciate the world around us in a new way – awareness of the body and awareness of the world around us seem to go together, as both quieten our inner dialogue.

So being more mindful of the body brings many rewards in its own right, but it is also the foundation on which we build all other aspects of mindfulness. When our awareness is grounded in our actual physical experience, we have a firm anchor that lets us become more aware of our inner mental processes without getting caught up and swept along by them. But when we are not ‘in our body’ we have no firm place to stand, and we all too easily get lost in a purely mental world of fleeting thoughts, feelings, imaginations, and anxieties.

Going on a meditation retreat can help us become more aware of our bodies. We can also cultivate mindfulness of the body in our everyday life e.g. by walking and eating mindfully, rather than distracting ourselves from our physical experience by listening to music or reading at the same time. Any form of physical exercise can help, if it is done in the right frame of mind. Yoga and tai chi have developed specifically as aids to body awareness, and are particularly helpful.

b) Awareness of feelings

The word ‘feeling’ as used by the Buddha in this context does not mean emotion, it refers to what is called, in Pāli, *vedanā*. *Vedanā* means the instantaneous response of liking or disliking that we get whenever any stimulus impinges on our senses. According to whether it gives us a pleasant or unpleasant *vedanā*, we try to grab or reject different parts of our experience. Our *vedanās* arise from our past conditioning, and often they are not connected with any objective good or bad qualities inherent in the thing or experience itself – why should one person love strawberry ice cream, or rainy weather, when another hates it?

When our responses to *vedanā* rule our life we live in what someone has jokingly called ‘doggy consciousness’ – like a dog chasing smells it likes, shying away from what it dislikes, running this way then that with no fixed aim at all. Responding automatically and unconsciously to our *vedanās* is what keeps us trapped in our old reactive patterns of behaviour. The gap between *vedanā* and our response is our point of freedom, where we can escape from past patterns and free ourselves to act in new and creative ways. This only becomes possible when we are aware of our *vedanās*, without responding – hence mindfulness of feelings in this sense is a crucial part of our effort to liberate ourselves.

Sangharakshita also uses the word ‘feeling’ in a broader sense, to include emotions. Being aware of our emotions is a crucial part of becoming a conscious, self-determining human being, living from the full potency of our hearts as well as our heads. If we are not aware of our emotions they tend to rule us, without us having any conscious choice in the matter. We have all had experience of people who say that they are not angry or resentful, when everything about their body language and tone of voice clearly shows that they are. These may be extreme examples, but most of us could usefully become more aware of the underlying emotions that are driving us.

As we become more aware of our emotional life we have more choice about how we express our feelings. This may start out by us simply refusing to express harmful emotions, especially when we know that these would not be helpful. But as our practice deepens, mindfulness of feelings starts to have a deeper effect, transforming our emotions so that our experience becomes more and more positive. The very act of becoming aware of our emotions has this transformative effect – our unskilful emotions tend to be resolved, and our skilful emotions tend to become stronger and more refined.

c) Awareness of thoughts

Often our heads are full of mental chatter. We are constantly planning the future, regretting the past, worrying about what other people think, imagining what is going to happen, constructing fantasies, making assumptions about other people and their motives, and so on. This constant stream of thoughts gives us little time for peace of mind or enjoyment of the world around us. And what is worse, we often take our mental dialogue completely seriously, and identify with it, so that what starts out as a passing thought becomes a whole fantasy which we take for a reality, and which we then act out in the world.

But in fact most of our thinking is like mental weather – it comes, and it goes, in dependence on past conditions. We do not have to take it so seriously, identify with it, or pour energy into it. If instead we can maintain clear awareness of our mental weather, we have taken the first step in liberating ourselves from it. As with feelings, awareness of our thoughts has a transformative effect. As we learn to watch our thoughts from moment to moment, firstly in meditation, and then in our everyday life as well, we notice that the flow of mental chatter often slows down or stops altogether. This can be a profoundly refreshing experience, which goes along with a deep sense of peace. We also become more able to evaluate our thinking, sifting what is true and objective from what simply untrue, clouded by negative emotion, or based on mere assumptions. We become more able to consciously direct our thinking, so that we can reflect on the subject we choose in a more effective, concentrated way, rather than simply drifting from one thought to another. And we may also find that as our superficial thinking quiets down we become able to think from deeper levels, so that thinking and feeling become fused into one higher faculty, and our intuitions becomes more frequent and reliable.

3. Awareness of other people

Usually most of us are not very aware of other people in their fullness, as beings who feel and experience as intensely as we do, who have a whole inner world as we do, and who are in every way as important as we are. Apart from the few people we are close to, we often see people almost as objects, who either exist for our convenience – to drive our bus or cook our dinner – or else are of no interest at all. One way to change this lack of awareness is simply to pay attention to people, which includes looking at them – their faces, their eyes, their body language. When we really pay attention to people we begin to see them as they are, as human

beings in their own right. We also need to make an effort to pay attention to people close to us, to use our senses and imagination to know what they are feeling, to empathise with them and know their needs. Unless we are aware of other people we cannot feel mettā for them, and we cannot communicate with them.

4. Awareness of reality

In traditional texts this is usually described in terms of relating our experience to Buddhist ideas like the Four Noble Truths. This can allow us to cut through our usual interpretations of events, and see things in a truer light. For example, if we make the effort to remain mindful of the fact of transience, then we will see transience and change everywhere, and our deluded tendency to interpret the world in terms of fixed permanent ‘things’ will be eroded. We may also be liberated from some of our anxieties and negative states – when our car gets dented or we notice some grey hairs, this may not seem so awful or surprising in the context of a cosmos that is one huge process of transformation!

The negative form of the precept

In Sangharakshita’s words, mindfulness “is fundamental to spiritual practice; one cannot begin without it.” So it is not surprising that Buddhist ethical guidelines advise us not to do those things that destroy our mindfulness needlessly. The negative form of the fifth precept therefore calls for us to refrain from drink and drugs that cloud the mind.

Alcohol

Some newcomers to Buddhism have a problem accepting this negative form of the precept, because for many people in Western societies drinking alcohol is an integral part of their social life. But in this respect there are several things we should think about.

Firstly, the precept is advising us not to drink to the point that our mindfulness is impaired. For some people this may not rule out some social drinking, or the occasional glass of wine with a meal. Secondly, as with all the precepts, what is important is that we are moving in the right direction, not necessarily that we immediately follow all the precepts perfectly. Thirdly, it can be unwise to jump ahead in our imagination to a point where we are further advanced in our practice than we are now, and then judge what this might be like from our present position. At the moment, a life without alcohol might seem like a joyless prospect. But by the time we are ready to give up alcohol completely things may look very different. Most practising Buddhists find that, as their normal state of mind becomes happier and their emotions warmer and more easily expressed, they lose the desire to drink alcohol. Many find the dulled awareness caused by alcohol unpleasant.

So we do not need to feel that we cannot be a practising Buddhist unless we give up alcohol. But we should recognise that our practice will lead us in that direction if we want to make serious progress. Many Buddhists in the West drink alcohol occasionally, but few serious practitioners in the Triratna Buddhist Community drink regularly, or to the point of intoxication. Many never drink at all. In particular, when we are trying to make serious progress in meditation it is advisable not to drink any alcohol, as even small amounts affect our meditation the next morning.

As with the other precepts, the advice not to drink alcohol has an other-regarding aspect, as well as protecting our own well-being. Many people are seriously damaged by alcohol, and cause a great deal of unhappiness to themselves and those close to them. Others equate drunkenness with happiness, and spend a lot of their leisure time in a dulled, coarsened state, which must have a long term effect on their spiritual well-being. By abstaining from drink we

make it easier for others to do so, making the world a happier place in the process. By not drinking we also withhold our complicity from the alcohol industry, an exploitative aspect of the consumer society, which profits from creating a great deal of unhappiness.

Other drugs

The fifth precept also advises against the use of intoxicating drugs other than alcohol. Cannabis is the most common recreational drug after alcohol in modern Western societies, and paradoxically it may have a more serious effect on spiritual practice than alcohol, precisely because it is not so obviously damaging. If we drink too much alcohol we will quickly be confronted with some stark choices. But it is possible to spend our every moment to some extent dulled by cannabis, particularly as it lasts for many days in the body. Even occasional cannabis use is bad news for mindfulness and meditation.

Lastly, what about other mind-altering drugs like LSD, psilocybin (magic mushrooms), and ecstasy? Some people are attracted to the Dharma because drugs like these revealed the possibility of other states of being, or even opened up something like a spiritual experience. But continued use of these drugs is damaging, and having found the Dharma, with its many much healthier and more sustainable ways of expanding our consciousness, why take the risks involved in the violent chemical alteration of consciousness? (Sangharakshita has described LSD for example as ‘spiritual baby food’ – and as with baby food, when we are more spiritually grown up it is unnecessary and unpleasant.)

Mindfulness in daily life

Mindfulness is difficult to maintain, and because it is so crucial to spiritual life we need to do everything we can to develop and maintain it. This could include meditation, retreats, body awareness exercises, giving ourselves the time to be aware of simple pleasures, avoiding too much rush and input overload, and making the effort to be aware of the world around us. Another important way of developing mindfulness is to keep in contact with other Buddhists, to use the conducive environment provided by the Sangha. To quote Sangharakshita:

If you realise the importance of ...mindfulness...you realise that if you lose it, you lose, in a sense, everything, then you are going to want to do something a little more radical than tying a knot in your handkerchief to make sure you preserve it. And one very effective way is to develop spiritual friendship.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Has your mindfulness increased since you started to meditate? If so, which aspects of your awareness have been most affected?
2. When are you most mindful of your body? Do you notice any relationship between mindfulness of the body and your mental state, especially anxiety?
3. What could you do to increase your mindfulness of the body?
4. What effects have retreats or periods with little activity had on your mindfulness?

5. Do you accept that it would be a good idea to avoid intoxicants? To what extent do you practice this? If you do not practice the precept perfectly, has your use of intoxicants changed since you started practising the Dharma?

1.3

Exploring Buddhist Practice Meditation



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Introduction

To begin this section on meditation we will be looking at an excerpt from one of the Buddha's discourses from the Pāli Canon, called 'The Fruits of the Homeless Life.' This has been chosen because it puts meditation in its context, showing how it fits into the Buddhist path. It describes the attitudes and mental states we need to develop to make meditation effective, and it also describes the effects of meditation, which go far beyond our experience on the meditation cushion.

Meditation is what first attracts many people to the Dharma, and we can sometimes see it as the most important part of Buddhism, and even as a stand-alone practice we can pursue in its own right. But traditionally meditation was not seen in this way. It is seen as just one part of an overall process of transformation, which is often summarised as the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom. The text we are going to look at brings the Threefold Path alive. It describes a total process of inner transformation, caused by a combination of meditation and changes in the way we live and act. It shows how combining these practices can progressively transform our attitudes, our emotions, and the way we see the world. And it describes how this process of transformation ultimately culminates in complete liberation.

The text does this in the context of the Buddha's recommended style of practice for those who were able and willing to become homeless renunciants, at a time when there was still a lot of forest wilderness for homeless wanderers to live in, when ordinary householders seem to have been generally happy to support spiritual practitioners by giving them food, and in a climate where living and sleeping outdoors was possible for most of the year. We probably won't be willing or able to practice in exactly this way, even if it were possible in our very different social, economic, and climatic conditions. But this doesn't mean we can't put the same principles into practice in our own spiritual lives, and it is the principles behind the lifestyle that we need to be looking for in this text.

Setting the scene

There are no questions for discussion with this text; instead you will be reading it through in the group, and discussing it as you do so. To set the scene:

The Buddha and 1250 of his followers are staying in a mango grove belonging to the physician of King Ajātasattu of Maghada. The King is infamous for having gained his throne by killing his father. He has a troubled mind because of his crime, and has been looking for spiritual advice, but his practical, no-nonsense turn of mind makes it difficult for him to accept that purely spiritual benefits are worth pursuing for their own sake. So he has been asking different spiritual teachers what benefits, visible here and now in this life, we could expect from living the spiritual life, but nobody has been able to convince him that there are any. It is a beautiful

moonlit night, and the King recognises that this should be enjoyable, but he is restless. He says “Can we not visit some ascetic ... to visit whom would bring peace to our heart?”

Different ministers suggest a number of spiritual teachers, but the royal physician’s description of the Buddha, who he says “may well bring peace to Your Majesty’s heart”, obviously carries much more conviction than anyone else’s suggestion. So the King orders his riding elephants to be made ready, and sets off for the doctor’s mango grove with a ridiculous procession of hundreds of riding elephants bearing, among others, his hundreds of wives. When he gets into the countryside and has to get off his elephant and walk he is terrified by the darkness and silence, and has to be coaxed along by the doctor. Then he is astounded and very impressed to come across the Buddha’s followers sitting ‘in silence like a clear lake’. He wishes that his son – who will eventually kill him to get his throne – could have the same calm.

The King introduces himself, and then asks the Buddha, as he had asked others, what benefits visible in this life he could expect from following the spiritual path. The excerpt we are studying is part of the Buddha’s reply, which deeply impresses the King, so that he declares himself a lay follower, and confesses his father’s murder with regret.

The Place of Meditation in the Spiritual Life

Text from The Sāmaññaphala Sutta: The Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life, adapted from the translation of Maurice Walsh, in The Long Discourses of the Buddha.

1. “This Dhamma is heard by a householder or a householder’s son. Having heard this Dhamma, he gains faith in the Tathāgata. Having gained this faith, he reflects: “The household life is close and dusty, the homeless life is free as air. It is not easy, living the household life, to live the fully-perfected noble life. Suppose I were to shave off my hair and beard, don yellow robes and go forth from the household life into homelessness!” And after some time, he abandons his property, leaves his circle of relatives, shaves off his hair and beard, dons yellow robes, and goes forth into the homeless life.

2. And having gone forth, he dwells restrained by the restraint of the rules, persisting in right behaviour, seeing danger in the slightest faults, observing the commitments he has taken on, devoted to the skilled and purified life, perfected in morality, with the sense-doors guarded, skilled in mindful awareness, and content.

3. And how, Sire, is a monk perfected in morality? Abandoning the taking of life, he dwells refraining from taking life, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he lives accepting what is given, without stealing. Abandoning unchastity, he lives aloof from the village-practice of sex. Abandoning false speech, he is a truth-speaker, one to be relied on. Abandoning malicious speech, he does not repeat here what he has heard there. He is a reconciler, rejoicing in peace, and speaking up for it. Abandoning harsh speech, he speaks what is pleasing to the ear, reaching the heart, urbane. Abandoning idle chatter, he speaks at the right time, what is correct and to the point. Thus he is perfected in morality.

4. And then Sire, that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side. Just as a duly-anointed king, having conquered his enemies, sees no danger from any side, so the monk, on account of his morality, sees no danger anywhere. He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality. In this way Sire, he is perfected in morality.

5. And how, Sire, is he a guardian of the sense-doors? Here a monk, on seeing an object with the eye, does not grasp at it. Because unskilled states would overwhelm him if he dwelt leaving this eye-faculty unguarded, so he develops restraint of the eye-faculty. On hearing a sound with the ear, on smelling an odour with the nose, on tasting a flavour with the tongue, on feeling an object with the body, on thinking a thought with the mind, he does not grasp at it. He develops restraint of the mind-faculty. He experiences within himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble guarding of the faculties. In this way, Sire, a monk is a guardian of the sense-doors.

6. And how, Sire, is a monk accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness? Here a monk acts with clear awareness in going forth and back, in looking ahead or behind him, in bending and stretching, in wearing his robe and carrying his bowl, in eating and drinking, in evacuating and urinating, in walking, standing, sitting, lying down, in speaking and in keeping silent. In this way, a monk is accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness.

7. And how is a monk contented? Here, a monk is satisfied with a robe to protect his body, with alms to satisfy his stomach, taking only what he needs. Just as a bird flies hither and thither, burdened by nothing but its wings, so he is satisfied. In this way, Sire, a monk is contented.

8. Then he, equipped with this noble morality, with this noble restraint of the senses, with this noble contentment, finds a solitary lodging, at the root of a forest tree, in a mountain cave, a charnel-ground, or in a jungle-thicket. Then he sits down cross-legged, holding his body erect, and concentrates on keeping mindfulness established before him.

9. Abandoning worldly desires, he dwells with a mind freed from worldly desires, and his mind is purified of them. Abandoning ill-will, by compassionate love for the welfare of all living beings his mind is purified of ill-will. Abandoning sloth-and-torpor, perceiving light, clearly aware, his mind is purified of sloth-and-torpor. Abandoning worry-and-flurry, with a calmed mind his heart is purified of worry-and-flurry. Abandoning doubt, he dwells with doubt left behind.

10. Just as a man who had taken a loan to develop his business might pay off his debts, and might think: “Before this I developed my business by borrowing, but now it has prospered”, and he would rejoice and be glad about that.

11. Just as a man who was ill, with no appetite and weak in body, might after a time recover, and regain his appetite and bodily strength. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

12. Just as a man might be in prison, and after a time he might be freed from his bonds. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

13. Just as a man might be a slave, unable to go where he liked, and after some time he might be freed from slavery, able to go where he liked. And he would rejoice and be glad about that.

14. Just as a man might go on a journey through the desert, and after a time arrive safely at a village, and think: “Before this I was in danger, now I am safe at a village”, and he would rejoice and be glad about that.

15. As long, Sire, as a monk does not perceive the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, he feels as if in debt, in sickness, in bonds, in slavery, on a desert journey. But when he

perceives the disappearance of the five hindrances in himself, it is as if he were freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert.

16. And when these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind his body is tranquillised, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated. Being thus detached from unwholesome states, he enters and remains in the first jhāna, which is with thinking and pondering, born of detachment, filled with joy and [physical] delight. And with this delight and joy born of detachment, he so suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body that there is no spot in his body that is untouched by this delight and joy born of detachment.

17. Just as a skilled bath-man, kneading the soap-powder with water, forms a soft lump, so that it becomes one oleaginous mass, so this monk suffuses, drenches, fills and irradiates his body, so that no spot remains untouched. This, Sire, is a fruit of the homeless life, visible here and now.

18. Again, a monk, with the subsiding of thinking and pondering, by gaining inner tranquillity and oneness of mind, enters and remains in the second jhāna, which is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with joy and [physical] delight. And with this delight and joy born of concentration he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched.

19. Just as a spring feeding a lake, the water welling up from below, would suffuse, fill and irradiate that cool water, so that no part of the pool was untouched by it, so, with this delight and joy born of concentration he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched. This, Sire, is a fruit more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

20. Again, a monk with the fading away of [physical] delight remains imperturbable, mindful and clearly aware, and experiences in himself that joy of which the Noble Ones say: “Happy is he who dwells with equanimity and mindfulness”, and he enters and remains in the third jhāna. And with this joy devoid of [physical] delight he so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched.

21. Just as if, in a pond of lotuses, in which the flowers are fed from the water’s depths, those lotuses would be suffused with the cool water, so with this joy devoid of delight the monk so suffuses his body that no spot remains untouched. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

22. Again, a monk, having gone beyond pleasure and pain, and with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness, enters and remains in the fourth jhāna, which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. And he sits suffusing his body with mental purity and clarification, so that no part of his body is untouched by it.

23. Just as if a man were to sit wrapped from head to foot in a white garment, so that no part of him was untouched by that garment, so his body is suffused, with mental purity and clarification. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

24. And so, with mind concentrated and cleansed, spotless, malleable, workable, and having gained imperturbability, he directs his mind towards knowing and seeing. It is just as if there were a gem, clear, bright, unflawed, and a man might take it in his hand and describe it clearly.

In the same way a monk with mind concentrated and cleansed directs his mind towards knowing and seeing. This is a fruit of the homeless life, more excellent than the former ones.

25. And he, with mind concentrated, applies his mind to the production of a mind-made body. And out of this body he produces another body, having a form mind-made. It is just as if a man were to draw a snake from its [old] skin. In the same way a monk, with mind concentrated, directs his mind to the production of a mind-made body. He draws that body out of this body, mind-made. This is a fruit of the homeless life more excellent and perfect than the former ones.

26. And with mind concentrated, purified and cleansed, malleable, and having gained imperturbability, he applies and directs his mind to the knowledge of the destruction of the corruptions. And through his knowing and seeing his mind is delivered from the corruption of sense-desire, from the corruption of becoming, from the corruption of ignorance, and the knowledge arises in him: “This is deliverance!” And he knows: “Birth is finished, the noble life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here.”

27. Just as if, Sire, in the midst of the mountains there were a pond, clear as a mirror, where a man standing on the bank could see oyster-shells, gravel-banks, and shoals of fish. And he might think: “This pond is clear, there are oyster-shells...” and so on, just so, with mind concentrated, he knows: “Birth is finished, the noble life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here.” This, Sire, is a fruit of the homeless life, visible here and now, which is more excellent and perfect than the previous fruits. And, Sire, there is no fruit of the homeless life that is more excellent than this.’



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. In verse one, the “going forth” is a spiritual death, the death of the old person, who leaves his old identity and role completely behind, and even changes his appearance and perhaps name to mark this death. Why is this important?
2. We probably are not up for the radical “going forth” the Buddha describes, but how can we get some of this?
3. Verse three brings out the importance of positive emotion. It also brings out that ethics is about cultivating positive emotion, not about sticking to the letter of a set of rules, and that concern for the wellbeing of others is ideally part of our motivation for practicing.

Why is positive emotion, and concern for others in particular, needed to meditate effectively and develop wisdom?

4. In verse four, “...that monk who is perfected in morality sees no danger from any side... He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this noble morality”. Why does being ethical free us from anxiety and a sense of danger?
5. In verse five, the monk is encouraged to guard the gates of the senses. Why might guarding the gates of the senses help us in our meditation practice?

6. In verse eight, the monk, “equipped ... with this noble restraint of the senses, with this noble contentment” goes to his solitary lodging to meditate. Would the monk be able to meditate effectively there while still subject to distraction and discontent? What would he probably experience if he tried to?
7. How might the ethical practice the monk has already undertaken help him get beyond the hindrances?
8. If the monk is already in such a good state, e.g. trembling for the welfare of all beings and completely contented, how could he still be subject to the hindrances of sense desire and ill-will?
9. What are your responses to the descriptions of the dhyānas, and the traditional images? Do they sound like a fruit of spiritual practice that is worth striving for? Have people had any experiences resembling these, and if so what were the circumstances that gave rise to this?

This text is an edited version of A System of Meditation by Sangharakshita, in A Guide to the Buddhist Path.

Introduction

Buddhism grew out of meditation. It grew out of the Buddha's meditation under the Bodhi tree, 2,500 years ago. It grew therefore out of meditation in the highest sense: not simply meditation in the sense of concentration, nor even the experience of higher states of consciousness, but meditation in the sense of contemplation – a direct, total, all-comprehending vision and experience of ultimate Reality. It is out of this that Buddhism grew, and out of this that it has continually refreshed itself down through the ages.

Of the many methods of meditation developed within the Buddhist tradition, in my own teaching I have taken a few to form what can be called a system. The more important and well-known methods of meditation in this system are the Mindfulness of Breathing, the Mettā Bhāvanā, Visualisation Practice, the Recollection of the Six Elements, and the Just Sitting practice. We need a progressive arrangement of the methods of meditation, a definite cumulative sequence that takes us forward step by step.

The Mindfulness of Breathing

In such a series, first comes the 'Mindfulness of Breathing'. This is usually the first method we teach in Triratna, for various reasons. One does not need to know any distinctively Buddhist teaching to practise it. And it is the starting point for the development of mindfulness in general. We start by being mindful of our breath, but that is only the beginning. We extend this until we are aware of all our bodily movements. We become more aware of the world around us and more aware of other people. We become aware, ultimately, of Reality itself. But we start with the Mindfulness of Breathing.

The development of mindfulness is the key to psychological integration. All too often we do not have any real individuality. We are a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address. These desires and selves are both conscious and unconscious. The Mindfulness of Breathing helps to bind them together; it tightens the string, so that they are not so loose in the middle. It makes more of a recognizable bundle of these different desires and selves.

The practice of mindfulness helps to create real unity and harmony between the different aspects of ourselves. Through mindfulness we begin to create true individuality. Individuality is essentially integrated; an unintegrated individuality is a contradiction in terms. Unless we become integrated, unless we are really individuals, there is no real progress. There is no real progress because there is no commitment, and you cannot commit yourself unless there is just

one individuality to commit itself. Only an integrated person can commit themselves, because all their energies are flowing in the same direction; one energy, one interest, one desire, is not in conflict with another. Awareness, mindfulness, at many different levels, is therefore of crucial importance – it is the key to the whole thing.

But there is a danger that in the course of our practice of mindfulness we develop what I have come to term ‘alienated awareness’. This arises when we are aware of ourselves without experiencing our emotions. Therefore, as well as practising mindfulness, it is very important that we establish contact with our emotions, whatever they are. Ideally we will establish contact with our positive emotions, but it is better to establish real, living contact with our negative emotions (which means acknowledging them and experiencing them, but not indulging them) than to remain in an alienated state and not experience our emotions at all.

The Mettā Bhāvanā

It is here that the ‘Mettā Bhāvanā’ and similar practices come in: not just developing loving-kindness but also compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, as well as śraddhā, faith. All of these are based on mettā. Mettā, loving-kindness, friendliness, is the fundamental positive emotion. As I come into contact with more and more Order members, Mitras, Friends, and people outside the Movement, I see more and more clearly the importance of positive emotions in our lives – both spiritual and worldly. I would say that the development of positive emotions like friendliness, joy, peace, faith, and serenity, is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals. It is crucial for each of us individually, and for all of us in association with one another. Therefore the Mettā Bhāvanā, as the practice for developing the basic positive emotion of mettā, is absolutely crucial.

The Six-Element Practice

But suppose you have developed mindfulness and all these positive emotions. Suppose you are a very aware, positive, responsible person, even a true individual, psychologically speaking. Then what is the next step? The next step is death! The happy, healthy individual that you now are must die. In other words, the subject-object distinction itself must be transcended. The mundane individuality must be broken up. Here the key practice is the practice of the recollection of the six elements.

There are other practices which help us to break up our present mundane individuality: the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā (emptiness) meditations. But the śūnyatā meditations can become rather abstract and intellectual. The recollection of the six elements – which involves giving back the earth, water, fire, and other elements in us to the earth, water, fire and so on in the universe, relinquishing in turn each element, and even our individualized consciousness – is the most concrete and practical way of practising at this stage. This is the key practice for breaking up our sense of relative individuality.

The six-element practice is itself a śūnyatā meditation, because it helps us to realise the voidness of our own mundane individuality – it helps us to die. There are many translations for the word śūnyatā. Sometimes it is translated ‘voidness’, sometimes ‘relativity’. But śūnyatā could well be rendered ‘death’, because it is the death of everything conditioned. It is only when the conditioned individuality dies that the unconditioned Individuality begins to emerge.

The recollection of the six elements and the other śūnyatā meditations are vipaśyanā (Pāli vipassanā) or insight meditations, whereas the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Mettā

Bhāvanā are Śamatha or pacification-type meditations. Śamatha develops and refines our conditioned individuality, but vipaśyanā breaks down that individuality, or rather it enables us to see right through it.

Visualisation practices

When the mundane self has died, what happens next? In not very traditional language, out of the experience of the death of the mundane self the transcendental self arises. In a visualisation practice, the visualised figure before you, the figure of a Buddha or Bodhisattva, sublime and glorious though it may be, is, in fact, you. It is the new you – you as you will be if only you allow yourself to die. In certain forms of visualisation practice we recite and meditate first of all upon the śūnyatā mantra, which means ‘om, all things are pure by nature; I too am pure by nature’. Here pure means Void, pure of all concepts, pure of all conditionality, because we cannot be reborn without passing through death.

There are many different kinds of visualisation practice. There are many different Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, dakas, dākinīs, dharmapālas that one can visualise. The practices most widely current in the Order pertain to Śākyamuni, Amitābha, Padmasambhava, Avalokiteśvara, Tārā, Manjughōṣa, Vajrapāṇi, Vajrasattva, and Prajñāpāramitā. Every Order member has his or her own visualisation practice, together with the mantra pertaining to it, which they received at the time of ordination. I would personally like all the more experienced Order members to be thoroughly familiar with at least two or three different kinds of visualisation practice.

The general significance of visualisation practice comes out with particular clarity in the Vajrasattva practice. Vajrasattva is white in colour: white for purification. Here the purification consists in the realisation that in the ultimate sense you have never become impure: you are pure from the beginning, pure from the beginningless beginning, pure by nature, pure essentially. In the depths of your being you are pure of all conditionality, or rather you are pure of the very distinction between conditioned and Unconditioned, and hence are Void.

In visualisation practices when we see Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, these are not outside us; they are the manifestation of our own True Mind, the manifestation of the dharmakāya, and we can identify with them and thus be spiritually reborn, in a transcendental mode of existence.

Summary of the four stages

I hope that we can now begin to see the whole system of meditation, at least in outline. There are four great stages, which I will briefly recapitulate. The first is the stage of integration. That is the first thing you must do in connection with meditation. Integration is achieved mainly through practice of the Mindfulness of Breathing, as well as with the help of mindfulness and awareness in general. Here, in this stage, we develop an integrated self.

The second great stage is the stage of emotional positivity. This is achieved mainly through the development of mettā and so on. Here the integrated self is raised to a higher, more refined and at the same time more powerful level.

Then there is the third great stage of spiritual death, achieved mainly through the recollection of the six elements, but also through the recollection of impermanence, the recollection of death, and the śūnyatā meditations. Here the refined self is seen through, and we experience the Void, experience śūnyatā, experience spiritual death.

And then, fourthly, there is the stage of spiritual rebirth. This is achieved through the visualisation and mantra recitation practice. This, in broad outline, is the system of meditation.

But perhaps you are wondering: Where does ordination fit in? Where does the arising of the Bodhicitta¹⁰ fit in? What about the 'Just Sitting' practice? I will deal briefly with each of these questions.

The place of ordination

Where does ordination fit in? Ordination means Going for Refuge. Going for Refuge means commitment. One cannot commit oneself unless one is reasonably integrated. Otherwise you commit yourself today, but tomorrow you withdraw the commitment, because the total being was not involved. You also cannot commit yourself unless you have a certain amount of emotional positivity, otherwise you have nothing to keep you going. For commitment, there should also be a faint glimmer of Perfect Vision. Ordination therefore comes somewhere between the second and third stage. One might say that it comes when one has just begun to enter on the third stage, the stage of spiritual death.

The Bodhicitta

Secondly, where does the arising of the Bodhicitta fit in? Bodhicitta is often translated as 'Will to Enlightenment', but it is not an egoistic will, it is more of the nature of a supra-individual aspiration. It arises when the individuality in the ordinary sense has to some extent been seen through. The Bodhicitta is the aspiration to gain Enlightenment for the benefit of all – that is how it is usually popularly phrased. Not that there is a 'real individual' seeking to gain Enlightenment for the sake of 'real others'. The Bodhicitta arises beyond self and beyond others – though not without self and others. It arises when the mundane self is seen through, but before the transcendental self has really emerged. It arises when one is no longer seeking Enlightenment for the (so-called) self, but has not yet fully dedicated oneself to gaining it for the (so-called) others. The Bodhicitta therefore arises in between the third and the fourth stages, between the stage of spiritual death and the stage of spiritual rebirth. The Bodhicitta is the seed of spiritual rebirth. There is an anticipation of this at the time of the private ordination when one receives the mantra. The mantra is the seed of the Bodhicitta.

After all, when one is ordained one has gone forth, at least psychologically, if not physically. One has died to the group. One aspires after Enlightenment. And one aspires not just for one's own sake, but for the sake, ultimately, of all. It is not surprising, therefore, that at that time some faint reflection of the Bodhicitta should arise, at least in some cases.

Just Sitting

Thirdly, what about the 'Just Sitting' practice? It is difficult to say much more about this than 'when one just sits, one just sits'. In all the other meditations, conscious effort is required. But one must be careful that this conscious effort does not become too willed, even too wilful, and in order to counteract this tendency we can practise Just Sitting, in between the other methods. There is a period of activity, during which you are practising, say, the Mindfulness of Breathing or the *Mettā Bhāvanā*, and then a period of passivity, a period of receptivity. In this way we go on: activity – passivity – activity – passivity – and so on. Mindfulness of Breathing – Just Sitting – *Mettā Bhāvanā* – Just Sitting – Recollection of the Six Elements – Just Sitting –

¹⁰ The word 'Bodhicitta' literally means something like 'Mind (or heart) of Enlightenment'. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Bodhicitta is often seen as arising when our motivation for spiritual development becomes more about the well-being of others than about our own happiness. This is seen as the supremely important spiritual event this side of Enlightenment, because we have begun to genuinely transcend our egocentric motivations.

Visualisation – Just Sitting. We can go on in this way all the time, having a rhythm and balance in our meditation practice. There is taking hold of, and letting go; there is grasping, and opening up; there is action, and non-action. Thus we achieve a perfectly balanced practice of meditation, and the whole system of meditation becomes complete.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. *“All too often we do not have any real individuality. We are a bundle of conflicting desires, even conflicting selves, loosely tied together with the thread of a name and an address.”*
Do you agree with this statement? What symptoms would we expect to see in someone for whom it was true? What would someone who had what Sangharakshita describes as ‘true individuality’ be like?
2. Why might the mindfulness of breathing help us to integrate the different parts of ourselves and develop more individuality?
3. *“I would say that the development of positive emotions like friendliness, joy, peace, faith, and serenity, is absolutely crucial for our development as individuals.”*
Do you agree? Why, or why not?
4. What is your emotional response to the idea of spiritual death? Do you think there might be a connection between spiritual death and insight into the true nature of reality?
5. How do you respond to the idea of visualisation practice? Do you think there could be a connection between visualisation practice and the development of a ‘mind-made body’ described in the text we looked at last week?
6. In this text and the last one we looked at two different descriptions of the process of spiritual growth. Do you think these are in conflict with one another? Are there any similarities? Which do you think is most applicable to your own situation?
7. Which stage or stages of Sangharakshita’s system of meditation do you think you should give most priority to? Before going beyond the first two stages we might ask ourselves:
 - a. Do I find it easy to carry out my resolutions? Can I stick at long term tasks and projects? How much energy do I have, and how effectively do I use it? Do I tend to change my mind or switch from one enthusiasm to another? How much inner conflict and anxiety do I experience? (All relate to integration.)
 - b. How positive and upbeat is my emotional response to the world and other people? Am I generally happy most of the time? How often do I complain, or feel low, negative, or resentful? (All relate to positive emotion.)

Introduction

In the first text of this part of the course the Buddha described the hindrances that may stop us from focussing on the object of meditation – these were described as ‘worldly’ desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, ‘worry and flurry’, and doubt. These five hindrances are not caused by meditation – they are mental habits we are prone to in everyday life, and when our enthusiasm and motivation to meditate is not strong they are likely to assert themselves when we meditate.

Probably all meditators experience all of the five hindrances at some time, and working with them can be a profitable way of getting to know our own mental processes and learning to manage our mind, our energy, and our emotions. But we shouldn’t get the impression that meditation is just about working with the hindrances. If we approach meditation in the right way and set up the right conditions we can often leave our old mental habits far behind for a while, opening the gateway to mental states we perhaps have never experienced in everyday life.

In the following passage Kamalashila describes how we can use the positive elements in our meditation experience to take us past the five hindrances, and also how we can work with the hindrances when they do arise. You will find more information about ways of working in meditation in the book from which this passage is adapted: *Meditation* by Kamalashila, which includes an appendix giving a detailed list of ways of counteracting specific hindrances.

How to Work in Meditation

Text an edited extract from Meditation, Kamalashila, pp 49-57.

Appreciating concentrated states of mind

Even if you have only tried the Mindfulness of Breathing once, you will probably have discovered something about the nature of concentration. Even if it was just for a split second, you probably experienced some clarity of mind. If so, you’ll have a sense of what it is like to be without all the distractions, images, and thoughts which usually clatter away in the mind. A concentrated mind is happy; it is clear, like a blue summer sky. The more concentrated you become in meditation practice, the more you will find these distracted thoughts dissolving away. In fact when one is very absorbed in meditation there may be almost no thought at all. We usually identify mental experience with thoughts. But the experience of meditation shows us that thinking is not necessarily the most important activity that happens in our mind. We may discover that our mind can be at its clearest, richest, and most refined when there is virtually no thought at all.

A popular myth about meditation is that it involves ‘making your mind go blank’. But thought-free awareness is a very positive and natural thing. It is certainly not confined to meditation. We can get so happily absorbed, so ‘wrapped up’ in an activity, that thoughts simply do not arise.

The elements of meditation

Before we start looking at possible distractions and hindrances, it is useful to know roughly what we are aiming for. When we meditate, we should be looking for an absorbed, balanced, happy, concentrated state of mind. And it’s helpful to have some expectation that this happy state of concentration is ‘just round the corner’, or ‘just beneath the surface’. In fact there is always some degree of concentration present, even when we are distracted! If we have this attitude it is much more likely that deeper concentration will arise.

Meditation is like flying a glider, sailing with the wind, or surfing. We need to take the opportunities offered by the elements of meditation. We need to ride the warm air currents, use the power of the wind, launch ourselves skilfully in and out of the waves. And if we are to do so, we need to be aware of the positive potential of the states that arise in our mind. We need to be ready to ‘ride’ our mental states as they arise.

One example is pleasure and enjoyment. If we notice that we are experiencing a pleasant state of peacefulness – even if it is very slight – in the midst of an otherwise dull or distracted state of mind, this feeling is to be encouraged. We can allow this feeling to continue, and simply experience and enjoy it, as we concentrate on the object of our meditation. We should avoid getting distracted by the feeling, and simply use it as a support for our concentration. There is a bright energy in pleasure that we can learn to channel into our practice, rather than allowing it to divert our attention.

Similar to this is inspiration – deep joy and excitement – which can even be felt physically, in the form of ‘goose-pimples’ and ‘rushes’ of pleasure. Again, we can encourage this, include it as an aspect of our concentration. Another kind of recollection that can aid our concentration is the more sober, patient kind of determination – we feel deeply that we want to meditate, that we don’t want to be distracted, that we want to grow and develop. This kind of motivation can be profoundly moving. Another such aid can be the sense of concentration itself. As they grow, concentration and clarity of thought have their own distinct feeling-tones which we can learn to recognize and encourage.

We need to get to know these allies of meditation – to anticipate them, to utilize their aid, and to ride upon their positive influence. The more use we make of these allies, the less we shall have to be concerned with the hindrances to meditation.

Hindrances to meditation

Paying attention to just one thing, as we do in meditation, is not always easy. There is often a semi-conscious resistance from those parts of ourselves which want to stay in the ordinary sense-world and do other things. There are five recognizable kinds of hindrance to concentration, and everyone experiences all of them from time to time. If you know what they are, you can recognize them when they arise – perhaps before they take you over!

The five hindrances are:

1. Desire for sense experience
2. Ill will

3. Restlessness and anxiety
4. Sloth and torpor
5. Doubt and indecision

1. Desire for sense experience

Desire for sense experience is the most basic kind of distraction. We aren't particularly interested in the meditation, so our mind keeps getting drawn back to the sense-world. We haven't yet learned how to find pleasure in concentration, so we can't help looking for it in pleasurable sense experiences. If we hear a sound, it seems so interesting that we start listening to it. We may have many pleasant thoughts – about what we could be doing this evening, about what we could have to eat, or ideas we have recently read about. These impulses are perfectly natural in themselves – but they make concentration impossible.

2. Ill will

Ill will is a variant of the previous hindrance: this time our interest is stuck in some painful experience. We are irritated – by something or someone – and we can't let it go. We can't stop thinking about the way we have been mistreated and about what we'd like to say, or do, to even the score. Or maybe there is some external sound, or smell, which irritates us so much that we cannot stop thinking about it. Perhaps some idea or opinion has struck a wrong note, and we feel we must analyse all its faults in detail. So long as this is going on, it is impossible to concentrate on anything else.

3. Restlessness and anxiety

Restlessness and anxiety gives us no peace – we cannot settle down and concentrate our mind. We need to slow down. We are 'speedy', going too fast. Either the body is restless and fidgeting, or the mind is anxious – or both are happening at the same time! A restless body and mind might be the result of insufficient preparation. Maybe we sat down to meditate too soon after some stimulating activity; or maybe there is a lot on our mind at present; perhaps there is something weighing on our conscience. If we can work patiently with this situation, meditation practice itself will eventually harmonize such conflicts.

4. Sloth and torpor

With sloth and torpor the hindrance to our concentration is dullness of mind. We feel tired, and our body feels heavy. There is vacuity in the mind (that's the torpor) and heaviness in the body (sloth). Sometimes physical sloth can be so overwhelming that our head nods or we start snoring! The causes for this hindrance may lie simply in physical or mental tiredness, or our digestion may be coping with the onslaught of a recent meal. But it sometimes seems that psychological factors may be involved – perhaps the resistance has arisen due to some unacknowledged emotion. Again, it could also be a reflex of the previous hindrance, restless mental activity leading to exhaustion! We may sometimes alternate between restlessness and dullness, both in and out of meditation. If so, this demonstrates a need to find some new kind of balance.

5. Doubt and indecision

Can I, with all my problems, hope to get anywhere with meditation – especially with this meditation? Is this kind of meditation practice really any good? Can it actually do anything for me? Is this teacher any use? – Does he really know what he's talking about? And how would I know, anyway?

All this is doubt – and it is also indecision, since in this state of mind we cannot make up our mind and get on with the concentration. We end up prevaricating, ‘sitting on the fence’ – we lose our motivation. Doubt, in this sense, is a very serious hindrance to meditation.

There is nothing wrong with the sincere doubts that we are sure to have about meditation and its effects. There is bound to be a degree of uncertainty in our mind; some things can only be found out from experience. To a certain extent we have to take what we are told on trust and discover the truth through our own experimentation. But we can do that only by giving ourselves wholeheartedly to our experimenting. The doubting, over-sceptical frame of mind might often stem from self-doubt, or a rationalisation of self-doubt. We can hardly expect to concentrate without some confidence that we will be able to do it.

Learning from the hindrances

These five hindrances are a useful check-list for assessing how a session of meditation is going. The most important thing is to recognize the hindrance as a hindrance. Very often the act of recognition will itself weaken the hindrance. However, there may be some tendency to avoid the recognition. Most people’s hindrances have their own style of ‘protection’ built into them. Sloth and torpor, for example, may succeed in completely walling itself off from our recognition. It’s like when we don’t want to get up in the morning: our mind firstly doesn’t want to know and, secondly, can keep finding good ‘reasons’ for lying in, just for another five minutes. When we’re taken over by ill will, we probably won’t want to stop picking on faults and running our minds over all the painful, unpleasant things that have happened to us. And our doubts can immediately fulfil their own prophecies.

We need to recognize clearly that we are entertaining a hindrance to concentration – the first principle is acknowledgement that the hindrance is actually there. It’s no good carrying on meditating regardless, trying to ignore it and wishing that it would go away. That approach just leads to headaches and sloth and torpor! You need to take responsibility for the hindrance. You should accept that for the time being this is your hindrance and that you need to do something about it. In meditation, you need to acknowledge each new mental state as it arises. Guilt can be a problem for some of us. Many people don’t like to think that they could experience emotions like hatred, or animal-like cravings for food and sex. Yet when their meditation experience forces them to acknowledge that in fact they do, they may feel unduly bad about it. Such an attitude is extreme and unrealistic, and blocks the possibility of progress. In meditation we need to cultivate a positive view of ourselves, to have faith in our spiritual potential.

Creative use of antidotes

There are a number of ways we can work against the hindrances. The first is to consider the consequences of allowing the hindrance to increase unchecked. What if we simply did nothing about our tendency to distraction, to hatred, or to doubt? Clearly, it would increase – our character would become progressively dominated by that trait. If we reflect on this, the importance of what we are doing may become clear.

The second is to cultivate the opposite quality. If there is doubt, cultivate confidence. If there is sloth, cultivate energy. If there is restlessness, cultivate contentment and peace. If the mind is too tight, relax it; if it is too loose, sharpen it. In other words, whenever a negative mental state gets in the way of our concentration, we try to cultivate some positive quality that overcomes or neutralizes it.

The third antidote is to cultivate a sky-like attitude. Sometimes the more we resist a particular mental state, the stronger it seems to get. If the previous two methods don't work, try the 'sky-like attitude': the mind is like the clear blue sky, the hindrances are like clouds. With this way of working, we accept the fact that the hindrance has 'got in', and simply observe it. We watch it play itself out in our mind – we watch the fantasies, the worries, the images – we watch whatever arises. We watch, but we try not to get involved. Getting involved only feeds the hindrance. If we observe patiently, without getting involved with the hindrance, it will eventually lose its power and disperse.

Fourthly, there is suppression. This is something of a last resort: we just say 'no' to the hindrance, and push it aside. This is most effective when the hindrance is weak, and when we are quite convinced of the pointlessness of playing host to it. If the hindrance is very strong – or if there is an element of emotional conflict – we may find that using this method creates unhelpful side-effects. Tension, lack of feeling, and mental dullness commonly result from an over-forceful approach. The best rule of thumb is therefore to use suppression only with weak hindrances. If we are in a positive, clear state of mind, it can be quite easy to turn such a hindrance aside.

Finally, there is Going for Refuge. Sometimes, we completely fail to deal with the hindrances; we spend the whole of a meditation session, or part of it, in a distracted state of mind. When this happens, it is important not to lose heart. We need to see that session of practice in the perspective of our overall development. Unconscious tendencies are strong in all of us, and sometimes there is bound to be struggle. Some good effects are certain to result from that effort, even though we didn't experience its fruits in that meditation! Going for Refuge is not so much a way of working against the hindrances as an attitude with which we try to connect after a meditation session. We need to reaffirm our commitment to our practice – in traditional terms, we need to Go for Refuge – to our development of higher human qualities in the direction of Enlightenment (symbolized by the Buddha), to his teaching (the Dharma), and to all those who practise it (the Sangha).

Balanced effort

You should make all these efforts in a balanced way – you need to tread a middle path between too much and too little effort. If you are too easy-going and lazy – if you don't make any particular effort to become concentrated, don't encourage positive qualities, don't bother to avoid the hindrances – you will tend to drift in a hazy, unfocused state of mind. That is one extreme. On the other hand, if you force yourself too hard you will tend to become rigid and inflexible. There will probably be some kind of reaction: force can lead to dullness or headaches. You can find a middle way between these two extremes by ensuring that there is just enough tension, and just enough relaxation. We need to relax when our mind feels too tight, sharpen when it feels too loose.

When we get beyond these hindrances and achieve a steady stream of balanced concentration, we will become especially relaxed and especially energized, both at the same time. When these two states – the bright, joyful energy, and the deep calm – arise together, we enter a state of absorption. This is a state of consciousness known traditionally as *dhyāna* in Sanskrit, (*jhāna* in Pāli).

Some auspicious signs

If we practise regularly we will soon notice the benefits our meditation is having. We will probably see some signs of progress during our meditation itself – perhaps feeling unaccountably happy and peaceful. Ecstatic sensations of bliss may sometimes arise. We will

also find outside meditation that we are happier, that our life seems smoother, more under our control. We will probably find that our thoughts and ideas are clearer, and that our outlook is more expansive and creative. We may even find that our dreams have become unusually vivid and colourful. These are all typical results of meditation.

Our progress may also show itself in less definite ways. We may simply notice that there seems to have been some kind of indefinable change. It may even be the response of other people that brings it to our attention – we may find people are more attracted towards us than before. Perhaps they can sense that we are more inwardly free and content.

These inner changes may also present us with some challenges. Meditation can stir up a wealth of rich new feelings and emotions, and we may be unsure of what to do with them. We may start seeing our life very differently and may feel like making some fundamental changes. Such experiences are to be welcomed; they show us that we are breaking through some of our basic psychological limitations. It is important, though, that we understand what is happening. Meditation really can change people's lives, and we need to participate willingly and actively in the process of change – if that's what we want. If we don't actually want to change – perhaps we just wanted something to help us relax after work – no harm is being done, but we should be aware that the meditation we are practising is essentially about spiritual transformation, and that its effects will go deep.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What positive experiences – perhaps pleasure, inspiration, or the 'taste' of concentration – have you had so far in your meditation practice? How could you use these to motivate yourself and give impetus to your meditation?
2. Which of the five hindrances do you experience most in your everyday life? Are there changes you could make outside meditation that would reduce the habit-energy you give to the hindrance, or help you develop its opposite?
3. Which of the five hindrances do you experience most strongly or most often in meditation? If this is not the hindrance you chose in question two, could there be something about your approach to meditation that encourages this hindrance?
4. Which of the "creative antidotes" to the hindrances do you find most useful? Are there any you haven't used so far that you think you might find useful?
5. Do you need to make more effort or to be less wilful in meditation – is your tendency to be too lazy, or too rigid? (Or perhaps you get it just right?)
6. Has your meditation practice so far had any positive effects on your everyday life?

Introduction

Last week we looked at the mental habits that can get in the way of meditation. This week we look at what lies beyond these habits – the states we can get access to in meditation – using another text from the same book.

Access Concentration and the First Four ‘Dhyānas’

Text condensed from Meditation, Kamalashila, chapter 4.

Dhyāna and psychological integration

Sometimes when we meditate we may find blissful feelings arising spontaneously. Such feelings can range from mild pleasure to an almost overwhelming ecstasy – the experience can sometimes be so beautiful that we shed tears. People often blush, find their hair standing on end, or feel ‘goose-pimples’. What is more, their ability to concentrate may enter a completely new dimension of lucidity and calmness. Whatever is happening? In psychological terms, they are directly experiencing what is known as the process of integration: somewhere, disparate parts of the psyche are combining into a whole.

In spiritual terms, we are beginning to enter a higher state of consciousness – the first of eight levels of ‘dhyāna’ enumerated by Buddhist tradition – which is experienced as a deep inner harmony. It is the transition to this harmony which is so blissful.

Before I explain the nature of dhyāna any further, it will be useful for us to understand how the process of integration takes place, to see the connection between dhyāna and our day-to-day states of mind – which may not always be filled with bliss and inner peace! More often our mind resembles a battleground of contradictory likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears.

Practising mindfulness is likely to reveal paradoxes and oppositions in our character. It’s almost as though we are not one person – as though we have a number of different ‘selves’. We may, for example, behave quite differently when we are at work, when we are at home, and when we are with particular sets of friends.

This is the case with everyone (to different degrees, and in different ways) and is perfectly natural. We probably even choose our activities and friends precisely because they allow us to express different sides of our personality. However, the fact that we do so indicates something of an imbalance, though we may not immediately see things that way.

Imagine you are walking along with someone with a friend, and you meet a colleague from work. These two people have never met before; both know you quite well, but in a different context. The personality that your workmates see every weekday probably differs in certain

respects from your 'off-duty' personality. Each friend may see you quite differently, and expect different behaviour of you. Such an encounter may feel rather odd, since you find it difficult to live up to both sets of expectations at once.

This example illustrates a way in which we may sometimes detect a hint of the hidden divisions within the mind. We do not usually notice such blind spots ourselves, unless they are pointed out to us. It is as though we have many different selves, or different 'sub-personalities', which influence the mind in different ways at different times. Sometimes it is as if we had a whole coach full of these different characters, and each of them wants to take over the driving! Inconsistencies and conflicts like these are at the root of much of the psychological tension that we experience in day-to-day living. They can be very strong – so when the tension bound up in conflict is released through meditation, it's no wonder that blissful feelings and clarified concentration can arise.

However, these dhyāna-like feelings, enjoyable as they are, are not the aim of meditation. At this stage they usually last for only a few sessions at most, so it may be tempting to chase them – we'll probably want to get them back! But such an approach is likely to stir up distracted meditations. The pleasurable feelings we experience in dhyāna are a by-product of the integration process – they are what we feel when inner conflicts come to a head and are resolved. It is only natural that for a while afterwards we no longer experience quite the same intensity of pleasure, as the leading edge of our practice once again gets to work on the less integrated departments of our mind. For the time being our meditation will be more or less 'back to normal'. Yet the general tone of our practice, in terms of concentration and emotional engagement, will now be established at a new level. And, provided we keep practising, we should be able to maintain that new level.

'Horizontal' and 'vertical' integration

Integration is an interesting phenomenon. It's as though our life used to go on in several different 'compartments' at once, and now the momentum of our practice has started to remove some of the separating walls. We have begun to harmonize the contrary aspects of our character, together with the thoughts and emotions that are associated with them.

On the whole we can actually see the changes that are happening; they are all more or less at the surface of our mind, all on the same horizontal plane. But sometimes meditation can penetrate deeper than this. Sometimes we may go beyond the hindrances altogether and transcend the world of the senses and the ordinary mind. This is when we enter the state of absorption (dhyāna) in the fullest sense. When we enter into absorption at this deeper level, some of the contents of our subconscious mind will come 'up' into our consciousness. This marks the beginning of a 'vertical' aspect to the process of integration.

This second aspect of integration is called 'vertical' because we are getting into contact with our heights and our depths – we are discovering our heavens and our hells. At this stage a completely new order of emotions, thoughts, and pictorial images may be released into our consciousness. They may be connected with significant past experiences: happy childhood memories, or perhaps painful experiences that have long been forgotten. They may well be vision-like: sometimes people see divinely beautiful or awe-inspiring forms such as gods, demons, Buddhas, or symbolic images. Such experiences have a very different character to the samāpattis (distortions of sense-perception) that can occur at the edges of deeper concentration. These are more like visionary experiences – universal images coming from the heights and depths in our mind, such as the archetypes described by Carl Jung. Images like

these are commonly experienced in deep meditation. Clearly, there is much hidden energy and creativity in the depths, waiting to be activated through meditation.

‘Access’ concentration

When the five hindrances start to die away, we enter what is known as access concentration (Pāli *upacāra samādhi*): we now have ‘access’ to the *dhyānas*.

It is extremely useful if we can recognize whether we have reached this stage in our meditation. We will know that we are ‘in access’ when the concentration has become significantly easier. At this point our thoughts and emotions will start co-operating with our efforts to concentrate, instead of continually pulling us away from it. We will still experience some distractions, but these will not exert a strongly emotional pull, as do the five hindrances.

This new situation provides us with a significant opening. Since distracting thoughts now have less power over us, we have more free energy available. This allows us to notice distractions more quickly, before they have time to take hold; it is therefore easier to disengage from them. Reducing the level of distracted mental activity frees even more energy – which further sharpens our awareness. We are entering into an expansive, progressive phase; indeed, this is the beginning of meditation proper.

The term ‘access concentration’ doesn’t just mark a cross-over point between the ordinary mind and *dhyāna*. It describes quite a broad band of consciousness, ranging from the point at which we are concentrated but still frequently slipping back into distraction (i.e. almost in the hindrances) to a state in which concentration is extremely easy (almost in *dhyāna*).

This stage is within the reach of everyone who meditates regularly – it is not so very far away from our ordinary state of mind. If we know how to recognize access concentration, we can then learn how to encourage and dwell in it for as long as possible. The longer we can sustain access concentration, the more we are likely to move on into full concentration – that is, into the first *dhyāna*.

The first level of *dhyāna* is, again, within fairly easy reach of anyone who meditates regularly. We are likely to experience at least a taste of it within the first few weeks of taking up meditation – particularly if we ‘treat’ our practice to some time on a retreat.

Just now we noted that it isn’t helpful to cling on to the pleasure of *dhyānic* experiences, should they arise. But that does not mean that *dhyāna* ought not to be deliberately cultivated. On the contrary, it is important that we do so. We should definitely aim to develop higher states of consciousness – the benefits, in terms of our growth in maturity and insight, will be considerable. We can cultivate *dhyāna* in the ways that have already been outlined – by concentrating mindfully on the object of meditation, by acknowledging the hindrances, and by working with them with faith and confidence. As with the hindrances and access concentration, recognition is an important key. It will be very useful if we can learn how to recognize different aspects of the *dhyāna* state, so that we can encourage them to arise.

Images for the first four *dhyānas*

So how can we recognize them? Perhaps it is easiest to communicate the experience through images, as the Buddha himself did (as in the first text of this part of the course).

1. The experience of the first dhyāna is compared to soap powder and water being mixed thoroughly together – mixed until the soap powder is entirely saturated by the water and the water is completely pervaded by the soap powder.
2. Being in the second dhyāna feels like a calm lake being fed by an up-welling underground spring.
3. The third dhyāna feels as though lotuses and water-lilies are growing in that lake, soaked and saturated by its water.
4. The fourth dhyāna is like the experience of taking a bath in that lake on a very hot afternoon, and afterwards resting on the bank wrapped in a perfectly clean white cloth.

Notice how water, a universal symbol for the unconscious mind, links the images together into a series. In the first dhyāna the water is perfectly mixed with its opposite element, dry powder. This image of opposites mingling perfectly together reflects the theme of integration; we have already seen how, in our consciousness, there are all kinds of oppositions in need of integration, which are now all beginning to co-exist in harmony.

Dhyāna is an experience of pure happiness, pure in the sense that it has not been caused by anything external but comes from within our own mind. While it lasts, it makes us feel truly ourselves. We may feel the effects of this ‘perfect mingling of opposites’ for some time – hours, even days or weeks – after the meditation.

Yet dhyāna may not necessarily arise as a result of applying a particular meditation technique. It is a state of mind that occurs naturally in anyone who is extremely happy. Under special conditions it may be possible to dwell in dhyāna outside meditation for sustained periods of time. As a general rule, higher states of consciousness will arise naturally in our meditation if we are quite happy and free from guilt feelings.

In the second dhyāna, our concentration is so pure that we experience no thought whatever. Thoughts did occur back in the first dhyāna, of course, but even there they were minimal, and they were mostly thoughts about the meditation object. So as we cross over from the first into the second dhyāna we find ourselves in a far more lucid absorption which – apart from a subtle recognition of the state we are in – is completely without thought.

Outside of meditation, it is unlikely that the second dhyāna will simply arise on its own, spontaneously – but it isn’t impossible. Apart from meditators, there could conceivably be great artists, composers, or philosophers in the world who dwell in this sort of state frequently, even without meditating formally at all. The second dhyāna is thus a very inspired state of mind – we are sustained by an inner flow of inspiration which wells up inside us, like the constant trickling of an underground spring beneath the calm surface of a lake.

In classical times, artists and poets in need of inspiration would call upon the Muses, goddesses who personified different aspects of this higher nourishment. At times, inspiration may be felt as a powerful unification with forces that are normally viewed as ‘outside’ our conscious personality. So this dhyāna level is also the mental state of the inspired prophet, who receives ‘messages’ from a deeper level of consciousness.

The third dhyāna is compared to lotuses growing in the waters of the lake, completely surrounded by and soaked in the medium of water. In our progress through the dhyānas we become more and more integrated with the higher element of inspiration (which in the second dhyāna is experienced as just trickling into our consciousness). By the time we reach the third dhyāna the stream has greatly expanded until it has become our whole environment. This is a very rich experience of ‘vertical’ integration. In this third dhyāna, we feel as though we are

part of something much greater than our conscious self. It is a mystical state, in which we are completely surrounded, pervaded, and ‘at one with’ a higher element.

The fourth dhyāna is the perfection of human happiness – at least this side of Enlightenment. This attainment doesn’t endow us with any ultimate wisdom or compassion – we could still act unethically, even now, and fall back in our progress. However, even though we don’t possess the fullness of insight, we are in the best possible state of mental health. In the fourth dhyāna all the powerful energies that have been tamed and liberated through previous meditation co-exist in perfect harmonious peace. Notice how the Buddha changes his style of imagery at this point. An immaculate being appears, secure from harmful influences through being wrapped in the pure white cloth. It is as though the inspired state of consciousness, thoroughly purified through experience of the other dhyānas, is now ours to wear and to take with us, as both a protection and an outward influence upon the world. We are so happy that our positivity radiates outward, counteracting harmful influences – affecting others too, so that we become charismatic and even magical. This is why the fourth dhyāna is regarded as the basis for the development of ‘magical’ powers (walking on water, passing through walls, etc. attributed to practitioners of many religions) – and amazingly acute faculties of perception.

The ‘components’ of dhyāna

Images may help us recognize dhyāna from our own experience. But a check-list of its main ‘component parts’ – the mental states of which dhyāna consists – will also come in useful. Tradition enumerates five ‘dhyāna factors’, plus a sixth which only emerges in the fourth dhyāna. However, we should not think that dhyāna consists only of these factors, for we will experience many other positive qualities too.

Dhyāna is both a ‘warm’ state of positive emotion and a ‘cool’ state of increased concentration. The ‘cool’ portion includes one-pointedness, our ability to pay attention. It also includes what are traditionally called initial thought and applied thought, which are aspects of clear thinking.

In the ‘warm’ portion of the spectrum are the feelings of rapture and bliss that were spoken of earlier. Rapture is when we experience the process of integration as bodily pleasure. It is predominantly physical, though not entirely so – we feel both physically thrilled and wildly happy at the same time. Traditionally there are five degrees of intensity of rapture! We will probably recognize at least the first stage, which is the sensation of ‘goose-pimples’, when the hairs on our body stand on end.

Bliss is more subtle than rapture – but in its own ‘quiet’ way, actually more intense. Bliss marks a deeper stage of integration, in which our mind has begun to tame the somewhat wild, unrefined sensations of rapture. With experience one becomes less attached to these relatively coarse feelings, and begins to move into a deeper, stronger, and even happier, state of mind. As absorption takes a firmer hold, the deepening bliss gradually assimilates the bubbly, thrilling energy that is released in the experience of rapture. This is a particular feature of the third dhyāna, while the more physical sensations of rapture are features of the first and second dhyāna.

Encouraging the positive

We can encourage the dhyāna state to arise by developing those factors of dhyāna that are missing from our experience of meditation. By developing one of the positive features of dhyāna, we are simultaneously counteracting one of the five hindrances. As you work you

may be able to find ‘intermediary’ factors – for example, trying to arouse interest in the practice, rather than in the objects of sense desire.

The actual experience

The traditional classification of dhyāna levels is useful for defining higher states of consciousness in the abstract, but it is essentially an artificial way of looking at our experience. What we actually experience are various positive mental states arising. These factors become stronger, and then as we enter deeper into meditation discursive thought is left behind. At this point we find ourselves in that state of lucid, concept-less concentration traditionally classified as the second dhyāna

From this stage onwards we experience ‘vertical’ integration increasingly strongly. In terms of the Buddha’s simile, an underground spring begins percolating up from the depths. The spring of inspiration expands and broadens until, in the third dhyāna, it becomes the entire medium in which we experience ourselves. By now all the wildness of rapture has been absorbed into bliss, so that the only dhyāna factors remaining are this peaceful bliss and one-pointedness. This process of purification continues into the fourth dhyāna, at which point bliss is transformed into equanimity. At this stage our mind goes beyond any possibility of conflict, and reaches a peak of emotional stability and purity. Our one-pointedness of mind becomes unshakeable, so that we can maintain the concentration undistractedly for as long as we wish.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. *“It’s almost as though we are not one person – as though we have a number of different ‘selves’.”*
Do you agree? Can you recognise and maybe give a name to some of your main ‘selves’?
2. Have you ever experienced anything like the “higher states” described in the text – especially access concentration and the first dhyāna – either in or out of meditation?
3. If your answer to question two was “yes”, when did this happen, and what were the conditions that contributed to your experience?
4. If your answer to question two was “no”, do you accept that people can and do experience these states? If you compare your life to the life described by the Buddha in the first text of this part of the course, can you see any factors in your lifestyle that might be stopping you entering states of deep concentration?
5. Go back and look at the way the Buddha describes the dhyānas – or jhānas – in the first text of this section. Can you relate the way the Buddha describes them to the descriptions in the text?
6. *“By developing one of the positive features of dhyāna, we are simultaneously counteracting one of the five hindrances.”*
What qualities are the opposite of each of the five hindrances? What qualities do you think need to be present in a state of meditative awareness? Are they the same? Which positive factor tends to be most lacking in your experience of meditation, and how might you cultivate it?

Introduction

So far in this section we have looked at meditation in a general way. This week we take a detailed, down-to-earth look at how we actually do one of the two main practices used by mitras in the Triratna Buddhist Community. In the process we will probably become more conscious of how we apply the practice ourselves, and we will almost certainly pick up some tips and techniques that will make the mindfulness of breathing more fruitful and powerful.

Practical Advice on the Mindfulness of Breathing

Text condensed from Wildmind, Bodhipaksa, Chapter 3.

Mindfulness

In the short term, the Mindfulness of Breathing practice helps us to become calmer and (paradoxically) more energised and refreshed. In the long term, it helps us to develop more awareness so that we have more freedom to choose our responses in any give situation. For example, in a situation that would normally make us anxious, we can choose to be patient and calm. Over time, we shape our habits instead of letting them shape us. Mindfulness allows us to take full responsibility for our lives and happiness. Practising mindfulness is enormously enriching. Instead of being half-aware of what we are doing, we can fully and richly experience every moment of our lives.

Stages 1 and 2

What's the counting for?

The counting has a number of useful functions. It's **very easy** to 'space out' instead of meditating – we get distracted without realising it. The counting helps us to get a more objective sense of how much of the time we're distracted, and how much we're remaining aware. It also gives us something to aim for. It's good to have goals.

If you're getting distracted before reaching the tenth breath, you can try harder to reach it, then to get to ten again. Without the counting it's harder to notice the effects of your efforts. If you put effort into your meditation you will see results.

The numbers also act as an anchor. In the cycle of breathing the point at which we are most likely to get distracted is in the pause between the out-breath and the in-breath, when nothing much is happening. The number is a way of 'touching base' so that we can get through the pause without getting distracted.

When the counting seems boring

Sometimes people want to drop the counting. There can be good and bad reasons for this. Sometimes we've developed a strong current of stillness and it seems natural to drop the numbers. If so, let go. But often it's just a resistance to structure, or a desire to be passive, and we'd rather just daydream. Be honest about your motivation.

If the numbers seem mechanical, bear in mind that this is not inevitable – it's a product of the way your mind is working. If you approach the numbers gracefully and creatively, they'll seem natural and fluid.

The difference between stages 1 and 2

Most people find that the first two stages feel very different. This is because of the different nature of the counting, which provides a structured way of deepening our experience.

The nature of the counting changes which part of the breath you're most aware of. In the first stage, because you're counting after the out-breath, your mind links the counting with the out-breath. In the second stage, because you're counting before the in-breath, your mind is more aware of the in-breath. Taking a deep out-breath – or sighing – is what we do when we let go of tension. It feels like letting go, relaxing, moving downward, and it has a calming effect. Taking a deep in-breath on the other hand feels like expanding, opening up, rising, and it has an energizing effect.

So while the first stage is a stage of letting go, the second stage is one of energizing. Letting go is the perfect thing to do when starting a meditation – we let go of the tension in our bodies, and of the thoughts in our heads. Then in the next stage you energize your relaxed mind and body. By feeling the energy that comes with the in-breath, you help set up the conditions for being aware.

So there's a natural progression here – relaxing then energizing – and it's important to get these stages in the right order. Of course, if you start your meditation in a tired and sluggish state you might go straight into the second stage, and if in the second stage your mind is racing you may want to revert to the first stage to slow it down. These stages give us two tools – like a brake and an accelerator – which we need to learn to use appropriately.

Stage 3

Balancing energy

While stage one helps us to develop more calm, and stage two helps us to develop more energy and awareness, the third stage emphasizes the in-breath and out-breath equally, helping us to blend the calm relaxation of the first stage with the energized awareness of the second. In stage three you can be aware of the constant oscillation between the calming out-breath and the energizing in-breath, and allow these qualities to permeate each other.

Using anchors

If the first two stages have gone well, letting go of the numbers can allow us to develop a deeper and more balanced concentration. However the counting has been acting as an anchor for our awareness, so when we let it go we may tend to float off into distraction.

One way to retain an anchor while letting go of the numbers is to use a physical anchor. I sometimes use the physical sensations in my hands in the same way as I use the numbers. At the end of each out-breath and in-breath I take my awareness to my hands. This helps keep me

grounded. I maintain my awareness of my hands all the way through the cycle of the breath. I am still aware of my breath, but I'm also keeping some of my awareness in my hands. This isn't as hard as it might sound. I experience my breath flowing towards my hands, and then flowing away from my hands, over and over again. This helps prevent me drifting away from the breath.

You can vary which parts of the hands you are aware of. You can be aware of both hands in their entirety, or you can be aware of only the tips of your thumbs in contact. If you are using the *dhyāna mūdra* this can bring a lovely sense of delicate energy into your awareness.

The physical anchor is a more refined anchor than the counting because it's non-verbal – it cuts down on the amount of thinking, so that your mind can develop a deeper level of stillness.

Stage 4

Making the transition

In the third stage we're usually aware of quite a large area of the sensations associated with the breath. We might have been focussing primarily on the belly, or the chest, or the sensations in the head and throat. These involve large muscles or anatomical structures. In the fourth stage however we're focussing on a very small area of sensations: the rim of the nostrils.

I like to make a smooth transition from the third to the fourth stage, to maintain a sense of continuity and bring the quality of elegance to the practice. I do this by narrowing my focus over a series of seven or eight breaths, gradually homing in on the sensations on the rims of the nostrils. This helps the stages to flow together so that you can keep deepening your concentration. Simply jumping from stage three to stage four is rather crude.

Maintaining subtlety

Because the sensations at the nostrils are so subtle, there can be a tendency to breathe more forcibly in order to heighten the sensation. Try to resist this, allowing your breath to be light and delicate. Instead of breathing more heavily, try to find the subtle sensations by allowing the mind to become more receptive – this is the purpose of this stage of the practice.

If you don't manage to find the sensations on the rims of the nostrils, you can become aware of the breath in your nostrils: cool on the in-breath and warm on the out-breath. Some people find it easier to detect the sensations on the upper lip. Over time, try to refine your awareness so that you become aware of the most delicate sensations possible – these are the true focus of this stage.

If you can detect the sensations of the air flowing over the rims of your nostrils, you can refine the meditation even more. For example, you can notice whether the sensations are more pronounced in the left or right nostril, and you can try to take your awareness into any 'dead spots' where sensations are lacking. Or you can become aware of the sensations at the front of the rims of your nostrils, rather than all around – just to stretch your ability to detect very subtle sensations. There are always greater degrees of refinement to which we can take our concentration.

Occasionally your mind will settle down and you'll notice some interesting and subtle sensations related to your breathing. For example, you might hear a soft internal 'sound', which isn't coming from any physical process. Or you might experience a sensation like silk associated with your breathing but not exactly a part of it. Or you might notice a delightful

sense of 'flow' that accompanies the rhythm of your breathing. (These things can be hard to describe.) What seems to be happening is that your mind has moved to a more subtle level of perception, and found for itself objects of concentration that are correspondingly more delicate than the usual ones. Far from being a distraction, such sensations act as doorways into even deeper states of calmness and concentration. Cherish them when they arise, and let your awareness become absorbed in them.

Between stages

It's important to set up your posture at the start of a period of meditation. When you take your attention away from your posture in order to be more aware of your breath, often you'll find that your posture starts to drift. You may find that some parts of your body start to sag, while others become tense, and these changes lead to mental and emotional changes. The tension in your shoulders may be related to some anger you've started to experience. The sagging in your spine may be related to a feeling of despair that's crept in. If you relax your shoulders, the anger will start to disappear; if you straighten your spine you'll start to feel more confident.

As you become more proficient in meditation you'll learn that you can periodically check your posture and make minor corrections, without losing awareness of your breath. A good way to start practising this skill is to check and correct your posture between stages. You might want to do this every time you move from one stage to the next. Later you'll find that you can integrate monitoring your posture into your practice in the way I have described.

A meditation toolkit

Here we're going to look at some ways to use the breath to alter our mental and emotional states. These don't necessarily work immediately, and you may need to give them time. Changing the method every couple of minutes will just lead to frustration and restlessness.

- Take a few deep breaths into the belly.
- Take a few slow breaths before letting your breath return to normal.
- Keep your awareness low in the body, e.g. in your belly, for as long as you need to develop calmness.
- Pay attention to letting go on the out-breath.
- On every exhalation, imagine a wave of relaxation flowing downwards into the earth, sweeping away your tensions and cares.
- Imagine your whole body is floating on warm water; with every inhalation you rise, and with every exhalation you fall.

Using the breath to stimulate the mind

- Take a few deep breaths into your upper chest (feel the expansion).
- Take a few quick, light breaths, then let your breathing return to normal.
- Keep your awareness high in your body, e.g. in your upper chest, or even your head.
- Pay attention to the sense of your body expanding on the in-breath.
- On every inhalation, imagine you are drawing energy upwards from the earth, filling every fibre of your being with awareness.
- Imagine you are inhaling light with every breath; on every exhalation you breathe out your distractions in the form of grey mist.

Why all the emphasis on concentration?

Have you ever had the experience of talking to a friend while you're distracted, and realising that you haven't been listening because you've drifted off on some other train of thought? We

all do this from time to time. How can we deepen our understanding of ourselves if we don't experience anything but surface distractions?

Concentration allows us to go more deeply into our experiences. It allows us to experience more intensely, so that we can be more present with other people, and more present with ourselves. Concentration allows us to really enjoy what we're doing, whether it's walking in the countryside, reading a book, writing, or thinking.

Concentration allows us to think more clearly and deeply. When we can stay with a train of thought without wandering off, we can ask more penetrating questions of ourselves and, crucially, be able to hear the deep considered answers that come from our depths. The power of reflective concentration becomes crucial when we move on to vipassanā practices that require us to use thoughts and images as the objects of concentration.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What is your general experience of the mindfulness of breathing? Do you tend to prefer it to the mettā bhāvanā, or vice-versa? Why?
2. *"Sometimes people want to drop the counting. There can be good and bad reasons for this."* Do you ever feel tempted to drop the counting in the first two stages? Are your reasons related to Bodhipaksa's 'good and bad reasons'?
3. Do you notice a difference between stages 1 and 2? If so, do you think Bodhipaksa explains this well? Might there be any other reasons for the difference?
4. Try focussing more on either the out-breath or in-breath at times in your meditation this week. Notice the effects, and be prepared to tell the group about it.
5. Do you tend to become more concentrated when you drop the counting and move into stage 3 of the meditation, or do you tend to become more prone to distraction?
6. Try using a physical anchor in stage 3. Do the hands work for you as an anchor, or does some other part of the body work better?
7. How do you experience the breath in stage 4 of the practice? Try to relate your experience to the description given in the text – e.g. do you feel the breath on the rims of the nostrils or somewhere else; is there more sensation in one nostril than the other; do you ever experience anything like the "internal sound", "sensation like silk", or "delightful sense of flow" mentioned in the text?
8. Try using some of Bodhipaksa's 'meditation toolkit' in your practice this week. Tell the group about the effects.
9. Do you feel more interested in the mindfulness of breathing after reading this text and trying out some of the suggestions? If so, what does this tell you about a creative approach to meditation practice?

Introduction

In this last session of this part of the course we get some advice on how to do the mettā bhāvanā practice. Paradoxically it may be more difficult to suggest useful ways to be creative in this practice than for the mindfulness of breathing – at least in a short text – precisely because the scope for creativity is that much greater, and people’s responses are so different. To describe the different approaches to this practice used by even a small sample of experienced meditators would need a book, and many methods would only ‘work’ for someone of very similar temperament.

In this condensed extract Bodhipaksa gives us a framework for experimenting with the mettā bhāvanā practice that should provide something for everyone, and give us a springboard for developing our own creative approaches to the practice. He also looks at the nature of mettā, talks about how we cultivate emotions, and examines some general methods we can use to change our emotional state.

Cultivating Loving-kindness

Text condensed from Wildmind, Bodhipaksa, Chapter 5.

The idea of cultivating emotions might strike us as odd: after all, don’t emotions just happen? From a Buddhist point of view this is not the case. Emotions are habits, and are actively created. It seems as though they have a life of their own because we aren’t conscious of how we create them. If we can bring more awareness into our emotional life we can consciously cultivate the emotions we want to experience and discourage those we don’t want. This is what we aim to do in the Mettā Bhāvanā – to cultivate the positive and discourage the negative.

We cultivate emotions all the time

An example of how we unconsciously generate emotions is this: imagine you’re with a group of people, and you get to talking about all the things that are wrong with the world. As the conversation goes on, and we get more and more involved, the chances are that we get angry, or depressed, or feel self-righteous. By focusing on things that anger or depress you without creatively trying to see what you can actually do about these issues, you actually cultivate these emotions.

In the Mettā Bhāvanā, we consciously generate thoughts that are likely to give rise to positive emotions. Over time, and with practice, this has a nurturing effect on our faculty of love. We encourage the development of our patience, kindness, and understanding, and in this way we become more loving.

What mettā is

- Mettā is a recognition of the basic solidarity that we have with others.
- Mettā is empathy. It's the willingness to see the world from another's point of view
- Mettā is wishing others well.
- Mettā is friendliness, consideration, kindness, generosity, patience, understanding, considerateness, love, helpfulness.
- Mettā is the basis for compassion. When our mettā meets another's suffering, it transforms into compassion.
- Mettā is the most fulfilling emotional state we can know. To wish another well is to wish that they themselves be in a state of mettā.
- Mettā is the fulfilment of the emotional development of every human being. It's the potential emotional maturity inherent in each one of us.
- Mettā is more than just an emotion. It's an attitude. We can act out of an attitude of mettā even when we do not ourselves feel happy, or even when we don't subjectively feel loving.
- Mettā is the answer to almost every problem the world faces today. Money won't do it. Technology won't do it. Where there is no good will, there is no way to make positive change. Mettā can positively transform the world like no other quality.

What mettā is not

- Mettā isn't the same as feeling good. When we feel mettā we do generally feel more joyful and happy, but it's possible to feel good and for that not to be mettā. We can feel good but also be rather selfish and inconsiderate, for example. Mettā is an attitude of actively caring about others.
- Mettā isn't all or nothing. Just as our anger can reveal itself in many intensities from mild irritation to fury, our mettā can make itself known as anything from polite behaviour to a passionate love for all that lives.
- Mettā isn't something new or unknown to us. We all experience mettā. Every time you feel pleasure in seeing someone do well, or are patient with someone who's a bit difficult, you're experiencing mettā. In the Mettā Bhāvanā you are cultivating what is already there.
- Mettā isn't a denial of your experience. To practise mettā doesn't mean 'being nice' in a false way. Even if you don't like someone or disapprove of their actions, you can still have their welfare at heart. This is one of the greatest miracles in the world, since it liberates us from the endless round of violence and revenge, whether on a global or personal level.

Emotion is a river

Rivers carve valleys. Water cuts channels that grow deeper with every passing year, and the channel then defines the course of the river. The river creates the banks, and the banks create the river. Our emotions also follow patterns. They give rise to thoughts, and our thoughts reinforce our emotions. For example, when we're in an irritable mood, our thoughts tend to find fault. We notice things that we don't like about ourselves, about others, and about the world in general. We overlook the good and the positive even when it is staring us in the face. This sense of being surrounded by faults reinforces our irritability, so our emotions shape our thoughts (the river bank), and our thoughts influence our emotions (the river). It's a disturbingly circular dynamic!

How do we ever escape from a mood once we get into it? Why don't we get into a particular mood and just stay there? Thankfully, there are other influences on our feelings that can break in to the cyclical patterns that I've outlined above. We'll look at five of these in turn: the environment, the body, the will, thoughts, and communication.

Emotions and your environment

If you want to change how you feel, you can alter your environment. You can make your environment supportive of your efforts to develop mettā by creating a beautiful space in which to meditate. You can make a shrine that expresses your ideals. Candles, incense, flowers, and images that are meaningful for you can all help to uplift your emotions. Keeping the space tidy will help you to have better mental states in meditation, as well as helping you to keep the positive mental states that you develop. What you see when you open your eyes after meditation can have a strong effect – we are often more sensitive after meditation than we realize.

Emotions and your body

How you hold your body has a big effect on how you feel. So in setting up our posture for meditation it's not just a matter of being comfortable – you're working on your emotions through your body. It's important to be aware of your body outside meditation too, and to make sure you're setting up physical conditions that will support positive emotional states.

Emotions and your will

At every moment of your existence you have some degree of choice about how you feel. Whether you realize it or not, you can let go of negative emotions and find more positive responses. Sometimes we see venting our emotions as the only alternative to bottling them up. But there is another option: that of fully experiencing your emotions and learning to work with them: transforming them through awareness or, when appropriate, learning to express them more skilfully.

Emotions and your thoughts

Thoughts and feelings are deeply intertwined. Everything we think has some effect on how we feel. It's therefore essential that we learn to cultivate more mindfulness so that we can choose which thoughts to encourage and which to discourage. Over time, these thousands of small changes create a huge change in our emotional life. Listen to the stories you tell yourself, and ask whether they are helpful. If not, change them.

In the Mettā Bhāvanā we encourage the conscious development of thoughts that will give rise to positive emotions, rather than those that will reinforce negative emotions. The most widely used thought in the Mettā Bhāvanā practice is, 'May I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering.' The thoughts that we'll use to cultivate mettā aren't always verbal ones. We can also use visual imagery, such as a light radiating from your heart. Or we can use words and imagery together.

Emotions and your communication

Our communication has a powerful effect on our emotions. One way to change a mood is to talk to someone. When the emotions we express are positive, they become stronger through communication. Through communication we often get more in touch with our emotions. Communication need not be verbal. Non-verbal communication – a touch or a hug – can have an enormous effect on how we feel.

In the Mettā Bhāvanā we imagine we are communicating with others, and we actually communicate with ourselves. We call others to mind and we wish them well. We might imagine communicating our appreciation to a friend. We might call to mind someone we're in conflict with and imagine apologizing to them. We might imagine non-verbal communication as well.

Nurturing seeds of emotion

We all experience mettā. This practice takes our seeds of mettā and nurtures them so that they grow and send deep roots into the soil of our being. For those seeds to grow, we need soil and water. The soil is our awareness. The rain is the variety of methods we can use to develop the seeds of mettā. There are four main methods that I've found useful: the use of words, memories, creative imagination and body memories. Some of these will work for you, and possibly others won't. It's best to try a few methods and see which suit you, but make sure you give any method time to work. Like seeds germinating in response to water, your emotions might take time to unfold in response to the method you choose.

Using words to cultivate mettā

The use of phrases is the classic way of doing the Mettā Bhāvanā meditation, and I use this method more often than any other. The traditional phrase for the first stage is 'May I be well, may I be happy, may I be free from suffering.' You need to say the phrase to yourself as though you mean it. You will also need to remember to keep your focus on your emotions: repeat the phrase, over and over, but observe its effect on how you are feeling. Leave time between each repetition of the phrase to absorb its effect. I often fit the phrase in with the rhythm of my breathing and say, 'May I be well,' on an out-breath, and for the next in-breath, out-breath, and in-breath, I tune in to my heart and see what effect it has had. Then on the next out-breath I say, 'May I be happy'. Then two out-breaths later I say, 'May I be free from suffering.'

When you're thinking these words, you're being active. When you're listening for the effect they're having, you're being receptive. This practice needs you to be both active and receptive. You are actively working with your emotions, and receptively being aware of the effect of your actions. Both are equally important. Without active cultivation, your mind will tend to wander aimlessly and your emotions will follow old, habitual patterns.

Incidentally you might try saying the phrase to yourself on an in-breath instead of an out-breath. This produces quite a different effect. Try both methods and see which works best for you.

The traditional phrases are good to use as they so neatly encapsulate what the Mettā Bhāvanā meditation is about, but if you prefer you can just repeat a word like 'love' or 'kindness' or 'patience'. Or you can use a series of such words. Or you can come up with your own affirming phrase. I believe it is best to use affirmations that are true. If you say 'I am happy and content' when you obviously are not, it will be hard to do it wholeheartedly. On the other hand, if you use a phrase that expresses a wish, such as 'May I be happy and content', it is more likely to be effective.

Using memories

We're all familiar with the power of memory to evoke emotions. You remember something said to you and feel a rush of warmth and love. You remember doing something foolish and blush with shame. The power of memory is such that our recollections often provoke a stronger response than the original incident.

We can consciously use the evocative power of memory to help us cultivate mettā. Let's say we're cultivating mettā towards ourselves. You can recall a time when you felt appreciative of yourself. You might have been in a very good mood, and found yourself at ease with yourself. You might have been in the countryside and felt a great sense of harmony and peace. Or you might have just made a significant achievement in your life.

Recall every detail about that time. Remember what you were wearing, what you saw, how you held your body, any scents you were aware of, what people were saying. Call to mind the details: the texture of your clothing, the brightness of colours, tones of voice. The more vividly you recollect the experience, the easier it will be to re-experience the emotions. The more senses you involve, the more vivid and evocative the memory will be, so remember to use sight, hearing, touch and smell.

Using creative imagination

Again, let's say we're cultivating mettā towards ourselves. Think of an experience that would make you feel well and happy. Sometimes I imagine I'm snorkelling on the Australian Great Barrier Reef. I've never actually been snorkelling, but when I imagine the feeling of buoyancy, and the warm currents of water caressing my skin, the light rippling down from above on to the beautiful corals, and the shoals of vividly coloured fish swimming past, I feel a sense of well-being

In the other stages of the meditation, you can invite others to join you. You're generously offering them the benefits of the environment you've created for them. Again, the point is not simply to have a pleasant experience. Remember that mettā is a desire for well-being and not just a pleasant feeling. What we are doing is wishing ourselves well, and then wishing others well by imaginatively sharing our inner world with them.

By imagining that we are well, happy, and free from suffering, we are actually wishing these states upon ourselves. Our imaginations bring about real changes in our state of mind. We do this all the time – every time we daydream we're cultivating some emotion or other. Sometimes they are creative and helpful, sometimes they are destructive and undermining. What we're doing in the Mettā Bhāvanā is consciously bringing into being the useful emotions of love, appreciation, patience, and so on.

Using your body

We've already mentioned that the way you hold your body has a big effect on the way you experience emotion. You can use this principle in your Mettā Bhāvanā; use your posture to help you cultivate mettā by making sure that you avoid tension or slumping. It's almost as if our bodies have memories. As you sit in your meditation posture, recall what it is like to feel confident, happy, and full of energy. Let your body help you access these states by relaxing and maintaining an upright spine with an open chest. Imagine that your body is full of energy.

Allowing yourself to smile slightly will also make it easier to cultivate mettā. If deliberately smiling feels false, then just allow your face to relax. As the practice of mettā starts to result in perceptible and positive changes in your emotional states, you'll probably start to smile spontaneously.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How do you get on with the mettā bhāvanā practice? If you have difficulties with it, what are they?

2. *"Don't emotions just happen? From a Buddhist point of view this is not the case. Emotions are habits, and are actively created."*
Do you agree? If this is true, might it mean that we shouldn't take the way we happen to feel so seriously?
3. *"We can act out of an attitude of mettā even when we do not ourselves feel happy, or even when we don't subjectively feel loving."*
Have you ever experienced this?
4. Have you ever needed to be reminded of any of the things Bodhipaksa says that mettā isn't?
5. Bodhipaksa suggests four methods for developing our seeds of mettā: using words, memories, creative imagination, and the body. Which of these have you tried, and which worked best for you?
6. Do you use the traditional phrases that go along with this practice? What effect do they have? Have you ever invented your own words or phrases?
7. Try co-ordinating the phrases with your breathing as Bodhipaksa suggests this week. Notice and report back on the effects.
8. Do you ever use memories or creative imagination in your practice? If so, share what you have done with the group. If not, try it!
9. Do you have any experience of using the body to access emotions, either in the mettā bhāvanā or in another context? If so, experiment with this in your practice this week, and tell the group about it.

1.4

Exploring Buddhist Practice Wisdom



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Text purpose-written by Vadanya

The importance of ideas, and this part of the course

We all have a model of the world in our heads. Whether we are aware of it or not, we have a set of ideas, concepts, images, analogies and metaphors that we use to make sense of the world and guide our actions. It is as though we each had our own map of reality that we use to find our way around. This map is highly simplified, because reality is far too complex for us to hold in our heads. Our map bears a similar relationship to reality that a road map of France – say – bears to the actual country. If it is accurate, it is useful for finding our way around, but it leaves out almost all of the richness, beauty, complexity, mystery and wonder of the reality. If it is inaccurate, it is worse than useless, and will lead us into a succession of dead-ends, wild goose chases, and unpleasant experiences. So although our map is only ever a poor approximation to reality, it is still vitally important. Our beliefs and ideas about the nature of reality have a major effect on the way we feel, and on the way we live our life. Our beliefs can liberate us, or they can keep us stuck, and even trap us in downward spirals of negativity.

So we need to look at our beliefs and ideas about the world if we want to make spiritual progress, or even if we just want to live an emotionally healthy and productive life. For this reason examining and refining the way we think about the world is an important part of Buddhist practice – just as important as practising ethics or meditation. Refining our ideas about reality is an important aspect of the third part of the threefold path – wisdom – and it is this that we will be focussing on in this part of the course.

Wisdom and ‘Right View’

The word ‘wisdom’ in Buddhism often refers to a direct seeing into the nature of reality, beyond all words and concepts. This is part of the ultimate goal of Buddhism, but for most of us it is still a little way off. Certainly most of us do get partial glimpses of something like this direct insight as our practice unfolds, and we need to value and nurture these. But for the time being we also need to concentrate on developing what is called ‘Right View’. This means making sure that our concepts and ideas about the world are aligned with reality, and that they allow us to live a meaningful life in which we can make spiritual progress. We need to make sure that the maps we are using are accurate enough to get us where we want to go.

‘Right View’ can sound rather rigid and dogmatic. But working towards Right View does not mean signing up to a creed, taking on a set of beliefs by blind faith, or rigidly sticking to any body of dogma. (At its best Buddhism encourages us to take all ideas with a pinch of salt, recognising that until we are enlightened any concept we use to explain the inconceivable and mysterious reality we are part of will be partially true at best.) What working on Right View does mean is honestly looking at the way we have been conditioned to think about the world,

owning up to where our current beliefs keep us stuck or don't match reality, and giving open, objective consideration to some time-tested ideas that might at first seem too radical and revolutionary to fit in with the beliefs we have been bequeathed by our society, which operates on a very different world-view and set of values. Finally it might also mean being willing to try some of these new ways of thinking out – maybe adopting them for a while as 'working hypotheses', to see whether they do in fact open gateways to new levels of experience we had previously closed ourselves off from.

"All worldlings are mad!"

Most of us almost instinctively think that our present maps of reality are pretty much right. Unconsciously we think that maybe they could do with a bit more detail, and a bit more accuracy in places, but generally they are not too far from the truth. But the Buddhist view is more radical. According to the Buddha, if we see the world in anything like the 'normal' common-sense way that most humans do, then our maps are completely wrong in some important ways. And as a result just about the whole procession of humanity is lost, blundering about, looking for happiness in completely the wrong place, getting into a worse and worse mess, experiencing ever more and more suffering.

The Buddha once said that "all worldlings are mad." 'Worldlings' here means not the inhabitants of planet earth, but those beings who try to get their happiness and fulfilment from the fleeting phenomena of this transient world, rather than from spiritual development. In other words it means 'normal' people, and, to some extent at least, you and me, and the great majority of other Buddhists. (Traditionally the state of no longer being a 'worldling' and becoming one of the 'Noble Ones' is seen as a very high attainment indeed.)

To quote Sangharakshita:

This is the Buddha's statement. Everybody who is not spiritually enlightened or very near to it is mad. And the Buddha isn't exaggerating. If we look around we see that we are living in the midst of a vast hospital, because everybody is sick. Living in the midst of a vast lunatic asylum, because everybody is mad. And everything, we may say, that everybody does, in this world, is the action of a madman or a mad woman. And we see only here and there some gleams, some glimpses, of sanity.¹¹

The Buddha said we are mad because our worldly way of seeing things is 'topsy turvy' – upside-down – and he went on to describe several ways in which this 'normal' view of things was completely the opposite of the way things are. It isn't that we could make some improvements, but that overall we're on the right track. About the really important things, we are completely in the dark. This is a difficult idea to accept – in fact it already requires a certain amount of wisdom to accept it!

Because in certain important areas 'normal' ways of seeing the world are completely upside-down, and Buddhist ways of seeing things are the exact opposite, Buddhist ideas are revolutionary. They turn our currently upside-down world-view on its head. If we truly make such ideas a part of ourselves they will revolutionise our whole being and our whole life – they will completely change our goals, the way we think and feel, and the way we speak and act. The reason this doesn't happen as soon as we read a Dharma book or hear a Dharma talk is that the process of making an idea a part of ourselves is normally a long one, even when we have understood it intellectually and agreed that it is true. There is an enormous difference

11 *Zen and the Psycho-Therapeutic Process*, Sangharakshita.

between understanding an idea as it is expressed in words, and making the truth behind that idea a constant part of the way we see the world, the way we feel about the world, and the way we respond to the world.

Working on wisdom

The process by which we make Dharmic ideas so much a part of ourselves that they can radically transform our life and our approach to the world is summed up in the teaching of the Three Levels of Wisdom. This has already been discussed in the very first session of this course, but it is so central to the Wisdom aspect of the Threefold Path – which we will be exploring over the next few sessions – that it is worth looking at from a slightly different angle as a foundation for what follows.

The Three Levels of Wisdom according to the Sarvāstivādin tradition are:

1. Hearing (or reading) – Śruta mayī prajñā.
2. Thinking or reflecting – Cintā mayī prajñā.
3. Meditating – Bhāvanā mayī prajñā.

To use a metaphor, the process these ‘three wisdoms’ describe is very like what happens when we eat: firstly we take the food into our mouth and taste it, then we chew it and digest it and process it in a variety of ways to change it into a form we can use, and finally we make the food a part of ourselves – it becomes us, and we become it.

Stage 1: Hearing or reading

It might seem obvious that the first step in making Buddhist teachings our own is simply to hear or read the words in which they are expressed. But there is much more to this stage than that, and we need to pay close attention to how we approach this stage, by being aware of our response to the teachings and the attitude with which we approach them.

According to the Pali English dictionary, the word *suta*, which is the Pali equivalent of Śruta in Śruta mayī prajñā, means “heard in a special sense, received through inspiration or revelation, heard, taught.” On this basis Ratnaguna¹² has described this stage as the way we “receive the message from the Enlightened mind through the medium of concepts.” Sometimes the Enlightened mind might seem to use an odd vehicle to transmit its concepts – a not-very-well-written book or an ordinary-seeming Dharma teacher – but often our response to hearing the Dharma even from these apparently not very impressive sources can have this quality of being special, it can have the quality of inspiration or revelation. Often people say that their first response to hearing certain Dharma teachings was an immediate sense that “this is important” or “this is right”, perhaps along with a sense that they have somehow always known this, or a leap of joy and a sense of expectation, a feeling that this is the doorway to something important. We can even have something like this response to a teaching we don’t really understand yet – people often have a strong sense that, for example, the Heart Sūtra is saying something powerful and important, without really understanding it in any detail.

Śraddhā

This response is an aspect of a quality we refer to by the Sanskrit name of śraddhā, which is often translated, rather misleadingly, as faith. Śraddhā is certainly not faith in the sense of blindly believing something that doesn’t make sense. Śraddhā could be described as a sort of heart-knowledge, coming from a union of thinking and feeling. It often manifests as an

¹² *Reason and Reflection in the Spiritual Life*, Ratnaguna

intuitive sense of rightness and importance, combined with a more down-to-earth confidence that the teachings do make sense intellectually. If we have even a slight sense of this response to hearing or reading the Dharma we should pay attention to it and nurture it, because it is important. The Dharma is not just an ordinary teaching, it is a “message from the Enlightened mind through the medium of concepts.” Our felt sense of the rightness and specialness of the teachings is our link with the Enlightened mind. It is our link with our own potential. Speaking poetically, we could say that it is our higher self, or the future self we could become, speaking to us, telling us that what we are hearing is vitally important for our future fulfilment. It is no small thing to have a link to the Enlightened mind, or to our own higher self. We need to pay attention to it and respect it, so that we keep it in good working order. It is all too easy to get blasé about the Dharma after a while, to treat it as just another part of the clutter of ideas we have been exposed to, on the same level as our other opinions and enthusiasms and bits of information. But if we do this our link to the Enlightened mind will get weaker and weaker. To counteract this we need to remember and revisit our response of śraddhā, to keep it alive and fresh, and to nurture it so that it can grow into something that has a sustained and powerful effect on our lives. In the words of one of the earliest and most influential Mahayana texts, the White Lotus Sūtra: “If he hears [the Dharma] but for a moment, then let him joyfully congratulate himself, [saying] ‘I have now obtained a great benefit!’”

Receptivity

Sometimes, however, our initial response to some Dharma teachings is anything but śraddhā – sometimes it is scepticism or even dislike. Certainly we need to think critically about the teachings to make sure that they make sense. But thinking critically is not the same thing as being closed to new ideas because we think we already know the truth. There is an oft-quoted story about a Professor who goes to visit a Zen master. The Professor is full of his own theories and his own present understandings, yet, for some reason, he is still drawn to visit someone who he knows has a kind of knowledge he lacks. After they have been talking a while the Zen master pours tea. He fills the Professor’s cup, and then keeps pouring. Tea goes everywhere, but he just keeps pouring, until the Professor shouts out in disbelief, “Stop! Can’t you see the cup is full?” At which point the Zen master says, “You are just like the cup. You are already full of your own opinions, and there is no room for anything new or fresh to enter. Why have you bothered to come here?”

Sometimes we can all be like that Professor. At one level we know there is something inadequate about our present understanding of life – otherwise we would not be looking for what is missing from the Dharma. But at another level we think we know it all. We have a world-view we have picked up from our family, our society, the country we live in, our friends, our education, the media, and so forth. And often without even being aware of it we dismiss any ideas that don’t fit in with the world-view we have inherited. Even if an idea has been espoused over a long period by many people who are clearly wiser and more intelligent than ourselves, if it doesn’t fit in with the assumptions we’ve been conditioned to make, our immediate reaction is all too often to reject it out of hand. (Many Westerners’ responses to Buddhist ideas that don’t fit easily with so-called ‘scientific’ materialism are often an example of this phenomenon.)

To make room for something new and fresh we maybe need to remember that, according to the Buddha, many of our ‘normal’ ways of looking at things are upside down. We need to remember that we are looking for something that is beyond our present understanding of things – otherwise we wouldn’t need to look for it. We need to make some space in our cup, so that we can be open and receptive. In the words of Sangharakshita:

Receptivity is the first requisite of the disciple, and indeed of anyone who wants to learn anything. We can be anything else we like: we can be wicked, we can be stupid, we can be full of faults, we can backslide...In a sense it doesn't matter. But we must be spiritually receptive, we have to be ready to learn. When we know that we do not know, everything is possible.¹³

The first stage of the first stage of wisdom is to know that we don't know.

Stage 2: Thinking and reflecting

Once we have heard and understood an aspect of the Dharma, and even gladly accepted and welcomed it, this is just the start of a longer process. We have probably all come across ideas that seemed useful and important, and been convinced that we would put them into practice, but found that in fact we quickly forgot about them. (An excellent example of this often happens on work-related training courses – after a weekend course we come away full of ideas about how we are going to revolutionise our time management, say, but by Monday afternoon we are lapsing back into old habits, and by the next week we have completely forgotten about the training.) The human mind is like a sieve, a fact acknowledged in a Buddhist saying: “Non-repetition is the canker of the spiritual life.” Unless we go over and over what we have heard and read, we probably won't be able to bear it in mind amid the hectic rough-and-tumble of daily life, and over time it is likely to drift out of our consciousness altogether.

The White Lotus Sūtra, which we have already referred to, urges us to “receive and keep, read and recite, expound and copy” the teachings. We “receive and keep” the teachings by accepting them as our own, by taking them to our heart and keeping them close to our heart. Then we “read” the teachings, not just once, but exposing ourselves to them over and over again. Traditionally, we also “recite” – learning and chanting a teaching has often been seen as an important practice. Learning by heart is an excellent way of imprinting a teaching on the mind and understanding it, and it allows us to carry our own Dharma around with us, so that we can reflect on it whenever we are idle, and remember it even in difficult situations. Then, having understood the teachings and immersed ourselves in them over a period of time, we can also “expound.” Once we have a certain amount of understanding, teaching the Dharma to others is an excellent way of engraving it on our mind, relating it to our own and others' experience, and deepening our understanding – as well as being an important practice of generosity in its own right. Finally, at the time the Lotus Sūtra was written down, “copying” was also an important practice for making the Dharma more widely known. Although we no longer need to hand-copy books to make them available, the act of rewriting is still a good way of getting to grips with a text and immersing ourselves in it deeply.

We see from traditional texts like the White Lotus Sūtra and many others that this stage of ‘thinking and reflecting’ has always been an important practice for Buddhists. We may not approach it in quite the same way as the Lotus Sūtra suggests, but the principles are the same – we need to immerse ourselves thoroughly in the Dharma, so that it gradually soaks into us. Over the course of our involvement with the Dharma we will probably come across the important ideas of Buddhism again and again, from slightly different angles and expressed in slightly different ways. We will probably read a number of books, hear many talks, take part in many study groups and discussions, reflect on many occasions and in many different ways, and come across many symbols, myths and stories, all rounding out and deepening our understanding. Then we may also pass on the Dharma to others, formally or informally, in a large or small way. And just as, when we go out for a walk in heavy mist we may get soaked

13 *Wisdom Beyond Words*, Sangharakshita, p70.

without realising it, these ideas will soak into our being, perhaps without us noticing that anything dramatic is happening. But when we look back we will see that our approach to life has changed radically, and that we seem to be living in a more open world, with many more possibilities.

Stage 3: Meditating

The Sanskrit word *bhāvanā* in the term *bhāvanā-mayī-prajñā* means meditation: at this level of wisdom we in a sense have a direct experience of the wordless truths that the concepts of the Dharma point to, by meditating deeply upon them.

We approach this by reflecting deeply while in a higher meditative state – traditionally the first *dhyāna*, or at least access concentration. In such a state of calm focused alertness, integrated energy, and positive emotion, we begin to see behind the words or symbols in which the Dharma is expressed, to the experience beyond. We begin to have a direct wordless perception of the truth, which we call insight. Such insight is very different from a conceptual understanding – it is no longer an idea, it is a part of the very way we see the world. We can perhaps imagine, for example, that knowing intellectually that all beings are somehow interconnected – which most of us probably accept at some level – would have much less impact than living in a direct experience of interconnectedness as a concrete reality, so that we could no longer take our own sense of separateness seriously, and never feel any temptation to act just for our own benefit.

We may tend to think of such insight as an all-or-nothing, once-and-for-all experience, which at its highest level we are told it is. But we are all likely to get glimpses of insight if we meditate wholeheartedly while exposing ourselves to Buddhist ideas, and these can have a strong cumulative effect. Such glimpses behind the curtain may be intense, but, until we are well along the path, they do not seem to last. To build on them we need to revisit them, and to do this we need to turn them into a form we can remember and think about. This probably means putting them into words, although some people may prefer to use images or other symbols. We can then treat these glimpses of reality as another form of ‘hearing’, on which again we need to reflect, so that they can contribute to another cycle of meditating and becoming.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. “*All worldlings are mad*” – The Buddha.
“*...common-sense: the inherited stupidity of the race*” – Oscar Wilde.
What is your response to these statements?
2. What was your emotional response when you were first exposed to the Dharma? How has your response changed now that the Dharma is more familiar to you?
3. Which aspects of the Dharma have given you the strongest sense of *śraddhā*?
4. Have you come across any aspects of the Dharma that you tend to reject? Is your response a ‘cool’ intellectual questioning, or does it have a ‘warm’ emotional flavour – and if so, what sort of emotion do you experience in response to the teaching?

5. Have you ever radically changed your opinion about something? Do you find it possible to imagine that your existing world-view might be faulty in some areas?
6. *“Non-repetition is the canker of the spiritual life.”*
Are you happy to keep revisiting and reflecting on the same Dharma teachings from different angles, or do you tend to want novelty?

Text purpose-written by Vadanya

Conditioned co-production

The central concept that the Buddha used to try to communicate his Insight is often described as ‘conditioned co-production.’ This is one of several translations of the Sanskrit term *pratītya samutpāda* (Pali *paṭicca samuppāda*) – others include ‘dependent co-arising’ and ‘dependent origination’. *Pratītya samutpāda* could be translated as meaning something like ‘existing on account of arising together’. The influential fifth-century commentator Buddhaghosa says that it describes how the world we experience ‘arises as a togetherness, thus it is a co-arising.... The total of causes is a condition for the total of states produced from that conditionality.’¹⁴ It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this idea in Buddhism.

Western approaches to **pratītya samutpāda**

In the Pāli Canon the Buddha gives a number of different examples of the way conditioned co-production can work in our spiritual lives. Historically the most important of these has been the Twelve Nidānas, or links, of the reactive process of conditionality which keeps us trapped in Saṃsāra, as illustrated by the Wheel of Life. (This will be discussed later in this module.) For the purpose of our everyday practice as Buddhists, this formulation, along with the corresponding twelve positive links in the spiral path leading to Enlightenment, are the aspects of conditioned co-production that we need to focus on.

However in the West there has also been a great deal of interest in the more general implications of *pratītya samutpāda* for the way we see the world. At a general level, the idea points out that all things and events come about because of conditions, and exist only as long as the conditions that keep them in being exist. All phenomena constantly condition and interact with a host of other phenomena, so that nothing exists independently, as a thing-in-itself, separate from everything else.

In the West this is often explained in terms of material things and processes, so it is pointed out for example that we ourselves depend on an enormous number of conditions for our existence – the atmosphere, the sun, the water in the seas, the whole ecosystem we are part of, all the people who grow our food and provide us with necessary goods and services, and so on. We could never finish the list. Through thinking about things in this way we can begin to get an idea of how interconnected and interdependent we are with all other phenomena.

14 *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, Buddhaghosa, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, pp.596–7, Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre.

This is a valid understanding, but it is not the whole story. We need to beware of thinking we have completely understood the Buddha's insight. He described this teaching as:

Deep, hard to perceive, hard to understand... beyond logic, subtle, intelligible only to the wise.¹⁵

The concept of *pratītya samutpāda* is pointing to a vision of reality that is deeper and more far-reaching than we can imagine at the moment. So conditioned co-production is not just causality, and not just that phenomena in the material world are governed by complex networks of interactions, so that everything affects everything else. This is not “beyond logic” and we can understand it quite easily while not counting ourselves among ‘the wise’.

We Westerners have a tendency to see Buddhist teachings through the lenses of our materialist conditioning, and to interpret Buddhist ideas as though they were scientific theories about the material world, rather than attempts to convey a vision of reality that transcends our current materialist understanding. Conditioned co-production is not just about material things, it is about how our mind and the world we experience mutually condition each other and evolve together. To quote one modern author:

Integral to the concept of dependent co-arising is the belief that the preconceptions and predispositions of the mind itself shape the reality that it sees. This runs counter to commonsensical notions of a world ‘out there’ distinct from and independent of the perceiving self. A genuine understanding of mutual causality involves a transcendence of conventional dichotomies between self and world...which amounts to an overhauling of one's most ingrained assumptions.¹⁶

The Five Niyamas

Later commentators on the Buddha's teaching identified five strands – called *niyamas* – within *pratītya samutpāda*, five types of processes operating within the overall flux of conditioned co-production. In Sangharakshita's recent thinking these five *niyamas* have taken on a new importance as a way of clarifying our view of the spiritual life. The five *niyamas* as reinterpreted by Sangharakshita are:

1. Inorganic physical processes (Pali: *utu-niyama*).
2. Organic biological processes (Pali: *bīja-niyama*).
3. Cognitive, perceptual, instinctual and psychological processes (Pali: *mano-niyama*).
4. Processes arising from ethical and unethical actions (Pali: *kamma-niyama*; Skt: *karma-niyama*).
5. The progressive order of conditionality whereby higher states of being unfold spontaneously to produce even higher states (Pali: *dhamma-niyama*; Skt: *dharma-niyama*).

The first three of these *niyamas* need not concern us here, but some understanding of – and belief in – *karma-niyama* and *dharma-niyama* processes are crucial to a Buddhist spiritual life. However interesting we may find conditioned co-production from a philosophical point of view, the Buddha's goal in teaching it was less to try to explain the nature of reality in words, than to help us to follow a path of growth and development that would allow us to see the nature of reality directly for ourselves. In the early Buddhist scriptures *pratītya samutpāda* was mainly seen as describing how we evolve as spiritual beings, and the aspect of

¹⁵ *Dīgha Nikāya* II. 36

¹⁶ *Mutual causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory*, Joanna Macy.

conditioned co- production that the Buddha focused on was the law of karma. Karma means action. Essentially the law of karma tells us that the way we choose to act, speak and think now has a powerful influence on the sort of person we will become in the future, and therefore on our experience of the world around us. To grow towards Enlightenment we need to consciously use the law of karma to grow towards higher states, while at the same time opening ourselves up to dharma-niyama processes which may seem to us like influences ‘from beyond’.

The karma-niyama – or the Law of Karma

Traditionally it is said that a belief in the law of karma is the one ‘right view’ that is completely essential for our spiritual progress, while not to believe in the effects of karma is the one wrong view that will completely stop us from following the Buddhist path. There are good reasons for this. The Buddhist path works by using karma-niyama processes. It uses the fact that the way we act, speak, and use our mind at every moment of our existence helps to create the person we will become in the future. So it advises us on the types of action, speech and thought that are ‘skilful’ – meaning that they help us to evolve in a positive direction, towards more integrated and positive states of heart and mind, towards greater understanding, and towards states that open us up to dharma-niyama processes that can take us beyond our limited selfhood towards the complete liberation of Buddhahood.

Because the law of karma is the mechanism by which the Buddhist path works, if we do not believe in it we will not understand the nature of the path, and we will not follow it in a way that is effective. We may not see the point in acting skilfully, so we are unlikely to practise the first stage of the path – ethics – with any conviction or energy. We will not understand that the path involves a progressive process of change in our inner being, akin to the growth of a plant, brought about by regular steps – so we will probably try to jump right to the end, ignoring the fact that we are still close to the beginning. To be a Buddhist who does not believe in the law of karma is like being an architect who does not believe in the basic laws of physics – we will ignore the supporting framework of our structure, and try to build towers and roofs before there is anything to hold them up.

The dharma-niyama

Dharma-niyama processes take place – to put it simply – when, in the spiritual life, one good thing leads to something better, and then to something better again, in a progressive, positive process. Dharma-niyama processes equate roughly to the creative conditionality described in Week 3 of this part of the course, and the spiral path described in Week 4 is an example. Unlike karma-niyama processes, dharma-niyama processes do not depend on the volition of the individual, so that the effects may be experienced as an influence coming from outside the self, from something higher that we can open ourselves up to, but not control. This aspect is closely related to the Bodhicitta discussed in the last week of this part of the course.

Karma and rebirth

Traditionally the idea of karma is closely connected with the idea of rebirth, so that a skilful life leads us to be reborn in beautiful, happy states of existence, whereas an unskilful life leads to rebirth in painful states of suffering. This does not happen as a reward or punishment, but simply because the world we experience around us is a reflection of our state of being. If we make ourselves into a heavenly being by acting in a way that leads us to evolve in that direction, we will experience a heavenly state. If we make ourselves into a hellish being by our unskilful acts and thoughts, then our experience will be hell. This is often illustrated by the image of the Wheel of Life, which we will explore next week. The Wheel of Life depicts six realms of being we could be reborn into, some very pleasant, some mixed, and some full of

suffering. Each realm is not only an outer world, it is also a manifestation of an inner state – ultimately these inner and outer aspects cannot be separated.

Because the law of karma and the idea of rebirth are often so closely connected in people's minds, they can become confused. Some Western Buddhists find it hard to fully believe in rebirth, which goes against so much of our conditioning. (We will discuss this later in this text.) For those who find this to be the case, it is important to understand that the law of karma does not depend on the doctrine of rebirth. The law of karma operates just as much in this life as in future lives. Even in this one lifetime the way we act now has a major influence on the world we will experience in the future.

We all experience a mixture of skilful and unskilful motivations and mental states. If we choose to cultivate the positive aspects of our being, by acting and speaking in skilful ways, and by cultivating skilful states in meditation, then the positive aspects of our being will become stronger, and the negative strands will weaken. Over time we will become more aware, more whole, more connected with other beings and the world around us, and less tormented by craving and ill-will. Our experience of ourselves and of life will be more positive, and because we see the world through the lenses of our mental states, our experience will be that we live in a better, more beautiful world. And in many ways the circumstances we find ourselves in may actually change for the better – for example, people will tend to like, appreciate and trust us, so they will be more helpful, our relationships will improve, and new opportunities may open up that we could not have imagined in our previous, less positive mental state.

Of course the opposite is also the case. If we act, speak and think in unskilful ways then we cultivate and strengthen the negative sides of our being. Looking through the lenses of darker and more negative mental states, we come to see the world as a darker and ever darker place. Other people become more antagonistic to us, and we may eventually find ourselves feeling quite alone, cut off from others and the world around us, experiencing our own small version of one of the less pleasant realms on the Wheel of Life. This downward process is frighteningly depicted in Oscar Wilde's story, "The Picture of Dorian Gray." In this story the main character has a portrait of himself painted when he is a young man, and it is widely admired. He begins to behave in more and more craving-driven and dishonest ways, a process that starts with minor unskilful acts, but which leads him into a downward spiral from which eventually he cannot escape. In the early stages of this process he seems to see small changes happening to his face in the portrait, which seems to be becoming subtly less open and attractive – although he cannot be sure. But as time goes by, when he can no longer escape from the downward spiral, the changes in the picture become so obvious that they are a constant rebuke to him, and he hides it from the world as his private guilty secret. By the time of his death the picture shows the unlikeable portrait of a coarse, degraded man.

Luckily or unluckily, most of us most of the time do not seem to be taking either of these two extreme courses – towards Enlightenment, or in the direction taken by Dorian Gray. We are sometimes moderately skilful, and sometimes moderately unskilful. So changes in our character are slow to happen, and we may appear to stay fairly much the same for periods of time. But in our world of constant change nothing can ever truly stay the same. We are all either going forwards or going backwards, evolving or devolving, and the choice is in our hands. The consequences of going in one direction are inspiring, and the results of going in the other could be very frightening.

Misunderstandings of karma

The Buddhist law of karma is often misunderstood. In particular it is often confused with the Hindu understanding of karma, which differs in several important ways. On several occasions the Buddha pointed out that these misunderstandings can be harmful to our spiritual development.

For example Hindus, along with many Tibetan Buddhists, take the view that all our experiences, good and bad, are the result of our past karma. (Buddhism arrived late in Tibet, by which time it had been strongly influenced by Hindu ideas.) This view of the law of karma can lead to the conclusion that anyone who suffers in any way – from social injustice, exploitation, disaster, illness, or whatever – has somehow brought this on themselves by their past actions. This can lead to lack of compassion and failure to right social wrongs, such as the evil of untouchability, whereby some people are condemned to a lifetime of poverty and exploitation because of their caste, which is held to be a deserved result of their past karma. It can also lead to fatalism and apathy – we may not act to improve our situation if we think we deserve it because it is ‘our karma’.

The Buddha refuted the idea that all our experiences are the result of past karma – paving the way for the teaching of the Five Niyamas. For example in the *Moliyasivaka Sutta* he states categorically that the view that all suffering and pleasure are the results of past karma is wrong, and spells out some other causes, which include illness and the effects of the environment. The same issue is tackled in the Questions of King Milinda:

Whoever says, “It is only kamma that oppresses beings” ... is wrong ... The ignorant go too far when they say that everything that is experienced is produced as the fruit of kamma.

One teacher has suggested that when something bad happens to someone else we should never think it is due to their karma, but when something bad happens to ourselves we should always think of it as due to our own past actions – in this way we avoid lack of compassion on the one hand, and complaining, ill-will and blaming on the other.

Rebirth

Although it is easy to see that the law of karma operates within one lifetime, in traditional Buddhism it is closely linked to the idea of rebirth. And if our actions not only affect us in this life, but affect us in a potentially infinite series of other lives as well, lived not only in the one environment we know in this life, but in other world-systems and planes of existence as well, then the possibilities for karma to produce changes in the very nature of our being become that much greater – and that much more inspiring, or frightening, as the case may be.

From the Pali Canon there seems little doubt that the Buddha taught rebirth, and all traditional Buddhist schools seem to accept rebirth as a fact. But it would be easy to misunderstand what this teaching means. The Buddhist idea of rebirth is a subtle one, in keeping with the truth that beings have no permanent and independent self-nature. It is not the same as the Hindu idea of reincarnation, with which it is often confused. The Hindu idea is that a permanent and unchanging soul – the *ātman* – takes on a series of different bodies, effectively as a sort of reward or punishment for good or bad actions. The Buddhist idea is that a constantly changing stream of psycho-physical energy is shaped and transformed by the lives it lives and the actions it takes, and in successive rebirths manifests in forms and worlds of experience appropriate to it. (At a public talk a woman once asked Sangharakshita, “Are you telling me that I could be reborn as a chicken?” He replied, “No madam, only if you think like a chicken.”)

The answer illustrates the point: that woman could not be reborn as a chicken – first she would have to become a chicken, in her inner being, and by then she would have long ceased to be the woman who asked the question.)

So in the Buddhist idea of rebirth there is no unchanging soul that passes from life to life. What continues after death are our karmic tendencies, the karma-formations or *saṃskāras* of the being who died. This is the deep volitional energy that drives us to live as a certain sort of being, in a certain sort of body, in a certain sort of world. The person who is reborn is neither the same as, nor completely different from, the person who died – they are the continuation of the same process of change. What happens is traditionally likened to lighting a new candle from one that is going out. The new flame is not the same as the old one, nor is it different. It is the continuation of a process.

On the one hand there is no ‘self’ that transmigrates from life to life. On the other hand the Buddha was able to remember former lives, and warned his disciples that they would reap the fruits of their actions in lives to come, just as if the person who would be reborn was the same as the one he was talking to. This is perhaps not quite such a paradox as it seems – in a world that is one vast process of change, none of us is exactly the same person that we were last week or last year; yet we have no difficulty in thinking of ourselves as benefiting in the future from the actions that we take now.

Rebirth and the Western Buddhist

Many Buddhists in the West have an intuitive sense of the rightness of the doctrine of rebirth, or else accept it because it is part of a tradition that they know from experience is a manifestation of a wisdom that is deeper than their own. Others see rebirth as a metaphor, pointing to the fact that in our interconnected world the effects of our actions spread in all directions, and continue, effectively, forever. Yet others see rebirth as a metaphor in a deeper sense, as a teaching we can understand that points to a reality that is beyond our human understanding and imagination, limited as this is by thinking in terms of space and time, and through language and other systems of symbols. For them the teaching of rebirth is as close as our limited understanding can get to the truth, and if we accept it and live as though it were literally true this is the wisest way we can behave, and will benefit us a great deal. (An analogy might be the well-known map of the London underground, which is a simplified and distorted representation of reality. If we refuse to use it because the scale and geometry is not exactly right we will find it difficult to find our way in London. Buddhist ideas are about helping us to find our way – from where we are now to Enlightenment – rather than to exactly describe a reality that is beyond our comprehension at the moment.)

But many Westerners experience a knee-jerk response of disbelief in the idea of rebirth, because it does not fit in with the prevailing world-view of our times, which is sometimes called ‘scientific materialism’ – although in view of some of the discoveries of twentieth century physics, its so-called ‘scientific’ basis is now very out of date. According to this materialistic view, matter is what is ‘real’, and consciousness is merely an accidental by-product that is produced when matter is arranged in certain complex ways. Our consciousness is produced by the working of organs in our body, and when our body ceases to function, that consciousness will end forever. Many of us have been strongly conditioned by our education to see this so-called ‘scientific’ materialism as the only sensible view of the world, and we tend to view anything that does not fit in with it as impossible – whatever the evidence.

And of course according to this view rebirth is one of the things that is simply impossible. There is no obvious materialist mechanism by which it could work, so it must be false. But no

mental model of the working of the world – which is what materialism is – can possibly do justice to the complexity of the miraculous phenomenon we are part of, which we call the universe. Our rational intellect – which cannot even beat a small computer at chess – cannot understand this reality. All it can do is to make highly simplified models of it that work for a particular purpose. The materialist model works very well for certain practical purposes, but if we think that this means it completely sums up the nature of reality we have shrunk our vision of the awesome wonder of the universe down to the size of our intellect – and we will live a smaller, greyer life as a result.

So if our knee-jerk reaction to the idea of rebirth is disbelief, we could ask ourselves whether this says more about our conditioning than it does about the nature of reality. It might be a **step forward in wisdom** if, instead of thinking “I do not believe in rebirth”, we were to think the more accurate thought, “I have been conditioned not to believe in rebirth, but I accept that reality is more complex and mysterious than my understanding of it, so I will keep an open mind.”

Of course it is not possible to prove the reality of rebirth. But there are many facts that might make us think. There is the existence of child prodigies, like Mozart and many others, who even as small children have talents and skills that are beyond most adults. There is the fact – obvious to most parents – that young children within the same family have very definite and distinctive characters and personalities, from the cradle onwards. There are the examples of people who seem to remember former lives, and – if we trust those who write about them – have knowledge about people and places which it is difficult to see how they could have acquired except by living the life they claim to remember. There is the fact that so many of the Tibetan ‘tulku’s, such as the Dalai Lama, who are supposed to be advanced practitioners reborn, do in fact turn out to be remarkable people – though some do not, and of course they all do have a very special education. There is the fact that so many different peoples through the ages and around the world have believed in some form of rebirth, including many of the ancient Indians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Celts, as well as many African tribes – which may point to a widespread intuitive sense of the truth of rebirth. There are the many great thinkers who have believed in rebirth, from Pythagoras onwards. There is the fact that many of us as children had an intuitive sense that this was not our first time around, and had a gut level belief in rebirth before we had ever heard the word.

And of course there is the fact that the Buddha and the great figures of the Buddhist tradition taught rebirth – if we think we have a better understanding of reality than they do, it is not obvious why we would want to be Buddhists! In view of all this – and although it is certainly possible to be a Buddhist and practice the Dharma effectively without believing in rebirth – it might be well to at least keep an open mind.

Types of karma

There are traditionally said to be four types of karma when it comes to determining how we will be reborn. These are listed in descending order of importance.

The first and most important of these is **weighty karma**. This comes from ‘weighty’ acts that have a major impact on us and others, and are associated with powerful emotions. Such actions have a strong and lasting impact on the mind of the person who performs them. One example of a weighty karma is murder – clearly such an act would have a potent effect on our emotions and mental states, which would continue for a very long time. On the positive side, another weighty karma is meditation – an effective meditation practice sets up a strong positive current in the mind, and will have a major effect on our future experience.

The second type of karma is death-proximate karma. ‘Death-proximate’ means ‘near to death’ and this refers to acts of body, speech and mind that we perform when we are close to death. Because such acts will still be echoing in our mind as we pass from one life to the next, they are thought to have a major impact on our rebirth.

Habitual karma is produced when we do something regularly over and over again, so that it wears a deep groove in our being. Even comparatively minor skilful or unskilful acts can have a powerful effect when they are habitual. Small addictions, small untruths, small irritable thoughts, or on the other hand regular small acts of generosity, have an effect that is sometimes likened to dripping water. Each drip is insignificant, but over time the cumulative effect fills up a large, heavy container of karma.

The last and least important sort of karma is residual karma which is anything that does not fit into the first three categories. Residual karma has a minor effect on our rebirth, and only becomes significant in the absence of the other three types.

If we are mainly interested in the effects of karma in this life we can still draw some conclusions from this classification: the actions, words and thoughts that will produce the strongest karmic effects are those that have weighty consequences, those where intense emotions are involved, and those that are repeated regularly over and over again, so that they become a part of the structure of our life.

Are the results of karma inevitable?

Some Buddhist schools and teachers warn us that we will inevitably reap the results of our karma; but this does not appear to be what the Buddha taught. For example in the Sankha Sutta the Buddha says that we are not bound to experience the results of past actions, and he tells us how to wipe out our negative karma – or at least that which is not too heavy. He says that mere remorse and regret is useless, and that no-one else can get rid of our karma for us. But if we definitely decide not to act unskilfully in the future, and fill our heart with mettā, compassion and other positive emotions, sending love and goodwill to all beings in all directions – if we do the last stage of the mettā bhāvanā at all times and in all places – then “any deed done to a limited extent no longer remains.”



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How would you describe the idea of conditioned co-production?
2. Consider the following course of events: A meteorite drops on Fred’s car. To buy another car he takes a highly paid but stressful job. Due to stress his resistance drops and he gets a cold. While ill he stops meditating, and gets out of the habit. His old irritability reappears, and he has a row with his partner. In a temper about the row, he walks into a low doorway, and knocks himself out. While out cold he has a vision of Avalokiteśvara, who points out how stupid he is being. He apologises to his partner and starts meditating again. Which niyamas might be involved in this sequence, and where?

3. Do you believe in the law of karma – i.e. that the way we speak, act and think at every moment has a major influence on whether we experience happiness or suffering in the future? Do your actions of body, speech and mind always reflect this belief?
4. Describe how karma has shaped your parents' character and lives.
5. *"It is a cliché that virtue is its own reward, but it is still true."*
Do you agree? Why, or why not?
6. *"In an important sense, our world is a creation of our mind."*
Do you agree? Has your experience of the world ever changed in response to your mental states? Can you think of people who seem to inhabit quite different worlds from you?
7. What is your response to the idea of rebirth? To what extent do you think this response is conditioned, for example, by the society you have been brought up in?
8. Do you think you need to believe in rebirth to be a Buddhist?

Text purpose-written by Vadanya

Introduction – reactive and creative conditionality

In the last session we saw that conditionality is the central concept that the Buddha used to communicate his vision of reality. Conditionality can work in two ways, which Sangharakshita has called the reactive and creative modes. In the reactive mode, things go round in circles, and nothing new ever happens. In the creative mode, on the other hand, each event builds on the one before it, unfolding ever more new possibilities.

The reactive mode

When we are in the reactive mode we behave like machines, doing what our past conditioning has programmed us to do. We see the cake, and reach for it. A comment annoys us, and we snap. We feel bored, so we turn on the TV. The world pushes one of our buttons, and we respond, like a machine, in our usual way. Each time we react automatically in this way we strengthen our old pattern. Next time the button is pushed we are a little more likely to do the same old thing again, and we find it a little more difficult to do anything else. The classic example of this is an addictive pattern like smoking, but the same thing is true of any behaviour, of body, speech or mind.

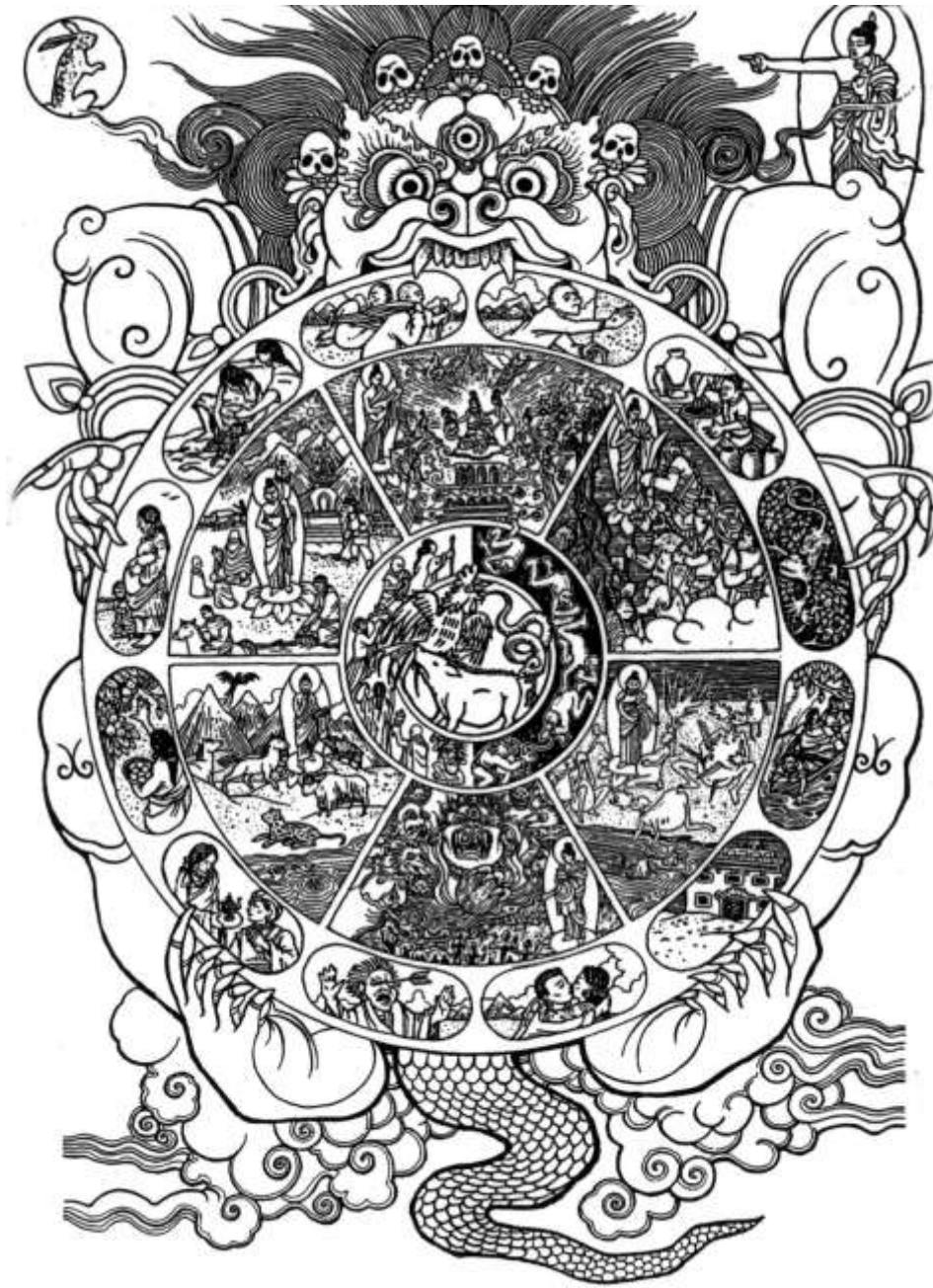
So in the reactive mode we go round in circles, deepening our old ruts. The circles we go round in can be simple, like the smoker's endless round of craving and cigarettes. But they can also be much more complicated, and involve other people and the world around us. Relationships can go round in circles, one person reacting to the other, who reacts back, both in their usual way. Lives can go round in circles, as our usual reactions to people and events bring the usual results from the world around us, which elicit the usual reactions from us – and so on, perhaps for a whole lifetime, even though the results might be painful, self-defeating, or just deeply boring.

The creative mode

We move into the creative mode when we don't do the usual thing, but instead make conscious choices to do what is skilful, and what opens up new possibilities. So for example we don't reach for the chocolate, or the beer, or the remote control, but we meditate or go for a walk. Or we apologise to the 'difficult' person at work for our side of the pattern between us, and ask them round for dinner. Or we stop putting energy into complaining thoughts, and instead start looking at how we contribute to the situation we are complaining about. When we do something new, new things start to happen. The old cycle gets a little weaker, we become a little freer, and new possibilities open up. After the initial discomfort of doing something new, we start to experience more positive mental states, which, if we persist, evolve into states that are more positive still – and so on, to a future we can't imagine.

The Wheel and the Spiral

The Wheel of Life is a powerful symbol for the reactive type of conditionality. In the Triratna Buddhist Community we tend to use the image of the Spiral Path to symbolise the creative mode. In this session and the next we will look at the Wheel and the Spiral in more detail – and also at the doorway that leads from one to the other.



The Wheel of Life

The Wheel of Life is a visual description of the process of reactive conditionality. It is a sort of combined map and user's manual of *samsāra*. The world it describes is like a computer game, in which we are imprisoned in a castle. Within the castle we can find ourselves in all sorts of different chambers, where lots of apparently interesting things can happen, where we can seem to score lots of points or accumulate lots of treasures. But none of this is the object of the game – the object is to escape from the castle. The Wheel of Life tells us how the game works, it tells us how to get from one chamber to another, it describes the various distractions in the

different chambers – and most importantly, it tells us how to find the door that leads us out of the castle, to freedom.

The inner circle: what drives the Wheel

The Wheel of Life consists of four concentric circles. In the centre are the forces that drive the wheel in its never-ending cycles – and that drive us, when we are in reactive mode. These forces are usually called delusion, greed, and hatred, and are pictured as a pig, a cock, and a snake. Delusion means our basic unawareness and ignorance about the nature of reality. In our dazed state of delusion, on the one hand we try to escape from our existential discomfort by grabbing hold of whatever gives us a pleasant feeling – here called greed. On the other hand we try to push away whatever give us an unpleasant feeling – our reactions of dislike, anger, anxiety and fear are summed up by the term ‘hatred’. The words ‘greed’ and ‘hatred’ are perhaps too strong for what we normally feel – ‘attraction’ and ‘aversion’ might be more accurate – but these are still what drive us round the Wheel.

The second circle: going up and down

Working outwards, the next circle of the Wheel is divided into two halves, one light, and one dark. In the light half, beings are shown going upwards, with expressions of joy on their faces. In the dark half, beings are shown falling, with expressions of fear and sorrow on their faces. This indicates that we can seem to be getting somewhere within the wheel, but ultimately this is beside the point. Unless we find our way out to freedom we will always fall back, and any gains we seem to make will be lost.

The third circle: the six realms of existence

The third circle of the Wheel is divided into six segments, which represent different ‘realms’ of existence we can spend time in during our stay on the Wheel. Traditionally these are seen as different worlds in which we can be reborn, but each is also the expression of a state of mind, so the six realms represent psychological states that we experience here and now, in this life.

The god (deva) realm

At the top of the third circle of the Wheel is the realm of the gods. This is often shown as an idyllic parkland dotted with palaces, in which beings enjoy a life of enjoyment and delight, without having to make any effort, and with no suffering. At the lower levels of this realm beings enjoy sensory pleasures, but of a refined type. At the higher levels they enjoy pure aesthetic delight, or the bliss of meditative states. This world is like some ideas of heaven, but with one important difference – it is not permanent. Eventually the gods use up the positive karma that put them in this realm, and they fall to a lower, coarser level of existence.

In our world, perhaps some celebrities spend time in the god realm, along with some rich people who devote themselves to having a good time in a fairly healthy way, perhaps splitting their time between their yacht and the ski resorts. Some people even spend time in rather higher parts of the god realm, feeding off the delights of beauty, or enjoying the bliss of meditative states. If we are healthy and lucky, and we make it our aim, then it is possible for some of us to spend at least a while in the god realm. But the catch is that these states do not last. And when they end, then the gods do experience suffering. With no practice at dealing with even minor discomfort, they can’t stand experiences that would not even be felt as unpleasant by dwellers in other realms.

The realm of the Titans, or Āsuras

Moving round in a clockwise direction from the realm of the gods we come to the realm of the Titans, or Āsuras. The Āsuras are big, fierce, and ugly, and their life is a constant struggle for

power. Theirs is a place of big egos, competition, envy, and aggression. There are a lot of āsuras in business and politics, or in any situation that is dominated by strong, un-self-critical people who like power and thrive on conflict.

The state of the Āsuras – in our world at least – is just as impermanent as that of the gods. To be a successful Āsura we need to **keep winning, and that is not possible for long**. Eventually every Āsura loses an election, is forced to retire, ends up in court, or something else happens to knock them off their pedestal. They become vulnerable, and they fall down into another state of being. And, because of their big egos, when they find themselves in a humble state where **they don't get much respect, they suffer a great deal**.

The realm of the hungry ghosts, or pretas

The pretas, or hungry ghosts, are traditionally shown as having enormous bellies and tiny mouths, symbolising that they have an enormous appetite and thirst, but can never get satisfaction. They live in a desert where there is little water or food, but when they do find water it turns into fire in their mouths, and when they find food it turns to knives in their stomachs. What they crave so much causes them suffering instead of satisfaction.

The pretas are beings who are dominated by neurotic desire – craving for things that don't bring any real satisfaction, but instead cause harm and increase dissatisfaction. Pretas have a sense of inner emptiness, and they try to fill their sense of lack – symbolised by their huge stomachs – by consuming through their tiny mouths. In our world pretas try to fill their inner emptiness by consuming sweets, cigarettes, alcohol, junk food, sex, entertainment, pornography, and the toys of the consumer society.

There are many pretas in our current world, and there is even an industry devoted to producing them – the advertising industry. The most extreme examples of the preta realm in our world are addicts of drugs like heroine, but most of us have our own little addictions. And **many people who lead what is regarded as a 'normal' existence actually live a life dominated by consumption, and even seem quite happy to be referred to as 'consumers'**.

The hell realm

At the bottom of the third circle we see a realm of suffering, a hell. This is not a hell to which beings have been condemned by any god, it is simply a reflection of the fact that some ways of being are, in themselves, states of intense suffering. The hell realm is a place of strong negative emotions, intense negative mental states, and mental illness. Many of us have spent at least a short time in the suburbs of the hell realm.

The animal realm

The world of animals is often shown as a natural landscape with herds of wild beasts roaming through beautiful scenery. At first sight it could look idyllic, but the reality is not so pleasant. Animals lack foresight, language, knowledge, and culture, so they are at the mercy of their environment, human beings, and their own instinctive drives. As a result they suffer. We live in the animal realm when we exist at the level of our biological appetites and natural instincts. This might seem like fun for a while, but as a long term state it is very limiting, and inevitably leads to suffering. While in the animal realm we are almost completely trapped in the reactive mode, with little ability to make conscious, creative choices.

The human realm

The human realm is the world we exist in when we live as reasonably mature, responsible, and emotionally healthy human beings. This is traditionally seen as the most auspicious realm,

where it is easiest to make spiritual progress and find the door that leads out of the Wheel, to freedom. In the human realm we don't experience the overwhelming suffering of the pretas or hell-dwellers, but we aren't lulled to sleep by the apparently endless pleasures of the gods. Instead we experience a useful mixture of pleasure and discomfort. We are not completely cut off from others like the āsuras – we can relate to others without always needing to be top dog. And we aren't trapped in the world of our bodies and instincts, like the animals, but have access to the worlds of the intellect, music, and the other arts.

It is possible to gain liberation from within any of the six realms, but for practical purposes most of us should aim to establish ourselves firmly in the human state. The god realm is – maybe surprisingly – not the place we should be aiming for. If we make our spiritual life a quest for effortless pleasure, this intensifies our egotism rather than eroding it, and makes us weak and prone to anxiety. Certainly we need to make space in our lives for solitude, meditation, the enjoyment of beauty, and for just doing nothing, but we also need to take on challenges and responsibility if we are to grow. When we get this balance right it is a sign that we are in the human realm.

The Buddhas of the six realms

Each of the six realms has its own Buddha, who offers the beings there what they need to progress. To the extent that we exist in these realms, these Buddhas will also tell us what we need in order to move on from our present state.

In the god realm the Buddha plays a musical instrument, making the music of impermanence. The gods will only listen to what is beautiful – they would turn away from anything harsh – but this music also carries a message, reminding them that their current state can't last, and they too need to look for the way out of the Wheel. In the realm of the Āsuras the Buddha carries a sword – he meets the Āsuras on their own terms. But this sword is also the sword of wisdom, that cuts through deluded, sloppy thinking. There is a connection between the fierce competitiveness of the Āsuras and a sharp, no-nonsense intellect, so the Āsuras may be affected by wisdom teachings, while they are not likely to respond to calls for love and compassion. In the world of the pretas the Buddha offers food and drink that really satisfies, which stands for what will really fill the preta's sense of inner emptiness, including the teachings and support that will help them regain a sense of inner richness and self-esteem. In the hell realms the Buddha offers a soothing balm – what the beings in hell need is simply to escape from suffering for a while, so that they are no longer overwhelmed by it. In the animal realm the Buddha holds a book, symbolising learning and culture. What beings in the animal state need is something to lift them above their focus on their bodily drives and immediate physical experience.

The outer circle: the process of becoming

The outermost circle of the wheel is divided into twelve boxes, which illustrate the most common description of the process of conditioned co-production in its reactive mode – the chain of the Twelve Nidānas, or links. (There is another set of twelve nidānas describing the spiral path.)

The Twelve Nidānas describe how our inner world and the outer world mutually influence each other, together creating the reality we experience as they both evolve over time. The twelve steps they describe are usually seen as taking place over three lifetimes, describing how the person we were in our last life has conditioned what we experience now, and how this in turn conditions what we become in our next life. Some scholars have suggested that the Twelve Nidānas were originally a description of the process of 'becoming' that is happening all

the time, and were not necessarily seen as happening over three lives. So whether or not we believe in rebirth, we can see the nidānas as a description of how our past creates our present, which in turn creates our future – which becomes our past, and so on round the wheel.

At this point it is the principle behind the nidānas that is important, rather than all the details. However there is one section of the Twelve Nidāna formulation that is particularly important to us, because it explains where we can find the door that leads us out of the wheel, and on to the spiral path.

From contact to becoming

Contact (Sanskrit: sparśa)

The first link in this particularly relevant part of the nidāna chain is contact between one of our sense organs and a stimulus (illustrated by a man and woman embracing.) Our eye sees an object, our tongue tastes a flavour, or our mind thinks a thought. (In Buddhism the mind is seen as one of the sense organs, so contact also includes remembering a past event, or imagining something that might happen.) Contact is happening to us all the time – we experience a constant succession of stimuli, from the world around us, from other people, and from our own minds.

Feeling (Sanskrit: vedanā)

Conditioned by the stream of stimuli that register on our senses and come up in our mind, we experience a continuous flow of responses, or feelings. This is illustrated by a man with an arrow in his eye, to communicate the overwhelming strength of the responses we can experience. Vedanā is translated as feeling, but it does not mean emotion – it is simply our response of pleasure or pain (or neither.)

Craving (Sanskrit: tṛṣṇā)

Conditioned by our feelings of pleasure and pain, we either grasp at things and events and thoughts, trying to perpetuate them and make them ours, or else we push them away, trying to make them stop. Both of these responses are covered by the shorthand term, ‘craving’, and illustrated by the image of a woman giving a man a drink. So the sight of chocolate gives us a pleasant feeling, and we want to eat it, and then carry on eating it – although more calories are the last thing we need. Or the harsh sound of our ‘difficult’ person’s voice gives us a painful feeling, and we react with irritation, trying to get them out of our experience – although it is this very response that causes them to talk to us in the tone we dislike.

Attachment (Sanskrit: upādāna)

Conditioned by our patterns of grasping and pushing away, we develop attachment, illustrated by the image of someone picking fruit from a tree. We develop likes and dislikes, which also turn into views and opinions. One person likes Fred, and another hates him. One person likes – say – peanut butter, or rainy weather, or shopping, and another hates it. One person holds one opinion, while someone else just as informed and intelligent holds the opposite. Obviously, if people’s responses are so different, there is usually no absolute objective truth behind our attachments – but that doesn’t stop us taking them totally seriously.

Becoming (Sanskrit: bhāva)

Conditioned by our likes and dislikes and opinions, we behave in certain well-worn patterns, and we become a certain sort of person. This is illustrated by the image of a pregnant woman – in the next part of the Wheel she is about to give birth to our future self, the person our conditioned responses have turned us into.

The point of freedom

The process we have just described goes on automatically, and we can't do anything about most of it. But there is one place in the sequence where we can make choices, and stop the process in its tracks. This is the so-called 'Gap' between feeling and craving – the 'Point of Freedom'. This is where we can find the door to escape from the Wheel, onto the Spiral Path.

To open this door we need to pay close attention to the way we respond to the feelings, or *vedanās*, that stimuli produce in us. We have no choice about the *vedanās* our experiences give rise to – this is the result of our past. But we do have a choice about how we respond to these feelings, and this choice is the dividing of the ways between the Wheel and the Spiral. If we respond semi-automatically to pleasant and unpleasant *vedanās*, grabbing at what we like and pushing away what we don't like, then we move on to craving, and take another turn round the Wheel. But if we face up to our discomfort, experience our feelings, and decide to do the skilful, creative thing whatever our *vedanās* push us to do, then we have opened the door and stepped onto the Spiral Path.

Our first experience of doing this is likely to be discomfort, or worse. It can be very uncomfortable to act, speak or think in new ways. Seeking to avoid discomfort is what keeps us going round the Wheel. So it is not surprising that the first step of the Spiral Path is *dukkha* – suffering, dissatisfaction, or discomfort. But when we face our discomfort, rather than running from it by grasping and pushing away, we can start to deal with it. And when we start to act skilfully and creatively, we begin to set up the conditions that mean we will experience many more pleasant feelings, and less *dukkha*, in the future – as we will see in the next session.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you tend to be more motivated by attraction or aversion? How might these two give rise to different approaches to life on the Wheel?
2. Which of the Six Realms have you spent time in in the past? Which do you spend time in now? Does the Buddha of the realm you spend most time in – apart from the human realm – have anything to say to you about how you need to practice?
3. What fascinating aspects of life on the Wheel most keep you distracted from looking for the door to freedom?
4. Do you have any tendency to see the spiritual life as a quest for the god realm? Do you think this is harmful or helpful in your case?
5. Do you think that a man with an arrow in his eye is too strong an image for our *vedanās*, or responses to stimuli? What stimuli – from the world, other people or your own mind – tend to create the strongest *vedanās* in you, and how do you respond?
6. Remember one occasion when you switched from the reactive to the creative mode by being in 'the gap'. What did it feel like, and what effects did it have?

Introduction: reactive and creative conditionality

In the last session we saw that reactive and creative ways of dealing with life can be symbolised by the Wheel of Life on the one hand, and the Spiral Path on the other. We also saw that the 'gap', or 'point of freedom' between feeling and craving in the outermost circle of the Wheel is the point where we can stop the reactive cycles, and begin to set up the positive train of events symbolised by the Spiral. The Wheel and the Spiral can be imagined visually as a circle lying in the horizontal plane with a spiral joined to it, which instead of revolving endlessly at the same level, leads upwards to ever greater heights.

In the following text Sangharakshita looks at the process of creative conditionality – which here he calls 'progressive'. To do this he uses the formulation of the twelve positive *nidānas*, to contrast with the twelve reactive *nidānas* of the Wheel of Life. The teaching of the twelve positive *nidānas* is an important part of Triratna's approach to the Dharma, which Sangharakshita has emphasised because it shows the path as a positive process of growth, rather than as a negative process of suppressing unskillful states, which can be the impression given by some interpretations of the Pali Canon.

The Spiral Path

Text condensed from What is the Dharma?, Sangharakshita, Chapter 7.

As we have already seen, the law of conditionality functions in two ways, one 'cyclical' and the other 'progressive'. Spiritual development takes place by the progressive mode of conditionality. Just as out of the bud grows the flower, and out of the flower the fruit, so out of one spiritual experience there grows another, and out of that yet another, each one higher, more refined, more beautiful, a little nearer to nirvana. All versions of the Buddhist path – the Noble Eightfold Path, the six *pāramitās*, and so on – are spiral paths, because they are all based upon the progressive type of conditionality. The concern of Buddhist practice is to break the endless cycle of action and reaction illustrated by the process of conditioned co-production on the Wheel of Life, and to set this process of progressive conditionality in motion. But where does this spiral path begin? It begins at the crucial point of our experience of *vedanā*, the feelings that befall us in the course of life.

THE STAGES OF THE SPIRAL PATH

Unsatisfactoriness

Some of the feelings we experience are pleasant, some are painful, and some are just neutral. And our reactions to them are usually pretty automatic. We want to grasp the pleasant experiences and escape from the unpleasant ones. We can't cling on to a pleasant experience forever, it's invariably interrupted, and that usually causes us pain too. So we oscillate between

pleasure and pain, and in this way the Wheel of Life continues to revolve. Fundamentally this is unsatisfactory. Yes, there are pleasant experiences. But there is nothing which is deeply and permanently satisfactory. This is the sense in which Buddhism says that life is 'suffering'. The Sanskrit word being translated as 'suffering' is *duḥkha*, 'ill-fitting': the sort of discomfort that arises when things don't work or fit together properly, the jarring quality that we experience in the course of our everyday life in this world.

We all know that things are never one hundred per cent right. There's always something that goes wrong. Nothing quite lives up to our expectations – at least for long. And this is what is meant by *duḥkha*, unsatisfactoriness or suffering. Once one has become sufficiently aware of this, eventually one starts becoming dissatisfied. One may have tried all sorts of things: one may have sought worldly success, or pleasure, or comfort and luxury, or learning. But in the end they are all unsatisfactory. It's not that you're actually experiencing pain all the time, but you're not really happy. You feel a vague discomfort; you can't settle down, you don't feel that you belong. It is a common experience that, in the words of the Bible, 'here we have no abiding city'. It is as though right in the middle of one's heart there is a terrible empty space.

Analysis of the problem of suffering produces two widely divergent views. Most of us take the attitude, consciously or unconsciously, that happiness must consist in the full satisfaction of our desires, and suffering is the opposite. But the Buddha came to a different conclusion. Whatever we enjoy cannot last. So our suffering cannot be avoided through the satisfaction of desire. That solution to the problem is really no solution at all. Many of us, sooner or later, have an inkling of this. Of course, we do our best to ignore it. We try to convince ourselves that we must be happy, because we've got all the things that are supposed to make people happy. But a whisper from deep within our heart keeps on saying, 'But you're not really happy'. We put our fingers in our ears and go off to drown our sorrows in one way or another, smothering this nagging feeling. But it's there underneath, building up. Stifling it only makes it worse. Rather, we should cherish our dissatisfaction, because it is this that makes us go in search of something higher, something more satisfying, some greater happiness.

Of course, we don't know at first what we are looking for. There's just this vague restlessness, a groping around in all directions for we know not what. And eventually, if we go on looking long enough, we come into contact with something which, for want of a better term, could be called spiritual. We come into contact with a glimpse of something higher, something which is not of this world. It may be a symbol, an echo, a reflection: a book that speaks to you, a picture, a person. And when you come into contact with it, whatever the circumstances, you respond. In the depths of your heart you get a feeling, or at least an inkling, that this is what you have been searching for all the time, even though you didn't know it.

Faith

In the Buddhist tradition this response is called *śraddhā*. And this is the next step of the spiral path: in dependence upon unsatisfactoriness arises *śraddhā*. We translate *śraddhā* as faith, but it isn't faith in the sense of believing something which cannot be rationally demonstrated. *Śraddhā* can also be translated as confidence or devotion, and it refers to the whole emotional side of the spiritual life. The word comes from a verb which means 'to place the heart on'. So faith in the Buddhist sense means the placing of one's heart on the Unconditioned, on the Absolute, rather than on the conditioned. It is the reorientation of one's whole emotional life. It is, in other words, the ethically wholesome counterpart of *tṛṣṇā*, craving. In dependence upon feeling – in this case feeling the unsatisfactoriness of the world – there arises not craving but faith – faith in something above and beyond the world, a sensitivity to a higher dimension of truth and reality.

Perhaps the best definition of faith is that it is the response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe. Faith – this intuitive, emotional, even mystical response to something higher, something supreme, something of ultimate value – is the very beginning of the spiritual life.

Then, in dependence upon faith, arises joy. This is the next step. You have found what you were looking for. You may not have been able to seize hold of it, but at least you've had a glimpse of it, like the sun through a cloud. So naturally, after perhaps a long period of searching, you are pleased. More than that, this contact with higher values has begun to transform your life. It isn't just a theoretical thing. Your heart has actually been lifted up; this is **what the word śraddhā literally means** – a lifting up of the heart. You have been lifted up to something higher, have touched something higher, have experienced, if only for a moment, something higher. And on account of that contact a change begins to take place. You feel that you now have a definite aim in life: to develop your contact with the higher dimension to which you have become sensitive. Of course, it isn't usually all plain sailing. Faith may arise but it may also subside. After an initial rush of enthusiasm for the spiritual life, and a phase of reading everything we can lay our hands on, and going to talks and meditation classes, we may suddenly lose interest. Perhaps our interest is caught by something else, or perhaps we get fed up with trying to be 'spiritual', and feel like living it up for a while. The pendulum may swing back and forth for quite some while, but as time goes by it swings less and less violently until it comes eventually to rest.

As one's faith strengthens, one gradually becomes a little less self-centred. One's egoity has been shaken up, and as a result one becomes just a little more generous, a little more outward-going. One tends not to hang on to things quite so tightly. What may be described as the lower part of one's nature, the part which is chiefly interested in things like food, sleep, and sex, starts coming under the conscious control of the higher part of one's nature. One begins to live more simply and harmlessly, and this makes one happier and more contented. More at ease within oneself, one doesn't rely so much upon external things. You don't care if you haven't got a beautiful house, a flashy car and all the rest of it. Sitting loose to all those things, freer and more detached than you were before, you are at peace with yourself. You may not have explored fully what you have discovered, but you've made contact with it, and that contact has begun to transform your life. You naturally start living a more ethical life, observing the five precepts. You have a more or less good conscience. And so you feel joyful. Joy is the next stage of the spiral path.

Joy

The Buddhist attitude is that if you're leading a spiritual life you should be happy, open, and carefree. If you have found the precious thing that you were looking for, and if it has really begun to transform your life, why shouldn't you be happy? If you're not happier than other people who haven't found this source of inspiration, what's the use of being a Buddhist? Joy is the hallmark of the true Buddhist. Buddhism attaches great importance to this stage of feeling happy and carefree and at peace with oneself, having a clear conscience, being able to go about with a song on one's lips.

Rapture

In dependence upon joy arises rapture; this is the next stage of the path. 'Rapture' is the nearest we get in English to translating the Sanskrit *prīti*. *Prīti* is an intense, thrilling, ecstatic joy, which is so powerful that you feel it in your body as well as in your mind. When we listen to a beautiful symphony, or watch the setting sun, or have a heart-warming communication with

a friend, we are sometimes so deeply moved that we experience not only an emotion, but also a physical response. We may be so greatly affected that our hair stands on end, or we shed tears. This is prīti.

One could say that rapture comes about as a result of the release of blocked energy – energy that is short-circuiting itself, or locked up. In the course of one's spiritual life, especially in meditation, these blocks get dissolved. One uncovers depths within oneself; little complexes are resolved, so that the energy locked up in them is released and surges up. It's due to this upsurge of energy, felt throughout the nervous system, that one experiences prīti.

Calm

Then, in dependence upon rapture there arises calm or peace. The Sanskrit word, praśrabdhi, means 'calm, tranquillity, serenity', and it is the calming down of the physical side effects of rapture, so that you're left with a purely mental and emotional experience.

Bliss

In dependence upon calm, there arises bliss, sukha. Sukha can have various meanings. Here it means the feeling of intense happiness that wells up due to the complete unification of all our emotional energies. Our energies are not divided, they are all flowing together strongly and powerfully in a single direction, like a great river. Whatever energy you had invested in negative emotions now flows positively in the form of bliss.

Samādhi

Then, dependent upon this intense happiness, arises samādhi. This word has several meanings, but here it means concentration – not a forcible fixation of the mind on a single object, but a concentration which comes about naturally when, in that state of intense happiness, all one's emotional energies are flowing in the same direction. When we are completely happy, when all our emotional energies are unified, we are concentrated in the true sense. A concentrated person is a happy person, and a happy person is a concentrated person. The happier we are, the longer we shall be able to stay concentrated; and conversely, if we find it difficult to concentrate for very long, the reason will be that we are not happy with our present state. If we were truly happy we wouldn't need to do anything else – we could just stay still. But we are unhappy, dissatisfied, so we get restless and go searching for this or that, looking for some distraction, some diversion.

It's significant that concentration in the sense of samādhi arises halfway up the path. It's only then that we can really begin to concentrate, because our emotional energies have been unified, and we are now, perhaps for the first time in our lives, happy. One's whole life needs to be a preparation for meditation. But however elevated our meditation practice, at this point we are still on the level of the mundane. We're on the spiral but we're still subject to the gravitational pull of the round. However, with the arising of the next stage in the series we come to the second part of the spiral, from which there is no possibility of regression.

Knowledge and vision of things as they really are

In dependence upon samādhi, there arises yathābhūta-jñānadarśana: 'knowledge and vision of things as they really are'. The concentrated mind sees things as they really are. When the mind is full of thoughts, when it isn't calm or harmonized, but pulled this way and that, it can't see things as they are. When the waters of a lake are still, they can reflect the face of the moon without distortion. But when the wind blows, making ripples and waves, the reflection of the moon is broken up and distorted. The usual way we see things is like that – all in bits and pieces, broken up, twisted.

This stage is of the utmost importance, because it marks the transition from meditation to wisdom. Once we've reached this stage there can be no falling back, the attainment of Enlightenment is now assured. One way of putting it is to say that this 'knowledge and vision' is insight into the 'three characteristics of conditioned existence'. One sees that all conditioned things are impermanent, unsatisfactory – they can't give permanent and absolute happiness – and insubstantial, or ultimately unreal.

This stage represents a direct perception: you actually see through the conditioned to the Unconditioned. Piercing through the impermanence of the conditioned, you see the permanence of the Unconditioned; piercing through the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned, you see the perfectly satisfying nature of the Unconditioned; and piercing through the insubstantial, the unreal, you see that which is eternally and everlastingly real. When you begin to see things in this way, your whole outlook changes radically. You are not the same as you were before. Once you've glimpsed something beyond, once you've seen through the passing show, once you've had a glimpse of that higher dimension, call it what you will, higher reality, the Absolute, even God if you must, once you've had a glimpse of that – not just an idea of it, not a concept, not a speculation, but a real glimpse, a real contact, a real communication – then you'll never be the same again. A permanent change takes place in your life. You've 'turned about in the deepest seat of consciousness.'

Withdrawal

Dependent upon knowledge and vision of things as they really are, there arises nirveda. This is sometimes translated as 'revulsion' or 'disgust', but that's too strong, too psychological; at this level you're far above psychology in the ordinary sense, because you're above the mind in any ordinary sense. This stage represents the clean, serene, withdrawal from involvement in conditioned things. It's like seeing a mirage in the desert. At first, seeing an oasis, you may hasten in its direction. But when you see that it's a mirage, you stop. There is no point in going towards what isn't really there. Similarly, when you see, on the basis of your experience of samādhi, that conditioned things, all the things of everyday experience, are unsatisfactory, that they're going to pass away, and that there's no real reality in them, you become less and less attached to them.

This stage of withdrawal is a sort of sitting loose to life. You still play the games that other people play – or some of them – but you know they're games. A child takes his game very seriously because to him it is real, but the adult can join in while knowing that it's a game. If the child wins, the adult doesn't get upset. In the same way, once you've seen through the games people play, you can go on playing them, but you know that they're just games and you can withdraw from them, at least inwardly. You may be doing what is necessary objectively, but subjectively you're not caught up in it.

Dispassion

In dependence upon withdrawal arises vairāgya, which can be translated as 'dispassion'. This stage differs from the previous one in that while withdrawal is the movement of detachment from conditioned existence, dispassion is the state of actually being detached. In this state you can't be moved or stirred or touched by any worldly happening. This isn't hardness or insensitivity, but a state of serene imperturbability.

Freedom

In dependence upon dispassion there arises spiritual freedom, vimukti. The Buddhist conception of freedom in the earliest teachings is twofold. Firstly there's ceto-vimukti –

freedom of mind – which means complete freedom from all subjective, emotional and psychological bias, from all psychological conditioning. And secondly there's *prajñā-vimukti* – the 'freedom of wisdom' – which means freedom from all wrong views, all ignorance, all false philosophy, all opinions. This complete freedom of heart and mind at the highest possible level is the aim and object of Buddhist life and practice.

Knowledge of the destruction of the āsravas

But this freedom is not quite the culmination of the spiral path. Dependent upon freedom arises 'knowledge of the destruction of the āsravas', (or 'mental poisons'). It isn't enough to be free. The next stage is to know that one is free. And one knows that one is free when one realizes that the mental poisons have been destroyed. When these poisons are extinct, and when one knows that they are extinct, then at last craving, the emotional counterpart of spiritual ignorance, has been destroyed. In dependence upon feeling there no longer arises any craving whatsoever. And at that stage you have reached the end of the spiral path, you have gained Buddhahood.

A natural process of growth

The spiral path shows us that the spiritual life is a natural process of growth, each stage arising from the overflow of the preceding one. As soon as one stage reaches its fullness, it inevitably passes over into the next. It's quite useful to have a theoretical idea of what lies ahead, but one doesn't need to bother about it too much. Once one stage is fully developed it will automatically pass over into the next.

The principle of conditionality isn't just an idea. Being aware that this is how life works can have a transforming effect on every aspect of the way we live. When any experience befalls us – when someone says something to us, or we read something, or we experience something through the senses – we can always ask ourselves whether our reaction is cyclical or progressive. If there's a cyclical reaction – say from pleasure to craving – then we go round and round on the Wheel of Life. But if there's a progressive response, however faint – say from an experience of the unsatisfactoriness of life to a feeling for something higher – then at that very moment we place our foot, however hesitantly, upon the first step of the path to Enlightenment.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. *"...a whisper from deep within our heart keeps on saying, "But you're not really happy". We put our fingers in our ears and go off to drown our sorrows in one way or another, smothering this nagging feeling."*
Have you experienced this whisper? If so, when did you first become conscious of it, and how has it developed? If not, why are you studying Buddhism?
2. *"We come into contact with a glimpse of something higher... It may be a symbol, an echo, a reflection: a book... a picture, a person. And when you come into contact with it ...in the depths of your heart you get a feeling that this is what you have been searching for."*
What first gave you this response of śraddhā? How has your śraddhā changed and developed over time?

3. What circumstances or activities tend to strengthen your śraddhā? How could you get more of these, whatever they are? On the basis of your experience, do you think you are more likely to experience śraddhā when you are in positive or negative states of mind?
4. *“Joy is the hallmark of the true Buddhist.”*
Have you become happier and more joyful since you started practising the Dharma? If so, in what ways? If not, why do you think this is?
5. *“We may be so greatly affected that our hair stands on end, or we shed tears. This is prīti.”*
Have you ever experienced anything like this? When? Do you think this could only be a short-lived experience, or might it be possible to experience this as a continuous state?
6. Have you become even a little calmer, more concentrated, more clear-sighted, and more detached from the “games people play” since you started practising the Dharma? In what ways? Does this give you confidence that the Spiral Path is describing a real process?
7. How might the positive nidānas match up with the stages of the Threefold Path of ethics, meditation, and wisdom?

Introduction

Over the last few sessions we have emphasised that conditionality and conditioned co-production are at the heart of the Buddhist vision of reality. But in the last session Sangharakshita also referred to ‘The Unconditioned’ – a mysterious ‘beyond’ we can say almost nothing about. In the following text Sangharakshita explores the relationship between the conditioned and The Unconditioned in more detail, looking at the traditional ‘marks’ or characteristics of conditioned existence, and explaining how these are doorways to the Unconditioned – which might be the same thing as conditioned existence anyway!

The Two Realities

Text condensed from What is the Dharma?, Sangharakshita, Chapter 3, with small amounts of additional material from Chapter 5, and from Wisdom Beyond Words, Sangharakshita, pp128-131.

Reality in Buddhism is often described as being of two kinds: conditioned reality and Unconditioned reality, or more simply the conditioned and the Unconditioned. ‘The Unconditioned’ is the usual translation of the Sanskrit *asaṃskṛta*. *Sam* means ‘together’, *ṛta* is ‘made’ or ‘put’, and *a-* is a negative prefix, so *asaṃskṛta* literally means ‘not put together’ or ‘uncompounded’. ‘The conditioned’ is therefore *saṃskṛta*, ‘put together’ or ‘compounded’. In this way the idea has developed that the conditioned is also the artificial, whereas the Unconditioned is the natural, the simple, that which has not been artificially put together. The distinction between the conditioned and the Unconditioned is fundamental to Buddhist thought.

In the Pali Ariyapariyesanā Sutta the Buddha tells how he decided to leave home and become a wandering ascetic. He describes himself as reflecting, ‘What am I? What am I doing with my life? I am mortal, subject to old age, sickness, and death. And yet, being myself subject to old age I pursue that which likewise will grow old. Being myself subject to decay, I pursue that which is subject to the same decay. And being myself subject to death, I pursue that which also must die. Suppose I were to go in search of that which is immutable? Suppose I were to go in search of that in whose perfection there is no diminution? Suppose I were to go in search of the deathless, the eternal?’

Siddhārtha realized that he was a conditioned being, and that he was spending all his time and energy in pursuit of conditioned things – that is, in the *anariyapariyesanā* or ‘ignoble quest’. He realized that he was binding himself to the endless round of existence, the wheel of life. So he decided to turn round completely and go in search of the Unconditioned instead, to take up the *ariyapariyesanā*, the ‘noble quest’. This simple description of the first great insight of the Buddha-to-be contains the essence of the spiritual life. Here we put our finger on the spring

that works the whole mechanism. This spring is the conditioned in pursuit of the Unconditioned, the mortal seeking, not immortality of the self, but a self-transcending immortality.

The Unconditioned

The Unconditioned is also ‘the transcendental’. This is not an ideal expression, but it does duty more or less adequately for the Sanskrit and Pali word ‘lokuttara’. ‘Loka’ means ‘world’ and ‘uttara’ ‘higher’ or ‘beyond’, hence the transcendental is that which is above or beyond the world. It is not above or beyond in a spatial sense, but in the sense that it is not conditioned. It is beyond all suffering, beyond transience, beyond the sense of self. It is above and beyond anything we can think of, or imagine, or begin to conceive. Contemplating it, the mind stalls and fails. It is almost as if there is only a great blank before us, an unconfined and inapprehensible plenitude. This is the Unconditioned, the transcendental reality, the goal of the spiritual life, of the ariyapariyesanā, the ‘noble quest’.

The three lakṣaṇas – or marks – of conditioned existence

What exactly do we mean by the conditioned? According to Buddhist tradition, that which is conditioned bears three characteristics, or lakṣaṇas, by which it may be recognized. The three characteristics of conditioned existence are that all conditioned ‘things’ or ‘beings’ are:

1. Unsatisfactory.
2. Impermanent.
3. Devoid of self.

Duḥkha: ‘unsatisfactoriness’

The usual translation of the Sanskrit word duḥkha is ‘suffering’, but a better one – if a bit cumbersome – is ‘unsatisfactoriness’. Duh- as a prefix means anything that is bad, ill, wrong, or out of place; and kha is supposed to be connected with the Sanskrit chakra, meaning ‘wheel’. So duḥkha is said to have meant originally the ill-fitting wheel of a chariot, suggesting a bumpy, jarring ride, a journey on which one could never be comfortable or at one’s ease.

So much for a general picture of duḥkha. But unease or suffering comes in many different forms – the Buddha usually speaks of seven. First, he says, birth is suffering: it is very unpleasant to be thrust from the harmony of the womb out into a cold, strange world. Secondly, old age is suffering, as it involves physical weakness, loss of memory and intellectual flexibility, and dependency on others. Thirdly, sickness is suffering. Whether it is a toothache or an incurable disease like cancer, no sickness is pleasant, and it seems that no sooner do we get rid of one disease than another comes along. Fourthly, death is suffering. We suffer when those dear to us die, and we suffer in the knowledge of our own dissolution. Death is a horrifying prospect for many people, which they do their best not to think about. Fifthly, contact with what one dislikes is suffering. You just have to live with people, places, things, and conditions that you don’t altogether like. Sixthly, separation from what one likes is suffering. This can be a very harrowing, especially when it takes the form of bereavement – permanent separation from those we love. Some people never get over such suffering, and brood over their loss for the rest of their lives. Seventhly, not to get what one wants is suffering. Some people experience a lifetime of disappointment, frustration, and bitterness if they feel that life has short-changed them in some way. But even in small ways this is something we all experience every day.

Now most people would say that this is going a bit far. They will admit that birth, sickness, old age and death are indeed painful. Yes, there is a certain amount of suffering in the world, but

on the whole it's not such a bad place. Why be so negative? And of course we do have pleasant experiences as well as painful ones. But the Buddhist view is that even the pleasant experiences are really only suffering concealed, glossed over, deferred – a whistling in the dark. And the extent to which we can see this depends on our spiritual maturity, because unless we are very aware, a lot of suffering is hidden from us.

Edward Conze has identified four aspects of concealed suffering. Firstly, something that is pleasant for oneself may involve suffering for other beings. We don't tend to consider this of course. The most common example is the enjoyment with which people eat the flesh of slaughtered animals. They merrily ply knife and fork without thinking about the suffering of the animals. But the unconscious mind is not so easily fooled. You may never be consciously aware of the unpleasant fact, but it will exert an influence on your mental state that is all the more powerful for being unseen. In this way we develop an 'irrational' feeling of guilt, because in the depths of ourselves we know that our own pleasure has been bought at the expense of the suffering of other living beings. This guilt is the source of a great deal of uneasiness and anxiety.

Conze's second kind of concealed suffering is a pleasant experience which has a flavour of anxiety because you are afraid of losing it. The traditional Buddhist illustration of this is a hawk flying off with a piece of meat in its talons, knowing that dozens of other hawks will fly after it to try and seize the meat for themselves. Any pleasure that involves any element of power or status is contaminated by anxiety, by the sense that others would like to replace you at the top of the dunghill.

The third concealed suffering indicated by Dr Conze is something which is pleasant but which binds us to something that brings about suffering. The example he gives is the human body. Through it we experience all sorts of pleasurable sensations that make us very attached to it; but we experience all sorts of unpleasant sensations through it as well. So our attachment to that which provides us with pleasant sensations also binds us to unpleasant sensations. We can't have the one without the other.

Lastly, Conze suggests that concealed suffering is to be found in the fact that pleasures derived from the experience of conditioned things cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the heart. In each of us there is something that is Unconditioned, something that is not of this world, something transcendental, the Buddha-nature – call it what you like. Whatever you call it, you can recognize it by the fact that it cannot be satisfied by anything conditioned. It can be satisfied only by the Unconditioned. So, whatever conditioned things you may enjoy, there is always a lack, a void, which only the Unconditioned can fill. Ultimately, it is for this reason that all conditioned things are unsatisfactory. It is in the light of the Unconditioned that *duḥkha* is clearly seen as characteristic of all forms of conditioned existence.

Anitya: impermanence

The second fundamental characteristic of conditioned existence, *anitya*, is quite easily translated. *Nitya* is 'permanent', 'eternal', so with the addition of the negative prefix you get 'impermanent'. It is also quite easily understood – intellectually at least. It can hardly be denied that all conditioned things, all compounded things, are constantly changing. They are by definition made up of parts – that is, compounded. And that which is compounded can also be reduced to its parts again – which is what happens, of course, all the time.

The *lakṣaṇa* of *anitya* points to the fact that the whole universe from top to bottom, in all its grandeur, in all its immensity, is one vast congeries of processes of different types, taking place

at different levels – and all interrelated. Nothing ever stands still, not even for a fraction of a second. We do not see this though. When we look up we see the everlasting hills. Houses stand from generation to generation. Even our own bodies seem much the same from one year to the next. It is only when the increments of change add up to something notable, when a house is burnt down, or when we ourselves take to our deathbed, that we realize the truth of impermanence, that all conditioned things – from the minutest particles to the most massive stars – begin, continue, and then cease.

Anātman: emptiness of self

The third lakṣaṇa, anātman, encapsulates the truth that all conditioned things are devoid of a permanent, unchanging self. So what does this mean? When the Buddha denied the reality of the idea of the ātman, what was he actually denying? The most common view in the Buddha's day, the one with which he appears to have been most concerned, asserted that the ātman, or self, was individual, immaterial, conscious, unchanging, blissful, and sovereign – in the sense of exercising complete control over its own destiny. The Buddha maintained that there was no such entity, and he did so by appealing to experience. He said that if you look within, at your own mental life, you can account for everything you observe under just five headings: form, feeling, perception, volitions, and acts of consciousness. Nothing in these categories can be observed to be permanent. There is nothing sovereign or ultimately blissful amongst them. Everything in them arises in dependence on conditions.

However it is appropriate at this point to remind ourselves of Candrakīrti's warning: it is better to have a belief in the self as high as Mount Meru than to have a false view of the emptiness of the self. He is saying that it is better to believe in the Absolute Self than to believe that you are an illusion. We can have a great time as Buddhists knocking down the ultimate truths of other religions, saying 'there's no God' and 'there's no soul', but these things at least symbolize something above and beyond the material. We have to be careful never to allow a reduction of Buddhism to a form of materialism or nihilism through a misunderstanding of the emptiness of the self.

The ātman that is being denied by this doctrine is our present being conceived as something ultimate, which we are never going to transcend. What the doctrine is getting at is that beyond our present mode of existence there are other dimensions of being we can grow towards that are inconceivable to our present sense of individuality. In denying the soul the anātman doctrine is not denying something deeper. It is saying that we shut ourselves off from anything deeper by asserting, 'no, this is me.'

The law of anātman could be stated thus: the self is illusory to the extent that it claims to be absolute and expects the universe to revolve around it – which is what causes neurotic craving and hatred. It is this self which is to be regarded as illusory. It is neither helpful nor healthy to attempt to destroy the empirical self. A better model for our practice is one that involves the refining of the empirical self until it evaporates (as it were) in some higher dimension. We are on altogether safer ground if we speak not in terms of the classical anātman doctrine, but in terms of growth. We can even speak of 'something' that grows, and sort out the metaphysics of that 'something' afterwards. At the appropriate time we will appreciate that this development of consciousness involves transcending our present individuality, and becoming part of something much larger.

Insight

Seeing conditioned existence as subject to suffering, impermanence, and emptiness of self is called vipaśyanā (Sanskrit) or vipassanā (Pali), which translates into English as 'insight'. Insight

is not just intellectual understanding. It can be developed only on the basis of a controlled, purified, elevated, concentrated, integrated mind – in other words, through meditative practice. Insight is a direct intuitive perception that takes place in the depths of meditation. A preliminary intellectual understanding of these three characteristics is certainly helpful, but ultimately, insight is something that transcends the intellectual workings of the mind.

The three liberations

At this point we have to guard against a misunderstanding. The conditioned and the Unconditioned are not two different entities. It isn't like that. They are more like two poles. Some Buddhist schools even say that the Unconditioned is the conditioned itself seen in its ultimate depths, or in a new, higher dimension. The Unconditioned is reached by knowing the conditioned deeply enough, by going right to the bottom of the conditioned and coming out the other side. The conditioned and the Unconditioned are two sides of the same coin. This important perspective is brought into focus by the teaching of the three vimokṣas, or 'liberations', also sometimes called the three samādhis, or the three 'doors' through which we can approach Enlightenment.

The unbiased

The first of these liberations is apraṇihita, the 'unaiming' or 'unbiased'. It is a mental state without likes or dislikes, perfectly still, perfectly poised. It is an approach to the Unconditioned by way of not going in any particular direction. You only want to go in a particular direction when you have a desire. If there's no particular direction in which you want to go, then you stay at rest. This state can be compared to a perfectly round sphere on a perfectly flat plane. Because the plane is absolutely level the sphere doesn't roll in any direction. The 'unbiased' or 'wishless' vimokṣa is like this. It is a state of absolute equanimity in which one has no egoistic motive for doing – or not doing – anything. So this is an avenue of approach to reality, to Enlightenment.

The signless

The second liberation, the second door to the Unconditioned, is animitta, the 'signless'. Nimitta literally means a sign, but it can also mean a word or a concept; so the animitta is the approach to the Unconditioned by bypassing all words and all thoughts. When you have this experience you realize that all words, all concepts, are totally inadequate. Not that they're not very adequate, but that actually they don't mean anything at all. This is another door through which one approaches the Unconditioned, through the vimokṣa or samādhi of signlessness.

Emptiness

The third liberation is śūnyatā, voidness or emptiness. In this state you see that everything is, as it were, completely transparent. Nothing has any own-being, nothing has any self-identity. Śūnyatā is a deep mystery not because it is an abstruse theory, but because it's not a theory or a philosophy at all. Śūnyatā is the word we use to label a spiritual experience which we have no way of describing. It is a mystery because it is incommunicable. Whatever we may learn about Buddhism, and particularly about the philosophy of śūnyatā, it is always essentially a mystery to be experienced.

The lakṣaṇas as gateways to the Unconditioned

The three liberations represent different aspects of the Unconditioned. They show the Unconditioned from different points of view, which are also different ways of realizing it. You can penetrate into the Unconditioned through the unbiased, through the signless, and through voidness. But, as we have already said, you attain the Unconditioned by knowing the

conditioned in its depths. You penetrate to the three liberations through attention to the three lakṣaṇas. In this way the three lakṣaṇas themselves are doors to liberation.

If you look deeply enough at the essentially unsatisfactory nature of conditioned existence, then you will realize the Unconditioned as being without bias. You lose interest in the goals and aims of conditioned existence. You are quite still and poised, without inclination towards this or that, without any desire. Hence when you go into the conditioned through the aspect of suffering, you go into the Unconditioned through the aspect of the unbiased.

Alternatively, when you concentrate on the conditioned as being impermanent, transitory, without fixed identity, then going to the bottom of that – and coming out the other side – you realize the Unconditioned as the signless. You realize the emptiness of all concepts, you transcend all thought; you realize, if you like, ‘the eternal’ – though not the eternal that continues through time, but the eternal which transcends time.

And thirdly, if you concentrate on the conditioned as devoid of self, devoid of individuality, devoid of I, devoid of you, devoid of me, devoid of mine, then you approach the Unconditioned as śūnyatā, as the voidness.

The three lakṣaṇas, the three characteristics of conditioned existence, are of central importance in the Buddhist spiritual life. According to the Buddha, we don’t really see conditioned existence until we see it in these terms. If we see anything else, that’s just an illusion, a projection. And once we start seeing the conditioned as essentially unsatisfactory, impermanent, and empty of self, then we begin to get a glimpse of the Unconditioned – a glimpse that is our essential guide on the Buddhist path.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What does Sangharakshita describe as “an unconfined and inapprehensible plenitude”? What do these words mean?
2. Think of some more examples, preferably from your own experience, of Conze’s first three types of concealed suffering: a) when a pleasure causes suffering to other beings; b) where a pleasure is tinged with anxiety because it may end or be taken away; c) when a pleasure makes us attached to something that also causes us suffering.
3. *“Whatever conditioned things you may enjoy, there is always a lack, a void, which only the Unconditioned can fill.”*
Do you agree?
4. Do you think that facing the fact that life contains an inescapable element of suffering makes us happier or more unhappy? Why? Do you think that recognising that conditioned things can’t bring us real satisfaction makes us happier or more unhappy? Why?
5. Is there a positive side to impermanence? What would the world be like if everything was permanent and unchanging?

6. Is there a positive side to anātman, emptiness of self nature? What might this idea imply for the way we live and act?
7. If you experienced the 'unbiased' liberation (sometimes called the 'wishless'), would you ever do anything? Why didn't the Buddha just sit still under a tree after his enlightenment?

Introduction

During the past few sessions we have explored the Buddhist vision of the conditionality of all phenomena, and in the last session Sangharakshita introduced the idea of a mysterious Unconditioned, or Nirvāṇa. We have also seen that conditionality can work in two ways – it can be reactive or creative.

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

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

The Arising of the Bodhicitta

Text from A Guide to the Buddhist Path, Sangharakshita, pp186-193 in the revised edition, with an additional passage from Ritual and Devotion in Buddhism, Sangharakshita, pp106-108.

The Bodhisattva and the Bodhicitta

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

Let us go back for a moment to the original Sanskrit term, which is bodhicitta-utpada. Bodhi means ‘spiritual Enlightenment’ or ‘spiritual Awakening’ and it consists in the seeing of Reality face to face. Citta means ‘mind’, ‘thought’, ‘consciousness’, or ‘heart’. Utpada means simply ‘arising’ or, more poetically, ‘awakening’.

The nature of the Bodhicitta

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

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

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

The Five Skandhas of conditioned existence

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

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

“Something transcendental”

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

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

An illustration

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

Something transpersonal

Not only is the Bodhicitta transcendental, but the Bodhicitta is not individual. This is another point that Nāgārjuna makes. We speak of the Bodhicitta as arising in this person or that person, and one might therefore think that there are a number of Bodhicittas arising in different people, making them all Bodhisattvas. In fact, it isn't so at all. The Bodhicitta is not anybody's individually, so there is no plurality of Bodhicittas arising in different people. Your thought of Enlightenment is your thought of Enlightenment, my thought of Enlightenment is mine; there are many thoughts. But your Bodhicitta is my Bodhicitta, and my Bodhicitta is your Bodhicitta; there is only one Bodhicitta.

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

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

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

The Bodhicitta, the spiritual community, and helping others

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

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

How the Bodhicitta arises

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

The trend of withdrawal and renunciation

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

The trend of involvement

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

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

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

Breaking through the conflict

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

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

What one has to do is not allow the tension between these two trends to relax. If one does that, then in a sense one is lost. Even though they are contradictory, one has to pursue both simultaneously. One has to get out and stay in, see the faults of conditioned existence while at the same time feeling the sufferings of sentient beings, develop both Wisdom and Compassion. As one pursues both of these trends simultaneously, the tension builds up and up (it is, of course, not a psychological tension but a spiritual tension). It is built up until a point is reached when one can't go any further. When one reaches that point, then something happens. We might describe it as an explosion. As the result of the tension generated by following these two contradictory trends simultaneously, there occurs a breakthrough into a higher dimension of

spiritual consciousness, where the two trends of withdrawal and involvement are no longer two, not because they have been artificially amalgamated into one, but because the plane on which they were seen as two different things has been transcended.

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



Questions for reflection and discussion

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

1.5

Buddhism and Triratna, Ritual and Devotion



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Introduction to *Part 5* of the Course

When we become mitras we assert that the Triratna Buddhist Community is the context in which we want to practice the Dharma, at least for the foreseeable future. In the first three sessions of *Part 5* of the course we will explore what this means, by looking at how Triratna fits in to the wider context of Buddhist history and Buddhist schools, by looking at the style of practice within Triratna – and why it is what it is – and by looking at some of the distinctive features of Triratna that distinguish it from other Buddhist schools you might come across.

The last four sessions of *Part 5* focus on ritual and devotional practice. We will look at the purpose of ritual, and we will explore the main devotional practices used in Triratna in some detail.

In this first session of *Part 5* we will give a brief history of the different schools and styles of Buddhism, to help us to see the Triratna Buddhist Community in its broader context.

The Diversity of Buddhism

Text purpose-written by Vadanya.

Buddhism is an ancient tradition, and even before its recent spread to the West it had taken root over an enormous tract of the Earth's surface, from Iran in the West to Japan in the East, from the cold dry plains of Mongolia in the North to the lush tropical Island of Java – on a similar latitude to North Australia – in the South. As a result Buddhism now exists in a number of forms, each of which has been heavily influenced by the particular culture in which it developed. On the surface these schools can look completely different, and even seem to be offering different paths. This can be confusing for the Westerner who wants to get an overview of Buddhism, rather than simply accepting one of these schools at face value as 'real' Buddhism. In this session we will try to give the basics of such an overview, by briefly summarising the history of Buddhism, and pointing out where some of the main schools present in the West fit in.

'Original' Buddhism

The Buddha was born near the present-day India/Nepal border, probably some time between about 560 and 480 BCE. He died 80 years later. After his death his teachings were passed on both as an oral tradition, and as a tradition of example and practice. Nothing seems to have been written down until at least three hundred years after the Buddha's death, by which time different approaches to practice had already developed, so we cannot be completely sure what 'original Buddhism' looked like.

However, we can probably be fairly sure about a few things. We can be fairly sure that the Buddha recommended a radical withdrawal from ‘worldly’ concerns and giving up all possessions and family ties as the most useful lifestyle for achieving spiritual liberation. Hence many of the Buddha’s early disciples lived as homeless beggars, sleeping and meditating under trees, and eating whatever they were given. We can also be sure that the Buddha taught other styles of practice to householders whose responsibilities did not allow them to live this way, and the early scriptures mention that some of these ‘lay’ disciples did in fact gain Insight.

We can be fairly sure, from the Buddha’s example, from the example of his most advanced disciples, and from the oldest parts of the oldest records, that the Buddha taught that the spiritual life should be lived – in the words he used to exhort his followers – “for the welfare of the many”. In other words he taught that the spiritual life is not just about looking for individual liberation, it is also about helping the spiritual evolution of the human race. So he and his early disciples saw spreading the Dharma and creating Sangha as an integral part of their practice. We can also be sure that he taught that we need to work hard on our own liberation if we want to be of use to others – until we stop being part of the problem we cannot be part of the solution. In the earliest scriptures he seems to have recommended a range of practices to help bring this liberation about, suited to the needs and temperament of the individual or group he was talking to.

As a minimum baseline he recommended a harmless, generous, upright ethical life. He advised people to develop a warm loving heart for other beings. He recommended spiritual friendship as the essential foundation for spiritual growth. He taught that developing clear mindfulness of our body, our thoughts, and our feelings was an indispensable part of spiritual growth. He taught that we need to learn to focus our mind in meditation to begin to see things as they really are. Triratna Buddhists would probably recognise many of the practices taught in the early Sangha – for example we would probably recognise the Five Precepts, the Mindfulness of Breathing and the Mettā Bhāvanā.

The Early Sangha

During the Buddha’s lifetime and for many years after his death the hard core of his followers lived as ‘forest renunciates’, sleeping for most of the year in the open air, meditating under trees, begging for food, and renouncing all but the very simplest possessions. During the monsoon period these forest renunciates would settle down for the rainy season retreat, gathering in huts or shelters to meditate and study the Dharma together. As time passed more and more renunciates opted to prolong this relatively comfortable settled lifestyle, until many were living all year round in buildings donated by wealthy lay disciples, perhaps near the palaces of generous patrons, where food, robes and medicine were easy to come by. In this way the settled monastic lifestyle – which is such a prominent feature of many schools of Buddhism today – gradually developed, almost certainly long after the death of the Buddha.

In this way three strands developed in the early Sangha. There were the forest renunciates – uncompromising, loosely organised, maybe a little wild, a little magical. Then there were the settled monastics – needing a higher degree of organisation, more able to spread the Dharma to the wider community, but also more dependent on the approval of wealthy donors, and more in danger of becoming comfortable and respectable, and so losing their spiritual edge. And finally there were the ‘laypeople’, who combined spiritual practice with the time-consuming business of raising a family and earning a livelihood. All three were necessary parts of a joint enterprise dedicated to raising the spiritual level of the human race.

‘Hīnayāna’ and Mahāyāna

During the early centuries of the Common Era a new movement emerged within Indian Buddhism, calling itself the Mahāyāna – the ‘Great Vehicle’, or ‘Great Way.’ The origins of the Mahāyāna are complex and obscure, but by the time the great Mahāyāna sūtras such as the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa and the White Lotus Sūtra were written down (these were first translated into Chinese in the second and third centuries CE respectively, and therefore existed in India earlier than this) it had clearly emerged as a self-conscious movement, critical of what its followers felt was a degeneration in the more traditional schools, which they called the Hīnayāna, the ‘Lesser Vehicle’. Most of the schools of Buddhism we see in the world today belong to the Mahāyāna or its offshoot, the Vajrayāna. The only exception is the Theravāda school of South-east Asia.

Mahāyāna Sūtras such as the White Lotus and the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa criticised the followers of the so-called Hīnayāna for seeing the spiritual life as a self-centred quest for individual salvation, rather than as contributing to the overall spiritual evolution of all beings. They caricatured what they saw as a small-minded obsession with monastic rules. And they portrayed the so-called Hīnayānists as having become so attached to particular details of practice that they had lost sight of the overall purpose these practices were meant to serve – they were mistaking the means for the end.

The Bodhisattva Ideal

These Mahāyāna sūtras re-emphasised the importance of cultivating a warm compassionate attitude towards other living beings. They put a more explicit stress on selfless action for others. And they presented a new version of the Buddhist spiritual ideal, which they distinguished from the older ideal of the Arhat or Arahant – literally ‘Worthy One’ – which in the minds of some people had come to imply a cold, negative detachment. The spiritual ideal for Mahāyāna Buddhism is not someone who is liberated from this world and lives in a state of bliss, it is someone who has seen beyond the world as we know it, but still chooses to work in the world and for the good of the world, out of a deep sense of solidarity with other living beings.

This spiritual ideal was called, in Sanskrit, the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva Ideal served a dual purpose for Mahāyāna Buddhists, because it both stressed the selfless, compassionate aspect of Enlightenment, which they felt that the so-called ‘Hīnayāna’ Buddhists had lost sight of, and because it was a goal that could be aimed for by all Buddhists, regardless of whether or not they lived a monastic lifestyle, so that it made the possibility of a committed spiritual life available to a wider range of people.

Cosmic Vision

Many Mahāyāna sūtras portray the Buddha as an archetype of Enlightenment that can be contacted in meditation – or even as a force in the universe – rather than as a limited historical being. Some extend this archetypal approach to include a range of different Buddha and Bodhisattva figures associated with different aspects of the Enlightened Mind. Some present us with a vast vision of a magical, multidimensional universe in which we can align ourselves with cosmic forces working for the Enlightenment of all beings. Such sūtras can read like grand spiritual science fiction – a far cry from the usually quite down-to-earth suttas of the Pāli Canon.

Skilful Means

Mahāyāna sūtras such as the White Lotus Sūtra make a point of telling us that all the teachings and practices of Buddhism are ‘skilful means’, ways to help people of different types and

spiritual levels develop towards an Enlightenment which at the moment they could not understand or imagine. Presumably because they saw all teachings as skilful means, Mahāyāna Buddhists often seem to have seen nothing wrong with developing new teachings and practices to suit different temperaments, lifestyles, and cultures, as long as they felt these were within the spirit if not the letter of the Buddha's teaching. This allowed them to be far more flexible in adapting to changed historical circumstances and new cultures, and it allowed them to evolve forms of practice suited to a much wider range of people.

This innovative tendency in Mahāyāna Buddhism is largely responsible for the bewildering array of different schools, philosophies, and practices we see in Buddhism today. According to our temperament we might see this diversity as either a good or a bad thing, but it is probably both. On the one hand Mahāyāna Buddhism has probably helped far more people to grow towards Enlightenment than would have been possible if it had kept strictly to the practices, customs and attitudes characteristic of the so-called Hīnayāna. On the other hand, some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism hardly seem to be Buddhism at all, and their practices no longer have much in common with those taught by the historical Buddha.

The Vajrayāna

From roughly 500CE onwards a third major branch of Buddhism emerged out of the Mahāyāna in India. This was the Vajrayāna, the „Diamond Vehicle“, sometimes called Tantric Buddhism. The Vajrayāna uses a range of symbols and rites to contact and engage the full subconscious energies of the individual. Tantric Buddhism is an “esoteric” tradition, in the sense that traditionally it depends on direct initiation and a close teacher-disciple relationship with a guru.

In Tibetan Buddhism it was, in the past at least, always stressed that the Vajrayāna is an advanced form of practice, for those who have already achieved a high degree of renunciation and developed a compassionate, altruistic motivation for their practice. For others it was said that the methods of the Vajrayāna would be useless, or even dangerous. In practice, Western followers of tantra are often in danger of skipping profound and important stages of the spiritual path in order to move on to the supposedly ‘powerful’ visualisation and ritual practices.

The literature of the Vajrayāna is enormous. Most of it consists of instructions for elaborate rituals and meditations. This vast array of different Tantric practices seems to have grown up in an organic, piecemeal manner, but in Tibet they were later systematised into different “classes” of Tantra, that were theoretically seen as representing progressively more and more advanced stages of practice through which the disciple should pass.

Apart from Tibetan Buddhism, which has a very strong element of Vajrayāna, the main Tantric school still surviving is the Shingon school of Japan.

Decline and Spread

By about 1300CE Buddhism had virtually died out in the land of its birth, partly due to a series of Moslem invasions in which the monasteries and universities were destroyed, and many monks were massacred. But long before Buddhism vanished from India it had already spread in all directions far beyond the Indian subcontinent. It is the schools that survived outside India that now make up the diverse tradition that we call Buddhism.

The Theravāda

The Theravādin school of South-east Asia – the only remaining school that traces itself back to the Sthaviras, or ‘elders’ – is the dominant tradition in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, and Laos. The image of the calm, stately, saffron robed Theravādin monk is an important part of many people’s idea of Buddhism.

The Theravādins largely base their teachings on the Pāli Canon, a set of scriptures in the Pāli language which were written down some time around the first century BCE. By this time these teachings had already been passed down as an oral tradition for several hundred years, and no doubt distorted in many ways. Nevertheless parts of the Pāli Canon are still probably as close as we can get to the actual words of the historical Buddha. Some knowledge of the most important suttas (or discourses) of the Pāli Canon is essential for anyone who wants to have an overview of the Buddhist tradition.

The Theravāda is a conservative tradition – the name Theravāda means “way of the elders”. Theravādin Buddhists place great emphasis on the historical authenticity of their teachings. They tend to reject the scriptures of the Mahāyāna as not being based on the words of the historical Buddha, and to frown on any innovations. Theravāda Buddhism puts a heavy emphasis on the monastic life – in the Theravāda tradition the word Sangha refers only to monastics.

For those able to lead the monastic life, the Theravāda offers a clear, rational, down-to-earth path of practice, with a strong emphasis on mindfulness, renunciation, detachment from worldly concerns, and insight into the transient and unsatisfactory nature of all worldly pleasures. Many of the basic practices and teachings used in Triratna derive primarily from the Theravādin tradition – which is not surprising, because Sangharakshita, the founder of the movement, was himself a Theravādin monk for many years.

The Theravādin tradition has however been criticised by Sangharakshita and other writers for emphasising strict adherence to the letter of the teachings at the expense of the spirit behind Buddha’s message, for seeing the minor rules of monasticism as ends in themselves, and for downplaying the importance of the warm, positive emotions in the spiritual life, and instead seeing the goal as a form of cold, analytical insight. It has been pointed out that the Buddha in the Pāli Canon frequently stressed the importance of mettā, compassion, and sympathetic joy, but that the Theravādin approach can ignore these aspects of their own canon, or downplay them as being relevant only to the ‘lower’ path of the layperson.

Mahāyāna Schools: Cha’an and Zen

Cha’an or Zen Buddhism first emerged as a separate school in China, and it may owe its original popularity to a desire to get back to basics, at a time when some forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism were indulging in wordy metaphysical speculation or unrealistic flights of fancy about the spiritual life. Cha’an in Chinese and Zen in Japanese are corruptions of the Sanskrit word dhyāna, meaning meditation or meditative states. Hence Zen Buddhism means a Buddhism that emphasises the importance of meditation.

In its traditional form Cha’an/Zen combined long hours of meditation with a challenging monastic regime of daily work, no comforts, no personal space, very basic food, and a fierce no-nonsense style of teaching. Cha’an and Zen practice also involves chanting, ritual, devotional practice, and Dharma talks. Taken together this package adds up to a full frontal assault on the

ego's attempt to live according to its likes and dislikes, forcing the practitioner to let go of his self-obsession – or else to be very unhappy.

Two distinct forms of Zen Buddhism evolved, called in Japan 'Rinzai' and 'Soto'. In Rinzai Zen the practitioner meditates on insoluble riddles, called koans, to generate a prolonged and intense sense of questioning, which eventually might lead to a breakthrough into insight. Some of these koans have become famous in Western Buddhist circles – such as, what is the sound of one hand clapping?

Soto Zen emphasises what is usually described as a formless 'Just Sitting' meditation. However the new meditator will usually start off by counting the breath, and even experienced Zen meditators use the breath and the body to anchor the practise in a direct experience of physical reality; so the supposedly formless meditation of Soto Zen actually has much in common with the way an Triratna practitioner might use the Mindfulness of Breathing while on a meditation retreat, when a strict use of the four stages would no longer be necessary.

Japanese Zen was the first Mahāyāna school to become popular in the West. Many Westerners were impressed by the art and poetry inspired by the Zen tradition, which can exude the deep calm of meditation, and the deep appreciation of natural beauty this opens up. In the enthusiasm for Zen in the 1960's and afterwards, Western intellectuals who would never have thought of submitting themselves to the rigorous discipline of a Zen monastery felt moved to write books about Zen, and an idea of Zen grew up that was based more on projection than fact. But times have moved on, and as the popular enthusiasm for Zen has waned, the number of practising Zen Buddhists in the West has increased. Japanese Zen has now taken its place as one of several Asian forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism present in the West.

Pure Land Schools

Like Zen, Pure Land Buddhism seems to have arisen as a separate approach in China, and then reached its full flowering in Japan, where it is by far the most popular form of Buddhism. Pure Land Buddhism seems to have started by stressing devotion to, mindfulness of, and meditation on, one of the archetypal Buddha's. As such it only differed in emphasis from other forms of Mahāyāna practice, which often include such practices. However the focus of aspiration in Pure Land Buddhism became rebirth in the 'Pure Land' of one or another of the Buddhas – most commonly Amitābha. These Pure Lands were sometimes taken quite literally, as heaven-like realms in which we could be reborn. However many practitioners had a more sophisticated understanding of the Pure Land, seeing it as a metaphor for the Enlightened state, or even as a metaphor for the wonderful reality behind our present experience, which is normally hidden from us by our mental obscurations.

Pure Land Buddhism emphasises faith as the main driving force behind our spiritual progress. This emphasis on faith reached its most extreme form in the 'True Pure Land' school of Japan. In this school disciples are encouraged to completely entrust ourselves to Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, in the certain knowledge that they are already 'grasped never to be released' by the compassion of the Absolute. The only formal practice in this school is to chant 'Homage to Amida Buddha' – 'namu amida butsu' in Japanese – not as a way of staying mindful of the Buddha or invoking his qualities, but simply as an expression of our gratitude for his grace, and for the fact that we are already destined for Enlightenment.

Pure Land Buddhism has not yet achieved much popularity in the West, except among expatriate Asians. For most of us, faith is perhaps not our strong point, and the more

intellectually minded will be tempted to dismiss a faith-based approach out of hand. However this might be a mistake. Sangharakshita has pointed out that the ‘complete entrusting’ of the successful ‘True Pure Land’ practitioner is equivalent to pure egolessness, and that such faith can be a form of wisdom. At its best, Pure Land doctrine is subtle and spiritually sophisticated.

Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren Buddhism is the creation of the thirteenth century CE Japanese teacher Nichiren, and has become one of the most widespread forms of Buddhism in the West. Like some other forms of Japanese Buddhism it offers a highly simplified style of practice, which may be part of its appeal. Its main practice is the devotional recitation of the phrase ‘Homage to the Lotus Sūtra.’ Nichiren revered the White Lotus Sūtra as the ultimate truth of Buddhism, and in this school the text is revered as though it were the Truth itself. Nichiren Buddhism has been criticised because it can seem to have little ethical content, and practitioners may be encouraged to chant as a form of prayer even for quite worldly material ends – caricatured as ‘chanting for a Porsche’. Perhaps this is an example of Mahāyāna ‘skilful means’, but it has led some writers to ask whether Nichiren Buddhism is in fact Buddhism at all.

Tibetan Buddhism

Tibetan Buddhism is a rich mixture of classical Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna, along with elements of native shamanism. At its best it preserves in the purest form still available: the style of Mahāyāna Buddhism practised in India before the great monastic universities were destroyed by the Muslim invasions. At its worst it degenerates into superstition and black magic. Tibetan Buddhism preserves a huge range of teachings and practices evolved over 1500 years in India, and as a result it is so rich, diverse, and even confused, that it is impossible to sum it up sensibly in a few paragraphs.

Many Tibetan lamas describe their Buddhism as including all three ‘Yānas’, the so-called Hīnayāna, the Mahāyāna, and the Vajrayāna, in a progressive sequence of spiritual development. According to this ideal scheme the disciple first of all goes for refuge to the Three Jewels, then develops disillusionment with saṃsāra and practices renunciation – equated with the goal of the ‘Hīnayāna’. The disciple then develops a compassionate attitude towards all beings, experiences the arising of the Bodhicitta, and develops an experience of śūnyatā, or ‘emptiness’ – together seen as encompassing the Mahāyāna. On the basis of refuge, renunciation, Bodhicitta, and an experience of śūnyatā, the disciple is then said to begin Vajrayāna practice under the guidance of a guru, using visualisations and mantras to connect with archetypal forms. The disciple would then work their way up through a progressive sequence of supposedly more and more advanced forms of tantric practice – the Nyingma school lists seven, making a total of nine ‘yānas’ the disciple must traverse.

The problem with this ideal scheme is that in practice the earlier stages are usually skimmed over, although they represent very profound spiritual achievements. (One might ask why, if the Bodhicitta has arisen and if we have a direct experience of śūnyatā – the naked reality behind all phenomena – we would bother to then start working with mantras and visualisation practice.) In fact of course this ideal scheme is not so much a realistic path as an attempt to make sense of all the different historical developments in Buddhism that the Tibetans inherited, by seeing them as progressively more and more advanced stages of practice.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Which would you most like to be, a forest renunciant, a settled monastic, or a lay practitioner? What might be the strengths and dangers of each lifestyle?
2. Temperamentally, which 'yāna' appeals to you most? Which school or style of Buddhism attracts you most – and least?
3. How many different styles of Buddhism have you encountered in your reading? Have you had any difficulty in seeing how the different approaches fit together?
4. Do you have any direct experience of traditional Asian styles of Buddhism? If so, tell the group about it.
5. What might be the dangers of thinking that all teachings are 'skilful means'? What might be the dangers of seeing a teaching as absolute truth?
6. Do you think that the three 'yānas' represent progressively more advanced stages of practice? Why, or why not?

Introduction

In the last session we explored the diversity of the Buddhist tradition, especially the three ‘yānas’ – the ‘ways’ or ‘vehicles’ into which it has become divided. In this session we will look at the unity behind these different manifestations of the Dharma. In particular we will explore the vision of the unity of Buddhism that has motivated Sangharakshita – the founder of Triratna – to set up a new, non-sectarian Buddhist movement for the modern world.

The Unity of Buddhism

Text condensed from Sangharakshita, a New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition, Subhuti, Chapter 2. All quotes from Sangharakshita unless otherwise specified.

Sangharakshita and the unity of Buddhism

Sangharakshita’s first published work on Buddhism, written at the age of eighteen, was an article on ‘The Unity of Buddhism’, published in June 1944 in the journal of the London Buddhist Society (now the Middle Way.) An understanding of this unity might seem fundamental, but it has not always been shared by all Buddhists. This is not surprising. In the elaboration of the Buddha’s original teaching by the different schools, quite diverse, even contrary, teachings and practices arose. Those divergences were then compounded by transmission through the various cultures of Asia. It has not been easy to see all Buddhism’s many manifestations as equally striving for the same transcendental goal. Buddhists have therefore often identified the Dharma with their own particular brand.

From the very outset of his career as a Buddhist, Sangharakshita did not identify with any particular school or conceive of Buddhism in terms of any one of its many cultural forms. This perspective gave him the freedom of the entire Buddhist tradition. He could draw sustenance and inspiration from whatever source was available to him, according to his unfolding spiritual needs.

Until he settled in Kalimpong almost all the Buddhists he met were Theravādins. When he came to seek ordination, without really considering the matter, it was to the Theravada that he looked. For him, ordination represented complete dedication to the Buddhist path, and acceptance into the Buddhist community as a whole. However from his arrival in the East, he began to form reservations about the Theravada School. He had a great love and respect for the Pāli Canon, but he saw that modern Theravādins, with a few notable exceptions, showed little spiritual vitality. Buddhism in Sri Lanka ‘seemed dead, or at least asleep’.

In Kalimpong, Sangharakshita wore the yellow robe and was in friendly contact with many Theravādin monks from various countries. He was forced, however, to look to other sources for his spiritual inspiration. His first years on his own, ‘working for the good of Buddhism’, were

exceptionally difficult. He derived no support from the order to which he belonged. His guidance and support were to come not from any earthly agency but from that sublime ideal of the Bodhisattva, which is the very heart of Mahāyāna Buddhism. From the time of discovering that he was a Buddhist this ideal had inspired him. It came now to have a deeper and more powerful influence on him in his present spiritual isolation. In 1962 he took from Dharo Rimpoché the sixty-four Bodhisattva vows that constitute the Bodhisattva ordination. This Gelugpa 'incarnate lama' had become his close friend and teacher, and Sangharakshita had come to revere him as a living Bodhisattva.

During his stay in Kalimpong Sangharakshita could meet many Tibetan teachers and study Tibetan Buddhism at first hand. He was strongly attracted to its rich symbolic world. From 1956 onwards he received several Tantric initiations from prominent Tibetan lamas and practised Vajrayāna meditation, as well as studying the Vajrayāna extensively. He also gained considerable guidance from a Chinese hermit living in Kalimpong who was well versed in Ch'an (Chinese Zen), thus giving him firsthand knowledge of that important tradition.

On his return to England in 1964 Sangharakshita did what he could to promote an understanding of the entire tradition, giving series of talks on Tibetan Buddhism and on Zen. However, he antagonised some of the trustees of the Hampstead Buddhist Vihāra, which was his base. They tended to support a particularly narrow and puritanical brand of Theravada Buddhism. He taught from the entire Buddhist tradition and not exclusively from the Theravada. He banned a form of meditation, dear to a leading trustee, when he saw that it was causing some people severe mental disturbance. He did not keep austere aloof, but valued friendship and intimacy. He went to the theatre and the opera a few times. He did not keep his hair completely shaved, but let it grow an inch or two in the fashion of Tibetan monks. He did not always wear his robes! His failure to operate within the narrow confines of what some of the trustees thought a Theravada monk should teach and do led to his being excluded from the Vihāra in 1967.

In many ways his exclusion was a relief: he was free to start afresh. Now a new movement could be started that was simply Buddhist, based on the fundamental principles of the Dharma and open to the entire Buddhist tradition. In this new phase of his work, the most important of his life, Sangharakshita no longer had to follow outworn cultural patterns. The movement he set out to create would be the direct expression of his understanding of Buddhism's essential principles. One of the most important of those principles is the unity of Buddhism.

How to define 'Dharma'

Buddhism is founded on the Buddha's experience of Enlightenment, his direct understanding of the true nature of things. But however united all schools may be in their ultimate source and goal, their doctrines and methods vary considerably. This poses an enormous problem. How are we to decide which are genuinely Buddhist and which are not? Sangharakshita looks to the Buddha's own words for a resolution of this problem. The Dharma is defined by the Buddha in the earliest scriptures in purely pragmatic terms.

Whatever teachings conduce ... to detachment not to bondage, to frugality not to covetousness ... to contentment not to discontent ... to energy not to sluggishness, to delight in good not delight in evil ... This is the Dharma ... This is the Master's Message.

The Dharma is a means to an end. What determines whether a school or teaching is truly Buddhist is not that it contains some particular set of words, practices, customs, or institutions, but that it helps individuals to move towards Enlightenment.

How to understand the diversity?

Although we may know the general criterion by which to test whether a teaching is truly Buddhist, it is not so easy in practice to untangle the immense and sometimes conflicting diversity of Buddhist schools. Modern Buddhists are faced with the whole range of Buddhist traditions. How are they to evaluate it? How are they to use it?

In this respect they receive little help from Buddhists of the past. The more sectarian among both ancient and modern Buddhists have believed that all schools but their own are deviations from the Buddha's teaching. The more sophisticated – and charitable – approach has been to see all known schools as deriving directly from the Buddha himself. Each school, according to these systems, is seen as enshrining either a particular phase in the Buddha's teaching or else his response to people at a particular level of development. This approach is exemplified by early Chinese Buddhists, who were confronted with the problem of reconciling diverse teachings from the entire existing range of Indian Buddhism. They therefore classified the stages of the path according to the order in which they thought the Buddha had revealed the various scriptures. The Tibetans too inherited the vast range of Indian Buddhist teachings. They regarded the Buddha as having taught the three great phases of Indian Buddhism – Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna – to beings of inferior, middling, and superior capacity respectively. The Chinese and the Tibetan perspectives really amount to the same: that the different traditions all embody different aspects of the Buddha's actual, historical teaching, the higher teachings being those revealed to disciples at the highest stages of the spiritual path.

Modern scholarship has led Sangharakshita to a new perspective on the Buddhist tradition. He accepts that many teachings attributed to the Buddha were probably not actually taught by him. As each school's doctrine developed over the centuries, new creations were fathered on the Buddha, to give them the authority of his name. Nonetheless, the fact that these doctrines were probably not taught by the Buddha does not lessen their possible value as means to Enlightenment – by the Buddha's own criterion, they may be 'the Master's Message'.

'Basic Buddhism' and the evolution of the yānas

Nonetheless there is found in the scriptures of all schools, and therefore pre-dating their division from each other, a core of common material. This common core contains what Sangharakshita calls 'Basic Buddhism': all the classic formulae of Buddhist doctrine such as conditioned co-production, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Three Characteristics. These are the basic teachings of Buddhism, contained in the oldest texts of all schools and accepted by all Buddhists.

Basic Buddhism is as near as we can get to the original teaching of the Buddha. However, even within the earliest scriptures some evolution can be discerned. Textual analysis reveals that some portions are earlier than others, and behind them we can sense what Sangharakshita has called 'pre-Buddhist Buddhism': Buddhism, in the period immediately following the Buddha's Enlightenment, before he had developed the doctrines and institutions later identified as Buddhism. Behind these texts we catch a glimpse of the Buddha not as a polished churchman giving scholarly talks, but more like a wild shaman in the vast and lonely jungle, as yet with few words to convey his new and vital message.

However, gradually the Buddha did develop the teachings of Basic Buddhism; he gradually evolved a body of teachings and a spiritual community that directly expressed his Enlightened experience. This is Buddhism at its most unified and harmonious. Whatever their temperaments or personal inclinations, under the Buddha's influence all his disciples felt

themselves to be members of a single spiritual community, following a single path to a single goal. Sangharakshita calls this period of harmony 'Archaic Buddhism', which lasted for about 100 years.

During this era of the Buddha's immediate personal influence, elements of all the later developments in Buddhism are discernible. Out of tendencies present in the Buddha's own teachings gradually emerged new teachings and practices. This is, argues Sangharakshita, a natural and healthy phenomenon. Spiritual life is rich and multifaceted and it is impossible to exhaust every dimension and aspect of it. Different disciples and groups of disciples developed different tendencies latent in the original teaching, elaborating them more fully and working out their implications.

Hence diversity developed to respond to the spiritual needs of different people. Buddhism was also spreading into new geographical areas, and conditions were constantly changing. The Dharma had to be communicated appropriately in new cultural and historical circumstances, for it is not a static set of words, fixed for all time; it is a living communication between the Enlightened and the unenlightened that must constantly be renewed and related to the people to whom it is directed, as the Buddha clearly saw.

But in elaborating particular aspects of the Dharma, a sense of the integrity of the teachings would often be lost and a one-sidedness would develop. Those following the different trends of the original teachings began to diverge more and more from one another, gradually hardening into distinct schools. As time went on, there were increasing debates and controversies between the different schools.

The Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna were the three main trends in the unfoldment of the latent tendencies within Archaic Buddhism, each of which enjoyed a period of roughly 500 years of dominance. The Hīnayāna unfolded the ethical dimension of the Buddha's teaching through its emphasis on monastic life. The Mahāyāna, building on traditions going back to the Buddha, brought out the devotional side of spiritual life, through meditation on the archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. On the doctrinal side, it elaborated the metaphysical implications of the Dharma. Finally, the Vajrayāna took the imaginative and mythic aspects of the original teaching and, based on Mahāyāna metaphysics, developed a language of ritual and symbol.

The process of unfoldment was not, of course, as tidy and self-conscious as this description suggests. All the tendencies were present from the beginning. One can't separate the yānas completely. Even though one was dominant, the others were present. The spirit of those latent tendencies within the original teaching was kept alive among groups of disciples and their successors. Under particular circumstances, the tendencies were gradually made explicit in texts, doctrines, and practices, to which later the terms 'Mahāyāna' or 'Vajrayāna' would be applied. But these were not, in the early stages of their evolution, seen as completely separate.

Buddhism had died out in India by the fourteenth century. However, it had, by then, been dispersed throughout Asia. The forms of Buddhism that have survived to the present are based on one or more aspects of Indian Buddhism, further developed within their new setting. There are three major geographical groupings of these surviving historical forms. These are: South-east Asian Buddhism, which is found in Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, and which belongs to the Hīnayāna; Sino-Japanese Buddhism, which exists in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and belongs to the combined Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, with the latter predominating, especially in Japan; and Tibetan Buddhism, which spread into Mongolia, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Ladakh, and combines Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna.

The yānas as polemical terms

The historical usage of the term yāna is value-neutral. It merely identifies three trends unfolding in Buddhist history. However the yānas may also be used as value judgements. Sangharakshita considers that this polemical usage of the yānas must be carefully separated from the historical. Not that there was not some truth in the historical Mahāyāna's criticisms of the historical Hīnayāna: he argues that at the time that the Mahāyāna was arising, the Hīnayāna schools had become conservative, literal-minded, scholastic, negative in their conception of nirvana and the Way, over-attached to the merely formal aspects of monasticism, and spiritually individualistic in the sense of being unconcerned with the spiritual welfare of others. However, these are not characteristics of the Hīnayāna as such but of Hīnayāna schools at a particular stage of development – or perhaps decay. The same criticisms can also be levelled at various Mahāyānists or Vajrayānists in certain periods of their history.

For instance, the Mahāyāna and the Vajrayāna developed a scholasticism of their own, and some of the modern books on Vajrayāna from Tibetan sources are highly scholastic, and do not give a feeling for the spirit of the Vajrayāna. Similarly, individual Theravādins, while belonging to a Hīnayāna school, may have a large altruistic element in their practice, while individual practitioners in a Mahāyāna school may practice mainly for individual liberation.

The yānas as 'crystallisations' of the Dharma

To see the real significance of the succession of the different yānas we need to appreciate the distinction between the Dharma and Buddhism:

What tends to happen is that the Dharma as a purely spiritual phenomenon crystallises... into a system of methods and teachings which we call 'Buddhism'.

This crystallisation is, of course, essential if the Dharma is to be communicated to others. The process of crystallisation can be seen in three distinct phases in the evolution of each Buddhist school. First there is the direct and spontaneous affirmation of the Dharma. Then there is a phase of 'tidying up' through philosophical systematisation. Finally, scholasticism ensues. Around the teachings also accumulate patterns of behaviour, institutions, artistic expressions – eventually a whole culture. The fact that Buddhism has crystallised in one way – adequate for a certain time and for certain people – tends to prevent a different kind of crystallisation in the future. It is as though the options are limited by the original crystallisation. Buddhism eventually gets so weighed down by its cultural forms that even the most gifted teachers cannot make headway on behalf of the Dharma against what passes as Buddhism. Eventually the existing crystallisation must be shattered and a new and more spiritually dynamic pattern established.

The yānas as stages of the spiritual path

The usage of the yāna model that sees the yānas as stages of the spiritual path is the one that presents most problems for readers of Sangharakshita's writings. His later thought here is definitely at odds with his earlier. Once he had encountered Tibetan triyāna [three-yāna] Buddhism he adopted its perspective. It was, after all, far more inclusive than the Theravādin perception of all other schools as degenerate. Tibetan Buddhism sees the three yānas as representing the three principal stages of the spiritual path. All three phases of the historical development of Indian Buddhism were made sense of in these terms. Sangharakshita characterises the yānas from this perspective as follows:

One could say that the keynote of the Hīnayāna is renunciation, of the Mahāyāna is altruism, and of the Vajrayāna is transformation. Renunciation in the sense of Going Forth from the world and from the group. And altruism because for oneself the distinction between self and others has lost at least something of its significance. And then transformation because one sees that spiritual life doesn't involve disowning anything or separating oneself from anything, but simply of transforming one's natural energies of body, speech, and mind into more and more refined forms.

According to this view, during any individual's spiritual career, taking place over many lifetimes, all three stages must be traversed. However, he has since come to the conclusion that the three yānas cannot be seen as a spiritual sequence. Clearly there are deeper and deeper levels of the spiritual path. However, we can't really equate them with the Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna in the traditional Tibetan sense. Sangharakshita values all three historical yānas equally. Each is the elaboration of aspects of the original teaching and represents a particular emphasis. Teachings that relate to the deepest levels of the path can be found in all three yānas.

We have already seen that there is a tendency for the original spiritual vitality of a manifestation of the Dharma to be lost as its crystallisations harden around it. But to Tibetan Buddhists all those crystallisations actually were the teachings of the Buddha. Having no idea of historical development, they could not reject them nor could they correct them, so they created what amounts to a myth. They saw the Buddha as having taught everything that had come down to them, for the sake of beings at various levels of attainment.

In Tibetan Buddhist schools the path of the three yānas is even further subdivided, in different ways by different schools. Some Chinese and Japanese masters similarly arranged the teachings in complex sequences. Sangharakshita uses the term 'ultra-ism' to describe the phenomenon of continuously adding further stages.

A certain name is applied to the ultimate stage. But, after a while, this term comes to be taken rather literally and therefore comes to mean something less than it meant originally. So you now have to go beyond it with another term that indicates what the first term meant before its meaning became debased. You see this with the word arahant. In the Pāli texts [belonging to the earliest, Hīnayāna phase] arahant refers to one who has realized the highest truth by following the teaching of the Buddha. But in the Mahāyāna sūtras, because the whole notion of the arahant had become rather debased, you needed something that went beyond that. In this way there arose the Mahāyāna conception of the Bodhisattva.

Sangharakshita considers that Western Buddhists cannot accept these traditional schematisations of the teachings. For a start, they have no basis in history since we know that the Buddha did not literally teach many of the later doctrines attributed to him. We can also see that the different schools do not fit into the classificatory schema. For instance, there are teachings in the Pāli Canon, supposedly belonging to the Hīnayāna, that are clearly directed to individuals at a very high level of attainment. At the same time, some teachings found in the 'higher' yānas of the Tibetan systems are actually quite elementary. For instance, Sangharakshita considers that some of the practices in the anuyoga-tantra of the Tibetan Nyingmapa school are merely Indian hatha yoga exercises. Again, he says of Dzogchen, which is for the Nyingmapa the very highest stage of spiritual practice, that it actually boils down to a quite simple practice of mindfulness. He says of some teachings in the anuttarayoga-tantra,

the summit of some Tibetan systems, that they are not really Buddhist at all, but rather unassimilated Hinduism.

Finally, these schema only account for the schools and teachings that were known to the systematisers. Modern Buddhists are faced with the entire range of Buddhist schools, ancient and modern. Since different schools have their own different classificatory systems, not only in Tibetan Buddhism but in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism too, there is a problem of reconciling the different systems. This would be extremely complex, perhaps impossible, and of doubtful spiritual value.

Back to basic Buddhism

It is better, Sangharakshita says, to set all these systems aside and go back to the original teachings, on top of which the later teachings have been stacked.

I think the stack has got so high we have just got to go back. Otherwise we have stack upon stack of practices which have superseded one another. So you might as well just drop all the later developments and go back to the original one, which is closer to the Buddha's own times and to the Buddha himself. We can do that on account of our historical perspective, whereas formerly Buddhists couldn't.

One important reason for a return to basics is the avoidance of the dangers inherent in the hierarchical arrangement of teachings. Inevitably people want to move on to the highest stage, missing out the initial levels. Sangharakshita calls this 'spiritual snobbism' and says that it was as common among Tibetans as it now is among Westerners in Europe and America.

In Tibetan Buddhism you are supposed to go through all the yānas – the Nyingmapas have nine! Actually, people go through the first few yānas very quickly and really only 'practise' the last one!

Taking the triyāna system literally leads to a serious distortion of spiritual life. Sangharakshita considers it safer and more spiritually efficacious to return to the essential principles of spiritual life embodied in the basic teachings. One needs no higher teachings beyond these. One simply needs to understand them ever more deeply and apply them ever more fully in one's own life.

This does not mean discarding later developments. It means seeing them in the context of the earlier teachings. Sangharakshita views the entire later Buddhist tradition as filling out, amplifying and elaborating the Buddha's original teaching – but not as superseding it or adding higher stages.

Testing the teachings

Buddhism went through many twists and turns in its 2,500-year history. As well as many brilliant and spiritually efficacious new elaborations, there were also many degenerations and distortions. We must test individual teachings to see whether they do indeed conduce to the attainment of Enlightenment. This criterion has, however, its limitations: in the end, only the Enlightened can know what conduces to Enlightenment. The pragmatic criterion can be used to justify mere heterodoxy and indulgence. Some trends in Buddhist history have tended to emphasise adaptability more than faithfulness to the tradition, and this had led to degeneration.

Eventually the Mahāyāna carried liberalism to extremes and exalted the spirit above the letter of the teaching to such an extent that the latter was almost lost sight of and the Dharma deprived, at least on the mundane plane, of its distinctive individuality. The need to constantly find new ways of communicating the Dharma in new contexts must be balanced by a concern to keep alive what the Dharma really is. Teachings and practices must be evaluated in the light of the experience of the Enlightened.

Some guidance is to be found in the scriptures, which provide an important safeguard against excessive liberalism. There is a common core of material found in all the canons, predating the schools' separation from each other, which describes what we have called 'Basic Buddhism'. Even those parts that are later, and so less likely to have come directly from the Buddha, are for the most part entirely in the spirit of that earlier teaching. They are genuine elaborations of it, exploring themes opened up in the original teaching, unfolding more fully an aspect of the Dharma.

The scriptures act as a touchstone by which the validity of a teaching can be tested. It should be possible to see whether it is in the spirit of the basic teachings of Buddhism as expressed in the scriptures. To be valid a teaching should be congruous with the scriptures common to all schools, especially with the main formulations such as the Four Noble Truths and the Three Characteristics; and it should also be aligned with basic Buddhist definitions of Right View, for example, in not inclining to the extreme views of eternalism or nihilism.

These criteria ensure that the pragmatic definition of the Dharma as whatever conduces to Enlightenment is not used to give licence to self-indulgence and whim. The scriptures and the basic doctrinal formulae, emanating from the Enlightened mind, offer some means of ascertaining whether the new teaching is genuinely 'the Master's Message'.

The principles of a new Buddhist movement
Sangharakshita's understanding of the unity of Buddhism found practical application when he came to found the FWBO in 1967. The principles on which it should be formed were by then very clear to him. The first and most basic was that the new movement should help individuals to grow towards Enlightenment. Teachings and practices were taken up because they worked. There was no question of simply continuing unthinkingly any one school or tradition in its existing form. Using the Buddha's pragmatic criteria for recognising the 'Master's Message', Sangharakshita built a body of teachings and practices – still growing and changing – which met the spiritual needs of his disciples. Since he viewed the entire Buddhist tradition as likely to contain valid means to Enlightenment, he could draw from any part of it whatever was appropriate to the present. This was no mere eclecticism, nor was it simply a matter of personal whim or preference. Teachings and practices were incorporated because they answered his disciples' definite spiritual needs.

Clearly it was not possible to take up every teaching of every school of Buddhism. Even within a single school there is far more material available than any individual could ever usefully take advantage of. There had to be a selection, based upon real spiritual needs. Indeed, as Sangharakshita pointed out that Triratna is doing no more, in principle, than Eastern Buddhists do in the case of their own particular tradition. A Theravada monk, for example, will not familiarize himself with all the doctrines of the Theravada, nor will he practise all the forty methods of meditation described in the Visuddhimagga.

There was however a clear starting point. Sangharakshita saw the Buddhist tradition as consisting of elaborations and explications of the essential principles contained in the

Buddha's original teaching. He therefore drew his main corpus of material from 'Basic Buddhism'. He considered that most of his disciples' spiritual needs could be met by practising more and more deeply these fundamental teachings. He enjoined on his disciples the maxim, 'More and more of less and less', rather than trying to hurry on to teachings which are allegedly more advanced.

The emphasis on the basic teachings also ensured the 'orthodoxy' of the new movement. Any innovations or importations from other sources could be tested against these teachings that embody the Buddha's own expression of the Dharma. Thus, although the FWBO did not adhere to any traditional school of Buddhism, Sangharakshita ensured that it was entirely traditional. It was based upon the Buddha's own Enlightened experience and followed as fully as it could the spirit of his teaching. The movement he created was a living testimony to the unity of Buddhism.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Have you ever felt confused by the diversity of Buddhist teachings? Has reading this text made things seem clearer? In what way?
2. What is the difference between the Dharma and Buddhism?
3. *"Whatever teachings conduce ... to detachment not to bondage, to frugality not to covetousness ... to contentment not to discontent ... to energy not to sluggishness, to delight in good not delight in evil This is the Dharma ... This is the Master's Message."*
By these criteria, do you think Buddhism has got a monopoly on the Dharma? If not, why do you think of yourself as a Buddhist rather than following another teaching that seems to meet these criteria?
4. Do you think that the fact that a Buddhist teaching did not come from the historical Buddha makes it less valid? How might you go about deciding whether you could trust such a teaching?
5. From your reading and study so far, can you see any examples of the tendencies explored and filled out by Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism already being present in the Buddhism described in the Pāli Canon?

Text purpose-written by Vadanya.

The common ground

The Triratna Buddhist Community is radical, in that it seeks to get back to what is universal in the Buddhist tradition: that which can jump the centuries, cross cultures, and speak directly to us here and now. But Triratna is still a recognisably Buddhist movement, and it shares a lot of common ground with other Buddhist schools. This is not surprising, as it bases its approach on the core teachings and practices that are the basis for all schools.

Nevertheless Triratna is a creative response to present-day Western conditions. These are very different from those in 500 BCE India, First Millennium China, or medieval Tibet and Japan. So, not surprisingly, there are some things about Triratna that are quite distinctive.

1. An 'ecumenical' approach

The first distinctive feature of Triratna is that we have an 'ecumenical' approach. The word 'ecumenical' is derived from the Christian tradition, where it means transcending the differences between different sects or churches. As we saw in the last session, the underlying unity of Buddhism is an important principle behind Triratna. We do not identify exclusively with any sect or tradition, or with any cultural manifestation of Buddhism. So we do not equate Buddhism with any one of its historical schools, or with any one of the various national cultures in which the Eastern schools are embodied. Instead we seek to see what the various schools have in common, looking for the general truths behind the particular cultural forms of Buddhism, at the same time as drawing inspiration and practices from the whole Buddhist tradition.

In the centuries and millennia after the Buddha's death, Buddhism took its message outwards from India into a wide range of new cultures and circumstances. Spread over a vast area, in an age when travel was slow and dangerous, and other forms of communication over long distances were non-existent, a number of different schools developed which were largely isolated from each other. Members of these schools often had little knowledge of each other, and they had no historical overview of the Buddhist tradition. They therefore each tended to see themselves as the true representative of the Buddhist tradition at its best.

But now for the first time in history all the Buddhist schools can be aware of each other, and we can see the historical process through which each developed. It is no longer possible to regard any one sect as 'real' Buddhism, except by ignoring the facts. However this is what many traditional schools still try to do, even when transplanted to the West. It is still quite normal for such transplanted schools in their public classes to put forward their particular teachings as 'Buddhism', making no mention of the teachings or practices of any other tradition.

For Buddhism to take root in the West it has to outgrow this culturally based sectarianism. We need to look at the different schools, see what they have in common, appreciate them, gain inspiration from them, and learn from them. We need to get back to the basic truths of Buddhism that underlie all schools, and use what is useful under present circumstances from the whole range of the tradition. And we need to do this without simply taking a magpie approach, picking up the glittery parts of the various schools that attract our eye, while ignoring the apparently duller or more challenging teachings and practices that may be what we really need to transform ourselves. All this is what Triratna is trying to do, although we are still at an early stage.

This might seem obvious. We tend to take this appreciation of the whole tradition for granted in Triratna, but it is a very unusual approach. Yet this is probably the only approach that will allow Buddhism to have the full impact on the modern world that it deserves – and that the modern world so badly needs. (Incidentally, all this is not to say that modern Westerners cannot make spiritual progress through one of the traditional schools.)

2. The centrality of Going for Refuge

A second distinctive emphasis of Triratna is that we see Going for Refuge as primary in the spiritual life, and particular lifestyles or practices as secondary. We could paraphrase this by saying that what is most important is our commitment to spiritual growth, while the way we put this commitment into practice may vary from person to person and time to time.

What is important is our commitment to the Three Jewels. Firstly this means commitment to becoming more like the Buddha, the ideal of Enlightenment. Secondly it means commitment to understanding and practising the Dharma. Thirdly it means coming into greater and greater harmony and communication with our fellow practitioners, so that between us we create the Sangha. The level and constancy of this commitment is what will mainly determine whether we make progress. Without this commitment, the most favourable lifestyle and the most supposedly ‘advanced’ practices will be useless. With this commitment, we will use difficulties as opportunities to grow, and the simplest practices will reveal depths that are unimaginable to the uncommitted.

In contrast to Triratna’s approach, many traditional schools see a particular lifestyle or practice as central to being a ‘real’ Buddhist. So in some schools what makes someone a ‘real’ Buddhist is living the monastic life. In other schools it is a particular practice or set of practices – ‘Just Sitting’ meditation in Zen, a particular chant in Nichiren and ‘True Pure Land’ Buddhism, or a particular sequence of meditations leading up to tantric initiation in some Tibetan schools. But in fact particular lifestyles or practices are all means to an end. They are not central to being a ‘real’ Buddhist. What is central is Going for Refuge.

Because Going for Refuge is primary, while lifestyle is secondary, the Triratna Buddhist Order is ‘neither monk nor lay.’ Some Order members live what is effectively a monastic life. Some live a ‘lay’ life, bringing up a family and earning the money needed to do this. Many combine elements of both lifestyles, perhaps living in a semi-monastic community without being celibate, or alternating periods of meditative monastic living ‘on retreat’ with periods of activity ‘in the world’. After all, the strict division between monk and lay was a product of traditional societies where no other possibility was allowed, and in the modern world we can be less rigid. What unites members of the Order is not a lifestyle, but the fact that they have all been recognised as ‘effectively’ Going for Refuge, which means that their commitment has

been seen to be powerful enough, consistent enough, and central enough in their lives to have a noticeable effect over a significant period of time.

Because Going for Refuge is primary, members of the Triratna Buddhist Order – and to a lesser extent friends and mitras – will engage in a range of practices suited to their temperament and circumstances. In the earlier stages of practice what is important is to lay a firm foundation. So in our first few years of practice most of us need to focus mainly on the Five Precepts, the Mindfulness of Breathing, and the Mettā Bhāvanā. However even in the earlier stages, Triratna encompasses a range of approaches, with people emphasising different aspects of practice, and drawing inspiration from different sources. When we have been practising for longer, Going for Refuge can manifest in even more diverse ways. In consultation with their Preceptors, new Order members take on a range of meditations, and develop their own regime of practice, suited to their temperament and circumstances. Again, the Triratna Buddhist Order can happily include this range of diversity, because Going for Refuge is primary, while the particular practices we take up to express and deepen our Going for Refuge may vary according to needs and circumstances.

Finally, one manifestation of the centrality of Going for Refuge in Triratna is that the people who lead and guide the movement's institutions are those who have shown themselves to be effectively going for refuge over a significant period of time – in other words, members of the Triratna Buddhist Order. Before he founded the FWBO, Sangharakshita observed that many modern Buddhist organisations were controlled by people who were not committed Buddhists. This is obviously not the way to set up an effective, liberating spiritual movement, and he was determined that Triratna should be run by the spiritually committed. In effect this means that the various Triratna charities that manage centres and other Triratna initiatives are run mainly by Order members – those people who have been recognised as effectively going for refuge. This is still viewed as an important principle of Triratna, which is partly responsible for its success. However, it can seem odd to some people – who want to apply egalitarian principles, derived from politics, to the spiritual life – that the important decisions at a centre are usually made by Order members, and not by a vote among the people who attend.

3. A Unified Order

The Triratna Buddhist Community and the Triratna Buddhist Order are open to all, and no distinction is made on the basis of gender, race, nationality, class, caste, age, or sexual orientation. One particular implication of this is that men and women are ordained on an equal basis. This is in marked contrast to the situation in most traditional Eastern schools of Buddhism – and their offshoots in the West – in which women are only allowed to take a 'lower' ordination, so that nuns are in a sense always in a subservient position in relation to monks. (This is true for example in both the Theravāda and the main Tibetan traditions.) No such distinction is made between members of the Triratna Buddhist Order on the basis of gender, or any of the other categories mentioned above. In addition, in the Triratna Buddhist Order, the marked difference in status between those who live a monastic and those who live a 'lay' life, which is such an important feature of many traditional schools of Buddhism, does not exist. As we have seen, Order members are 'neither monk nor lay', and it is the depth of a person's Going for Refuge rather than their lifestyle which determines whether they are ready to join the Order – and also the level of respect they are likely to receive from others within it.

4. The importance of friendship

An emphasis on 'horizontal' friendship is a possibly unique aspect of Triratna. Many schools encourage devotion to the teacher, master, or guru, but few emphasise friendship between people who are at a similar stage of the path – 'horizontal' friendships – possibly because

warm close friendships were taken for granted in traditional societies. However in Triratna friendship is seen as an important part to the spiritual life in two ways: firstly as a way of overcoming our self-obsession and deluded view, and secondly as an aspect of the goal of Enlightenment itself.

The Buddha said on a number of occasions that spiritual friendship is an essential part of the spiritual life. Because it is an aspect that many Westerners do not find easy, and one that our culture makes difficult – by encouraging individualism, competitiveness, and mobility – it is an aspect that we particularly need to emphasise.

Developing friendship is part of the way we grow. We transcend our egotism and break out of the box of our self-concern by deep and open communication, by developing empathy, by becoming more concerned for others, and by developing qualities such as loyalty and **gratitude**. We need friendship to develop **mettā, compassion, and sympathetic joy** – ultimately we aim to experience these for all other beings, but we need to start with our friends, who are not linked to us by ties of blood or self-interest, but for whom we feel warm affection.

Spiritual friends also help us to see ourselves more clearly – an essential part of growth. We all have aspects of ourselves that we hide from others – which makes it very difficult to work on them. Learning to be open and honest with others, taking off our mask, helps us to leave these hidden aspects behind, and move on. We all also have ‘blind spots’ – aspects of ourselves that we do not know about, which we hide even from ourselves. Spiritual friends – who take our spiritual well-being to heart, rather than colluding with us for an easy life – will help us to see these blind spots. Unless we are open to seeing ourselves as others see us we will probably never move forward, because we will not know ourselves as we really are.

This last point also brings out the fact that **Spiritual growth requires an element of ‘vertical’ friendship** – contact with those who are more experienced in the spiritual life than we are. In most traditional schools this relationship is formalised in a strict teacher-pupil or guru-disciple relationship. However Sangharakshita has pointed out that the guru-disciple relationship has many dangers, especially for Westerners, and that we do not usually need a ‘great guru’ – even if we could find one who would accept us. What we do need is contact with people who are more strongly in touch with a spiritual vision than we are, and who have more experience of the spiritual path than we do. It has been said that “the spiritual life is caught, not taught.” So having contact with people who have been practising longer than we have is an important part of our practice in Triratna.

So far we have talked about friendship as a means to an end. But friendship is also an end in itself. Friendship is an essential part of a happy, human life – and one of which many people are starved in the modern West. At a higher level, friendship can be seen as an important aspect of the spiritual goal. Enlightenment is a state in which we transcend our small, self-referential frame of reference and become a friend of the world. In effect we take our mundane human friendliness and raise it to new level, so that we are united in friendliness to all other people, to all other beings, and to the universe itself. We cannot hope to achieve this universal friendliness unless we start by behaving as a friend to at least a few real people.

Because of the emphasis on friendship, many Triratna Buddhists choose to live in residential communities. To really get to know people and develop deep friendships we need to spend time with them, and not just when we are on our best behaviour. Not everyone is in a position to live in a community, but for those that are, it can be an important help to spiritual practice, letting us immerse ourselves more deeply in the spiritual life, eroding our individualism and

self obsession, allowing us to see ourselves more clearly, and – last but not least – helping us develop deeper friendships.

5. The importance of work

The Triratna Buddhist Community offers a balanced approach to the spiritual life. An important part of this balance is the need to balance meditation, on the one hand, with energy and activity on the other. Energy is one of the characteristics of Enlightenment. But there can be a tendency to associate the spiritual life with being simply calm, inactive, and delicate. If we give a one-sided emphasis to calm inactivity we will tend to repress our energy, which will become stagnant or turn negative. This can be a problem in some traditional Eastern monastic settings. To quote Sangharakshita:

...work is very important, because if you're working...you're putting energy into something, with the result that energy does not stagnate. If there is any sort of curse of monasticism in the East, and it's a real curse, it's simply stagnation and idleness.

The major exception to this comment is the Zen tradition, in which daily physical work is an integral part of monastery life.

Triratna's emphasis on work can sound odd to some Westerners, because for many of us 'worldly' careers, which we follow mainly for money and status, can make it difficult to find time and energy for spiritual practice. Hence many Buddhists find it helpful to reduce the time they spend working, and to take periods off work when they can explore different aspects of their being. Such periods of 'idleness' are probably essential for most of us, and they may be particularly important if our life so far has been dominated by work or career. But the problem arises when we see idleness as a long term lifestyle – we have energy, and we need to use it to have a positive effect on the world, both for our own sake and for the sake of others.

The usefulness of work as part of our spiritual life depends on our motivation. If we are working just to earn a living, then it is probably a good idea to do as little of it as possible, and to simplify our life accordingly. However we will then need to find other more useful ways of using our energy. The type of work that Sangharakshita recommends as part of our spiritual life is work that has an altruistic or spiritual motivation, because it is helping to spread the Dharma, because it helps us to work on ourselves, because it helps us develop spiritual friendship, or because it helps other people.

'Team-based Right Livelihood businesses'

One very distinctive feature of Triratna is our team-based businesses. Apart from enabling people to earn a living in an ethical way, in an environment conducive to spiritual practice, these projects aim to help Buddhists to activate and engage their energies, and to provide a context in which we can use work as a direct spiritual practice.

Sangharakshita's has said that 'Work is the Tantric guru.' In the Tantric tradition, one of the guru's roles is to confront the disciple with their own shortcomings, and with the true nature of things. In the same way, work confronts us with ourselves, and, if we are honest, it forces us to change. Work provides us with an objective way of looking at ourselves. If the outcome of our work is ineffective, or if we are out of harmony with our team-mates, then we are made to look at those aspects of ourselves that contribute to the situation, and which we need to change. So work in a team-based business can be a challenging and powerful spiritual practice, which allows us to grow and change far faster than would be possible in a less intense situation.

Work for others

When our work helps other people – especially when it helps them spiritually – it becomes fully aligned with our spiritual ideals, and we can throw ourselves into it wholeheartedly. If we are building a Buddhist Centre, raising money to spread the Dharma, or publishing Dharma books, we will experience our work not just as a job, but as a vocation. Work that genuinely **relieves people's suffering** – either psychological or physical – will have a similar effect. For this reason Triratna has set up a charity, the Karuna Trust, to help Buddhists in the prosperous West use their energies to work for others less physically fortunate. Working for others is deeply satisfying, and has far-reaching spiritual consequences. To the extent that our work is truly about others, to that extent we transcend ourselves, breaking down our rigid self identification – which is the whole purpose of the spiritual life. When work for others is part of a balanced practice, including spiritual community, meditation, and devotion to a spiritual cause, it can be a powerful ingredient in gaining Insight.

6. The importance of the Arts

Unlike most Eastern cultures (except China) when they first encountered Buddhism, the West has a very well developed cultural and artistic tradition. At its best this tradition communicates spiritual values and a spiritual vision, and because it is culturally closer to us than Eastern forms of the Dharma, it can be a valuable bridge to a more spiritual view of life. Also, because many of us live in cities which are a far cry from the beautiful natural settings in which many Buddhists of the past have practised, we need ways of contacting the sense of beauty and wonder that we can get from living in nature. Contact with the arts can give us this, as well as helping us to grow spiritually in some of the following ways.

Art helps us expand our experience and broaden our sympathies

The Arts can allow us to live through experiences that have never happened to us in 'real' life, letting us grow through them and learn from them almost as though they had been our own. Through a play, novel or poem we can enter into the world, the thoughts, and the feelings of another person. We can know what it is like to be them, and we can develop a sense of sympathy for them. Visual art can have the same effect – really looking at the series of Rembrandt's self-portraits, for example, lets us experience what it felt like to be that man at various points in a life that was both tragic and fulfilling. In the same way, music can directly communicate what it is like to feel as another human being feels. Art can allow us to know what it is like to be another person, of a very different age, nation, race, culture, gender, and temperament. This broadening of our experience and our ability to identify with others is a very real expansion of our being. It is spiritual growth.

Art enlarges our imagination

Our separation from nature and the emphasis on mundane facts in our culture can atrophy our imagination. We need to counteract this, because imagination is an important faculty in the spiritual life. It allows us to contact possible ways of being that are completely beyond us at present. Imagination also opens a gateway to the visionary world we can experience in meditation – if our imagination is impoverished, our meditation is likely to be so too. Engaging in art, whether in creating it or appreciating it, strengthens the imagination, just as we strengthen a muscle by taking physical exercise.

Art refines and redirects our emotions

Usually our emotions are tied to a fairly coarse, basic level of existence. What excites them most usually has to do with things like sex, physical pleasure, money, possessions, security, and self-importance – things that derive from our animal nature. Our emotions are what drive

us, and as long as most of our emotional energy is stuck at this level, we will have little real drive for spiritual progress. We therefore need to progressively refine and raise the level of our emotions, so that more and more we get our satisfaction from the spiritual plane, and so that our emotions are linked to this plane. Art, and any experience of beauty, tends to refine our emotions. When we delight in the beauty of a piece of music, a painting, a building, or a tree, our emotions are engaged in a way that is not related to our animal ego. When we appreciate a sonnet or a sunset, this does not involve wanting to own it, eat it, or have sex with it. The more we hook our emotions to this sort of aesthetic appreciation, the more emotional energy we will be able to muster behind our meditation practice, and the more we can move our motivations up to the level of the spiritual and the transcendental.

Art can communicate spiritual values

The greatest art comes from the realm that the Dharma comes from – the creators of great art often speak of something communicating itself through them, something that transcends anything they are normally in touch with in their more mundane, non-creative times. Indeed the greatest art is Dharma, in its broadest definition. It derives from a spiritual vision and communicates spiritual values. It often does this in a way that is not linked specifically to any one ‘religious’ formulation of the Dharma, although it may be strongly flavoured by a particular religion, if the artist practised it. Great art is the Dharma communicated in a very attractive way, a way that makes us want to change ourselves. Truth communicated in a beautiful way is uniquely powerful.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Have any of the “distinctive emphases” described in the text been important in your decision to practice with Triratna rather than with a traditional Asian school? Are there any of the “emphases” that you don’t relate to?
2. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of an “ecumenical” approach to Buddhism? How can we guard against any dangers it might involve?
3. The Triratna Buddhist Community’s emphasis on Going for Refuge seems to give priority to commitment as a spiritual quality. How do you think commitment is related to other aspects of spiritual progress, such as simplicity of life, śraddhā, insight, and concern for others? How might commitment lead to each of these, and how might each of these lead to commitment?
4. Has the quality of your friendships changed since getting involved in Triratna? In what ways?
5. Do you tend to see calm or energy as more important in the spiritual life? What are the advantages and dangers of both points of view?
6. Do you think you need to do more work, or less? Would the answer be different if you did a different sort of work? Have you ever experienced work as “the Tantric Guru”?
7. What is the difference between art that can help us to develop spiritually, and mere entertainment that we use to distract ourselves?

Text purpose-written by Vadanya.

Introduction

The Triratna Buddhist Community started life as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, which, as its name implies, was an attempt to create a form of Buddhism suitable for people living in present-day Western cultures. When we first come across Triratna, many of us from a ‘Western’ cultural background assume that creating a Western Buddhism will mean that the Dharma will be stripped of its ‘irrational’ elements – with devotional practice often first and foremost among these. We can then be surprised and even disappointed when we discover that devotional practice has an important place in the Triratna approach.

But there are good reasons why ritual and devotional practice – what we often call by the Sanskrit word *pūjā* – plays the part that it does in Triratna. In the words of Sangharakshita:

Ritual is an integral part of Buddhism, and an integral part of every school of Buddhism, whether Tibetan, Zen, or Theravada. We cannot get away from ritual in Buddhism, nor should we try to do so. Instead we should try to understand ritual and see what its purpose is.

In this session we will be doing just that – we will be seeking to understand the purpose of ritual, and to understand how engaging in it can help us to make spiritual progress.

‘Rational Ritual’

Many of us have been conditioned by our cultural background to think of all ritual as somehow irrational. Certainly ritual can become empty and devoid of meaning, but as the psychologist Erich Fromm has pointed out, there is also such a thing as ‘rational ritual’ – ritual that serves a definite purpose, and is an effective way of achieving this purpose. Fromm described such rational ritual as “shared action, expressive of common strivings, rooted in shared values.” This description brings out several important aspects of ritual. Ritual is ‘expressive’ – it is a way of expressing our deepest aspirations and values, and in the process making them more conscious, and strengthening their power to guide our life and actions. Ritual is also often ‘shared’ (although we can engage in ritual on our own, and this can have a highly positive effect.) But when ritual is shared, with a number of people coming together to participate, it takes on another important dimension – it becomes a way to express and strengthen our sense of community with others who have the same goal as ourselves. It becomes a way of creating Sangha, or spiritual community.

If we engage in it in the right spirit, ritual can help us to:

- discover and make conscious;
- express;
- strengthen;

and remind us of our:

- admiration and reverence for what is higher than ourselves;
- aspiration to make progress;
- commitment to practice;
- solidarity and comradeship with others engaged in the same project.

Śraddhā

Admiration, aspiration and commitment are aspects of our śraddhā – an untranslatable Sanskrit word for an inner experience that can include all three of these elements, as well as confidence, and an intuitive sense of our direction in life. According to Sangharakshita, the Sanskrit word śraddhā comes from a root meaning ‘to place the heart upon.’ Śraddhā is what we feel for what we place our heart upon, for what has the deepest emotional meaning for us. But it is not just a feeling – it is the faculty that connects us with our deepest ideals and values.

Of course, not all ideals we might base our life on are of equal value. Someone might ‘place their heart on’ worldly ambition, or comfort and security, or the pursuit of sense pleasure, and make this the value that guides their life. This would not be śraddhā. Śraddhā is our response to ideals and values that are higher or deeper or more universal than the small concerns of our self as we are now. As Sangharakshita has said:

[Śraddhā is] a lifting up of the heart... you... have been lifted up to something higher, have touched something higher, have experienced, even if only for a moment, something higher.

Faith, śraddhā, is... the real living response of the whole being... to something; we may not be able to have a very clear idea of it conceptually, intellectually, but something which we intuitively perceive, which we feel, if you like, is greater, and higher, and nobler, and more sublime, and more worthwhile, of higher value than ourselves as we are now. Something to which we ought as it were to dedicate ourselves, if you like surrender ourselves. Something for the sake of which we ought to live, even sacrifice ourselves.

Although śraddhā is often translated as ‘faith’, it obviously does not just involve believing some dogma to be true, and it is certainly not ‘blind faith’. Śraddhā is often said to rest on three foundations – intuition, reason, and experience. We need to check our intuitive sense of our life’s direction with our reason, asking, does this make sense? We need to check our deep sense of attraction to the ideal against our experience, asking, does what I have seen with my own eyes confirm that what I am attracted to has a positive effect? But ultimately śraddhā goes beyond reason, and it goes beyond what we can confirm through our senses. It can sometimes be experienced almost physically, as a sense of rightness, clarity and certainty that is too deep for words. In Sangharakshita’s words again, śraddhā is ‘the response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe.’

In some traditional commentaries, three aspects of śraddhā are singled out: admiration for the ideal, longing for the ideal, and confidence that we can move towards the ideal. Śraddhā is said to bring many positive qualities, including clarity of mind, and a joyous serenity. It is said to be

a part of every positive mental state, and it is an essential faculty if we want to progress along the path.

We all have an element of śraddhā, or we would never be able to commit ourselves to a positive course of action and carry it through. But śraddhā is a quality that can be developed, a faculty that becomes stronger through exercise, and developing this faculty is an important part of the spiritual life.

Discovery

Śraddhā is not particularly recognized or valued in our culture, and when we start practising the Dharma we are often out of touch with it. Very often we need first of all to discover our śraddhā – beginning with our admiration and reverence for something beyond ourselves. When we start to take part in Buddhist ritual we may begin to experience feelings that we were only dimly conscious of before, because they are not valued by our society or encouraged by our conditioning. Often people who at first feel some resistance to ritual find that, when they take part in it with an open mind, they feel things that they had not at all expected. In the act of repeating some verses, in bowing, in making an offering to a shrine, we can find that the action reaches down into our depths and releases feelings that we are completely unaware of – even that we deny – when we are merely sitting still and thinking. By acting rather than thinking, by engaging our whole being rather than just our intellect, we begin to subvert our inner censor, and discover parts of ourselves that we did not know existed.

And these are parts of ourselves that we need if we are to succeed with the spiritual life. Without śraddhā we can get nowhere. An integral part of śraddhā is admiration, and even longing – for an ideal that we aspire towards, for people who embody this ideal, for beautiful and noble qualities, and perhaps for something we cannot name that somehow underlies all these. Unless we admire and want these things, we will not have the motivation to move towards them. In the words of the Theravādin monk Nyaponika Thera:

One who is incapable of a reverential attitude will also be incapable of spiritual progress beyond the narrow limits of his present mental condition. One who is so blind as not to see and recognize anything higher and better than the little mud-pool of his petty self...will suffer for a long time from [severely hindered] growth. And one who ... scorns a reverential attitude in himself and others will remain imprisoned in his self-conceit – a most formidable bar to a true maturity of character and to spiritual growth. It is by recognizing and honouring someone or something higher that one honours and enhances one's own inner potentialities.

That is putting it more strongly than most of us in Triratna would probably choose to do, and should not be taken to mean that if we do not enjoy pūjā we are spiritual no-hopers. Even some committed practitioners are not much drawn to pūjā, and express their śraddhā in other ways. In the words of Sangharakshita:

If you have a developing interest in Buddhism but you are not drawn to pūjā, even having tried it a number of times, this is not something to be worried about. You can practice meditation or engage in study. We are not all attracted to the same forms of practice. This is why within Triratna we don't prescribe just one particular spiritual practice, as some Buddhist schools do. We make available a whole range of Buddhist activities, anything that will help at least some people to grow and develop. It is important, especially in the early stages of following the Buddhist path, to latch on to

whichever form of practice seems most inspiring and helpful to you. Other aspects will develop later.

What is important is śraddhā, not ritual itself. But for most people ritual is an essential way of developing śraddhā, as well as being an enjoyable element of practice in its own right, and for these reasons it is important to give it a fair trial.

Expression, to aspiration, to commitment

So pūjā is often the way we begin to discover our capacity for admiration and reverence. And as we begin to experience these emotions more strongly, it is quite natural that we should want to express them, and again pūjā is often the main way we do this. (If we love or respect a person, we naturally want to express this. The same is true of our love and respect for the Three Jewels.) And as we express our admiration, it grows still further. The more we express our feelings, the more they move out of the secret, twilight private world into the outer world of public reality. They become more real.

As our admiration becomes stronger and more real, it is natural that it should turn into an aspiration to move towards the ideal, to embody it in ourselves, even to serve it if we can. This aspiration then, in turn, quite naturally develops into commitment, a determination to do what is necessary to let our aspiration have an effect on our actions and our life. This is all part of the process of moving our deepest ideals from our inner world into the outer world, turning them from a hazy bright patch in our psyche into a powerful force in our lives.

Pūjā can be a great help in every step of this process. As we express our admiration, it becomes more conscious, stronger, and more real. It develops into aspiration. As we express our aspiration, it becomes more conscious, stronger, and more real. It develops into commitment. As we express our commitment – and especially when we make it public – it becomes a stronger force in our life. It becomes who we are and what our life is about, publicly as well as in the secrecy of our own mind. (Anyone who has made a public, ritual declaration of commitment about anything will testify that this can have a powerful effect – you may have noticed this with the commitment you made at your mitra ceremony.)

Another effect of pūjā is that it simply reminds us of our ideals, and of our commitment to them. We humans can feel genuinely committed to something in our better moments, when we are in touch with what is best in ourselves, but forget all about it when we are distracted by the rough-and-tumble of everyday life. We need to constantly reconnect, to remind ourselves of what really matters to us, if we want to make this an effective force in our lives. Regular daily practice of even simple rituals, such as bowing to our shrine and chanting the refuges and precepts before meditating, helps to remind us of our values and our commitment to them, so that we stay in touch with them throughout the day.

In all these ways the practice of ritual helps us make what started out as a dim intuition of our potential into the ruling principle that guides our actions and our life. Eventually it can give us all the benefits of a developed faculty of śraddhā – serenity, clarity, continuity of purpose, strength in the face of adversity, wide perspective, maturity, individuality, and peace of mind.

How to approach ritual

Ritual brings an element of colour, music, poetry, and theatre into our spiritual life. It is meant to be enjoyed, and it is important that we engage with it in that spirit. Buddhist ritual is not meant to be heavily solemn or darkly serious, it is meant to be joyful, and it can even be humorous at times. So enjoy pūjā. Enjoy the sound of the mantras and the rhythm of the

chanting, matching and merging your voice with others to produce a harmonious sound. Enjoy taking part in ritual action with all the mindfulness and gracefulness of body that you can muster. Enjoy the images evoked by the words, using the imagination to conjure up the pictures and feelings they describe.

When we take part in a pūjā we are not signing up to any articles of belief. We may often be rehearsing attitudes and mental states that we aspire to, but that will be beyond us for some time to come, so we do not need to worry that the words we are saying do not always match our present state. Taking part in pūjā is like going to the theatre. When we see a play, we do not need to believe that what is happening on stage is literally true in order to engage with it, and to have our emotions transformed by it. We suspend disbelief, enjoy the experience, and let the play have its effect. We need to engage with pūjā in something of the same spirit – we suspend disbelief, engage our attention and our imagination as fully as we can, enjoy the experience, and let the ritual have its effect.

Expressing shared purpose

Pūjā can also be very enjoyable because it gives us a way of expressing and experiencing our sense of solidarity and comradeship with others on the path. We can consciously cultivate this aspect of ritual practice in several ways.

When we repeat verses or chant mantras, we can avoid an individualistic approach, not trying to be noticed, and instead making our contribution a harmonious part of a larger whole. So we listen closely to those around us, harmonizing and matching our volume, pace and rhythm with others, making our voice a synchronized part of something larger and richer. When we engage in ritual actions we can use this as an opportunity to express and cultivate a wordless rapport with others. In making offerings, for example, many people make a practice of being aware of the person next to them, and as far as possible matching their actions gracefully with the other, bowing when they bow, kneeling when they kneel, rising when they rise. When two people make offerings together with this approach it becomes a shared exercise in mindfulness and mutual consideration, and it can create a deep sense of wordless rapport with another practitioner – even with someone we never usually speak to.

Problems with pūjā

We have seen that the practice of pūjā should be enjoyable, and that it can bring great benefits. It is worth persevering with it, even if at first it seems strange, boring, or even distasteful. (Of course for many of us it seems none of these things, and is an enjoyable and fruitful part of practice from the start – if that is you, then you can probably skip this section.)

For those of us who do not at first respond to ritual practice, getting to like it is simply a matter of getting used to it, getting over the strangeness, and finding ways to engage the emotions with forms of words that may not suit our literary tastes. This just takes time, exposure, and a deepening understanding of the significance of the ritual practices used in our tradition. At first we may be inhibited by embarrassment about expressing unfashionable emotions like devotion in front of others. We fear we will look foolish, and our reserve and pride may get in the way. But this is usually overcome quite quickly, when we see that other people who are obviously strong and sane – and even admirable – are quite happy to express themselves in this way.

But some of us do experience negative reactions to ritual that go deeper than our usual caution about anything new and unusual. Such reactions can have a strong emotional flavour, which tells us that this is not just a question of not being much drawn to pūjā, but has its roots deep

in our psychology or past experience. Some of the most common reasons for this sort of reaction are that:

- We associate ritual with a religion we have been deeply involved with and rejected.
- We fear or reject the emotions that pūjā can evoke.
- Taking part in pūjās with others sets off our reaction to groups and belonging.

Associations with other religions

Often the first and second of these go together, particularly if we have experienced strong devotional feelings in the context of another spiritual tradition, which we have then rejected for rational reasons, because it does not make sense. We can then fear that devotional feelings will pull us back to an earlier, more easily manipulated, less adult state. But the fact that our śraddhā was once expressed through a medium that was perhaps not worthy of it does not invalidate our sense of reverence for something higher than ourselves as we currently are. What we need to do is to refine and educate our śraddhā, to check it against reason and experience, not to reject it altogether.

Nevertheless, in the case of a small number of people whose involvement with another tradition has been intense, the confused feelings brought up by taking part in pūjā can be overwhelmingly strong. If this is you it might be better to avoid pūjā for a while, or to only practice it in small trial doses, perhaps on your own, until you have more perspective on the feelings that it can evoke.

Reactions to groups

Probably a more common reason for strong negative reactions to pūjā is that it evokes feelings related to groups and belonging. Many of us at one time or another will have felt that joining in with a group of other people threatens our sense of our own individuality. This is a necessary and positive part of being an individual when the group is behaving unskilfully, but we may feel this even when others' behaviour is neutral or skilful. We feel the need to define ourselves as separate from any group, in order to establish and protect our sense of ourselves as self-determining individuals. For some of us this is a necessary stage in the task of becoming an individual, but it is not the last word. Once our sense of our own individuality is strong enough, we can join in with others while still being very much ourselves, like a musician who can happily play along with others without losing their part.

But meanwhile we may find that taking part in pūjā with others makes us feel like outsiders rather than strengthening our sense of solidarity with them. Everyone around us is taking part in something rather odd, that we perhaps do not fully understand, and we feel a pressure to go along with them that seems to threaten our individuality. We feel alienated, alone, perhaps rebellious, and perhaps superior.

In this case pūjā becomes an excellent opportunity to practice awareness, to become more conscious of the tendencies we need to work with, not just in pūjā, but in our life as a whole. When we practice ritual we have an opportunity to become aware of – and integrate – feelings and reactions to groups that almost certainly affect our lives and our relationships in a host of other ways. We might get more leverage on these reactions by reflecting that nobody else cares whether we join in with a ritual or not – the sense of pressure to conform is in our mind. We might ask ourselves whether the others taking part are really such conformists – perhaps some of them seem like very strong individuals in most other ways. We might ask ourselves whether we have ever felt anything similar in other circumstances, or whether we generally

tend to avoid joining with others, and whether we often seem to make ourselves a loner and an outsider.

Obviously this is not the main purpose of pūjā, but a valuable by-product of taking part in ritual can be that it helps us to become conscious of – and leave behind – reactions to groups that can limit us severely in many ways, preventing us from joining with others to change the world in positive ways, and shutting us off from the sense of shared purpose that is of deep friendship.

Pūjā is something to do

Pūjā is something to do, not something to think about or talk about. The only way we can judge its effects is to take part often enough to get over our initial unfamiliarity, as far as possible leaving our prejudices and preconceptions behind, so that we can experience the effects directly, for ourselves.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What was your first reaction to the idea of taking part in Buddhist ritual? Did any aspects of your past conditioning influence your attitude?
2. Under what circumstances in the past have you felt a sense of awe and reverence, or a sense of something higher than yourself as you are now? Can you learn anything from your past experience that could help you to cultivate this aspect of śraddhā in the future?
3. Try to describe what draws you towards:
 - a. the Buddha
 - b. the Dharma
 - c. the Sangha.
4. What first attracted you to each of them, and what attracts you now? How much of the attraction is based on reason and experience, and how much seems ‘too deep for words?’
5. What do you experience (positive and negative) when you take part in devotional practice? Does taking part in ritual affect your state of mind, and if so, how?
6. Do you think you could benefit by bringing more regular ritual into your practice? If so, how might you do this?

Text purpose-written by Vadanya.

In next three sessions we will be looking at the main devotional practices used in, firstly to get a clear idea of the purpose of each one, and secondly to find ways to engage more deeply with these practices. This week we will look at the Refuges and Precepts, the Threefold Pūjā, and the Dedication Ceremony. In the next session we explore the meaning of the Tiratana Vandana, and we will then devote the last session of this series on devotional practice to exploring the Sevenfold Pūjā.

The Refuges and Precepts

The Three Refuges and the ‘negative’ form of the Five Precepts, chanted in Pāli, followed by the ‘positive’ Precepts in English, are perhaps the most fundamental and essential devotional practice that we use in Triratna. The Refuges express our heartfelt commitment to the ideals of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha – our Going for Refuge – which is the what makes someone a Buddhist. Sangharakshita regards this Going for Refuge as the central spiritual experience, an experience that can occur at deeper and deeper levels. It is also an experience that can have many facets, including Insight, the arising of faith, and the altruistic desire to make a positive difference to the lives of others. The Five Precepts (or the Ten Precepts taken by Order members) follow naturally from this Going for Refuge. Practising the Precepts is the most obvious and practical way that we undertake to make our commitment to the Three Jewels a reality in our everyday lives.

For these reasons regularly chanting the Refuges and Precepts is a clear and powerful way to re-connect with what our lives are about, and to remind ourselves of what this implies for our daily behaviour. The practice gives us a regular opportunity to re-experience our commitment, and to remind ourselves to live by it. Without this constant re-experiencing and reminding, our commitment to the Three Jewels is often likely to be forgotten amid the rough-and-tumble of life in the everyday world.

Why chant in Pāli?

It may seem strange that we chant the Refuges and Precepts mainly in Pāli, when perhaps the meaning of what we are saying would loom larger in our minds if we were chanting in our own language. However there are some good reasons why we chant in Pāli. Although Pāli was almost certainly not the language spoken by the Buddha, it is probably as close to it as we can get, and because it is the language of the Pāli Canon, it is a link back to the historical Buddha and his followers, whose lives and teachings are recorded so vividly in these writings. The Pāli verses also link us with the other Buddhists throughout the world who chant the Refuges in this language. So by chanting the Refuges and ‘negative’ precepts in Pāli, we remind ourselves of our connections with all other Buddhists, in other countries all over the world, and

stretching back through time to the historical Buddha and his disciples. In contrast, if we all chanted the Refuges in our own modern language, then even within Triratna we would be saying different words from those repeated by our fellow Sangha members in different countries, and we would have lost an important opportunity to rise above our limited identification with our own culture, and instead to experience a sense of solidarity with all who belong to the ‘family of the Buddha’.

Involving the body

The Refuges and Precepts start with the phrase, ‘Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa’, translated in the Triratna Pūjā Book as “Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Perfectly Enlightened One.” The Pāli word *namo*, translated here as ‘homage’, implies a greeting involving a physical gesture of respect, with the hands held together in reverence. We normally make this gesture as we chant the Refuges and Precepts – the so-called *añjali mūdra*, a traditional sign of reverence in the Buddhist tradition. Placing our hands together in this gesture can make the emotional content of the words we are saying much more powerful – there is something real and direct about a physical gesture that speaks straight to the heart. In ritual practice we express ourselves with our whole being – with the body, as well as with the speech and mind – and this is one of the reasons it is so effective. If we feel resistance to making this gesture, it is precisely because it is such a potent way of expressing and invoking reverence.

The value of repetition

After the preliminary lines of homage to the Buddha, we chant the three Refuges three times each. This repetition gives us an extra opportunity to become fully aware of the meaning of what we are saying. Sometimes it may take us one round of the Refuges – or more – before we even remember what we are doing. Chanting three times also gives us an opportunity to call to mind different aspects of our commitment to the Three Jewels. For example, in our first chanting of the Sangha Refuge we might call to mind the Ārya Sangha – all those throughout time and space who have broken through to a higher level of awareness, and any great figures from the Buddhist tradition who we particularly admire. In the second round we might call to mind our commitment to Triratna, and our gratitude to all those who have devoted their lives to giving us the well-resourced Movement that we have today. In the third round we might call to mind our commitment to make a positive contribution to our local Sangha, which is probably the main way that the Sangha Refuge manifests in our everyday lives. Obviously the same principle can be applied to the other Refuges, and of course you will see aspects of each Refuge that have a particular meaning for you.

Re-committing to the Precepts

Having reminded ourselves of our commitment to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha by chanting the Refuges, we move on to chanting the Five Precepts, which are the most fundamental way in which we express our Going for Refuge in our day-to-day lives.

As we chant the traditional ‘negative’ form of the Precepts, we may become painfully aware of the ways in which we do not practice one or more the Precepts, and this can have the effect of undermining our sense of commitment. Maybe we remember the slightly-too-much beer we drank just last week at that party – and our behaviour afterwards – or the knee-jerk lie we told yesterday to get ourselves off the hook, or our unkind words we said to somebody who annoyed us. Perhaps half-consciously we think, “I did those things after the last time I chanted the precepts, and no doubt I will fall short of my commitment this time too.” So perhaps we chant with a sense that we are going through the motions, rather than with genuine commitment.

If chanting the precepts makes us aware of the ways in which we do not keep them – even if it makes us painfully aware of this – then this is a valuable and necessary part of our practice. Such remorse and disappointment with ourselves is a highly positive mental state – if not a pleasant one – and it gives us a strong motivation to align our life more closely with our values and ideals. But if our failure to keep the precepts perfectly in the past undermines our sense of being able to commit to them in the future, or if we feel that if we cannot keep the Precepts perfectly there is no point in practising them at all, then we need to remember the spirit behind the words we are chanting. Although the words of the Precepts simply ask us to “undertake to refrain from” taking life, taking the not-given, and so on, Sangharakshita has often translated this as “I undertake the training principle of refraining” from this or that action. The Precepts are training principles that we take on as a practice, not commandments that we must obey perfectly. No unenlightened human being keeps the Precepts perfectly. (Anyone who thinks they do so almost certainly has too simplistic an understanding of the Precepts. For example, it may be quite easy to refrain from intentionally killing another being with your own hands, but to completely avoid harming any other being in any way, or causing others to do so, is another matter.)

Because the Precepts are training guidelines, what is important is not so much that we keep them perfectly, but that we keep moving in the right direction. If we commit to the training principle of running a few miles every day, or to a daily practice of yoga, we do not feel that this is pointless because we cannot run a marathon, or because we cannot do the most difficult asanas precisely and perfectly. We keep stretching ourselves, we keep moving the goalposts, and this is what we commit to, not to some idea of perfection. Our commitment to the Precepts is the same. It is a commitment to moving forward, in the direction of a life that is more and more aligned with Buddhist values, and we should not allow the fact that we do not yet practice the Precepts perfectly to undermine our determination to carry this through.

Celebrating our Going for Refuge

At the end of the ‘negative’ Precepts in Pāli, we chant *sādhū* three times. As you probably know, *sādhū* is an expression of joy and celebration. In the Pāli Canon, when men and women where moved by the Buddha’s teaching and went for Refuge to him, this was usually accompanied by a heartfelt outburst of joy. With us, when we truly Go for Refuge, it should be the same. If we Go for Refuge in the right spirit we feel joy that we have found real meaning in life. We may feel that we have been released from a grey existence of indecision, lack of direction, and trivial concerns, and that we have entered a more colourful and vivid world where life has real significance, and even an element of magic. When we undertake the precepts we may feel delighted that we have been released from a prison of trivial, silly pleasures and dislikes, and started to live in a way that does not diminish and cramp us. So joy is a natural accompaniment to Going for Refuge, and we express this with three *sādhūs*.

The ‘positive’ Precepts

After the traditional ‘negative’ form of the Precepts, we chant them in their ‘positive’ form, this time in our own language, in words composed by Sangharakshita. Chanting this positive form of the Precepts reminds us that practising them is not about a literalistic adherence to the letter of a set of rules. Practising the Precepts does not mean valuing rules for rules’ sake, it means applying the principles of kindness, generosity, contentment, honesty, and awareness to our daily lives. It means living by the major, overarching spiritual principles that sum up the Buddhist approach to life. The positive form also makes it clear that we can never practice the Precepts perfectly, until we are Enlightened, and that our attempt to live ethically is always

work-in-progress – imagine what it would mean, for example, to be perfectly generous, perfectly contented with a simple life, or perfectly aware.

The value of repetition – again

As with any other practice, devotional practices only have a significant effect if we repeat them many times; and because chanting the Refuges and Precepts is a short practice that is fundamental to being a Buddhist, we can and should do it often and regularly. If you do not already do so, perhaps you could try chanting the Refuges and Precepts before or after your morning meditation, then perhaps making an offering of incense to your shrine. Do this for at least a week, genuinely trying to find ways to engage with the words you are saying, and see how this affects the rest of your day. Or, if you do not meditate in the morning, try devoting a few minutes to a brief morning ritual in which you chant the Refuges, to remind yourself of how you intend to approach the coming day.

The Threefold Pūjā

The Threefold Pūjā was written by Sangharakshita as a shorter and plainer alternative to the more elaborate Sevenfold Pūjā, but it is an important practice in its own right. The Short Pūjā is essentially a means to connect with and cultivate our sense of reverence for the Three Jewels, with a particular emphasis on the Buddha. The ‘Opening Reverence’ is a simple recollection of our respect for the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. The second section, ‘Reverence to the Three Jewels’, expands on this, reminding us that we too can attain what the Buddha attained; reminding us that Going for Refuge to the Dharma means a real commitment to “study, practice [and] realize” the teachings; and finally presenting us with the image of the Sangha as “an ever-widening circle” – a circle that we can help to expand.

In the final section of the pūjā we make three traditional offerings – flowers, light and incense – either in our imagination or in reality. The verses of the pūjā connect these offerings with three brief Dharmic reflections: the flowers are a reminder of impermanence; the light is a reminder of the illuminating wisdom of the Dharma handed on to us by the Buddha, which we can hand on in turn; the pervasive quality of the smell of incense is a reminder that the effects of spiritual practice do not stop with our own mental states, but that skilful action sends out ripples in all directions, influencing those around us, who in turn influence others, so that the way we live has an effect that is probably far greater and extends far further than we are aware of.

These three offerings in the last section of the pūjā are the same as those you made during your mitra ceremony – which is a powerful occasion for many people. For this reason you may be able to use the Threefold Pūjā to re-connect with what you felt when you became a mitra. It is important to find ways to recall significant turning points like this, reconnecting with the sense of decision and commitment we felt at the time, and with the sense of support from others in the Sangha we experienced. As you chant the verses of the Threefold Pūjā you could make this an opportunity to re-live in your imagination the offerings you made at your mitra ceremony, and to re-experience the deepening of commitment that this signified.

Like the Refuges and Precepts, the Threefold Pūjā is a short practice that we can chant on our own in just a few minutes. It can easily be incorporated into our daily routine if we find it useful.

The Dedication Ceremony

The Dedication Ceremony is used for a very specific purpose – to dedicate a place in which we will practice the Dharma, transforming it in our imagination into a sacred place, a protected

mandala in which a sort of alchemical transmutation can occur. Within this transformed and dedicated space, the base metal of our ordinary mind can become Buddha, our thought can become Dharma, and our communication with one another can become Sangha. This idea of the dedicated and therefore protected mandala within which transformation can occur is the central image of the Dedication Ceremony.

Mandalas come in many forms, and have many symbolic associations. The type of mandala we are concerned with here represents an ordered, enclosed, and sacred precinct, where we are protected from adverse influences from outside, and where something special can therefore happen. Traditionally such mandalas are often pictured as being surrounded and protected by an inner circle of lotuses, an impenetrable adamantine wall of vajras, and an outer circle of fire – all of which are referred to in the third part of the ceremony.

Some people have objected to the verse in the Dedication Ceremony that begins, “Though in the world outside there is strife/ Here may there be peace,” apparently on the grounds that they express a triumphalistic sentiment, comparing life within Triratna favourably to everything that happens outside it. However this objection is based on a misunderstanding. The “here” that the verses refer to – within which there is peace, love, and joy, in comparison to the strife, hate, and grief found outside – is the dedicated and protected mandala that we create in our imagination by performing the Dedication Ceremony.

As well as dedicating a place, we often use the Dedication Ceremony to dedicate a period of time to the practice of the Dharma. Often the two go together, as when we dedicate an ordinary rented hall for a weekend retreat, or an ordinary rented cottage for a period of solitary meditation. But we can also use the Dedication Ceremony to commit ourselves to a special period of practice. In the ‘Urban Retreats’ that have been introduced at some centres, in which people step up the level of their practice for a week while going about their ordinary lives, many people begin each day by chanting the Dedication Ceremony, changing the words “we dedicate this place” to “I dedicate this day.”

Getting our depths on our side

By chanting these verses of dedication, in our imagination changing an ordinary place into a protected mandala, or changing an otherwise ordinary period of our life into a special opportunity for transformation, we send an important message to our unconscious, which can have a powerful effect on our experience. Ordinary places and the routines of ordinary life tend to evoke our ordinary states of mind. When things are ordinary we find ourselves quite naturally slipping into our usual habits. And why not? After all – we think in our depths – everything is as usual, and this is what I usually do, this is how I usually think, this is how I usually feel. So we carry on as usual.

But our unconscious depths can be profoundly influenced by ritual. This is one of the important features of ritual practice – that it can speak directly to our unconscious mind, rather than just to the rationalistic, conscious part of our awareness – and the effects can be far more powerful than we probably realize. By chanting the Dedication Ceremony, engaging our mind with the meaning of what we are saying, and at the same time using our body to reinforce what we are expressing, we tell our unconscious depths that something different and special is happening. If we engage with this practice strongly enough, so that the message gets through, we may find that we can effortlessly leave behind old habits and patterns – for a period – and that we become far more open to experiencing new and better states of mind. Somehow we know in our depths that this is a special time and place, so we do not even feel tempted to indulge in old unskilful patterns. Somehow our hindrances seem to go into

abeyance. Perhaps we do not even think about sex, or any other craving, for a while. Ill-will does not raise its ugly head. We have no problem getting up to meditate, when usually it is a struggle. Somehow we seem to have left our usual anxious concerns at home. We feel able to commit ourselves to practice, in a way that in our normal situation often seems impossible. What has happened is that our unconscious mind has got the message, and is working on the side of the Dharma – at least for this special time, and in this special place. Through the power of ritual practice we have persuaded our unconscious mind to help our practice, at least for a while, rather than undermining it, as it so often does.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. If you do not already do so, try chanting the Refuges and Precepts every morning to start your day, as suggested in the text. Notice any effects this has on your state of mind, and be prepared to tell the group about them.
2. The text suggests that chanting each Refuge three times gives us an opportunity to call to mind different aspects of the Three Jewels, or different aspects of our commitment to each of them. Think of some different aspects of the Three Jewels that have a particular meaning to you, and/or think of some different aspects of your commitment to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and share these with the group. Try calling some of these different aspects of your Going for Refuge to mind as you go through the three repetitions of each Refuge, and notice any effects.
3. What is your attitude to making physical gestures of respect and reverence, such as holding the hands in the añjali mūdṛa, or bowing to the shrine? What feelings does making such gestures evoke for you?
4. Spend some time remembering how you felt at your mitra ceremony. Try to re-experience what you felt at the time, and express this ritually by offering a flower, a candle and a stick of incense to a shrine, perhaps in the context of a Threefold Pūjā.
5. Find some images of mandalas and bring them to the mitra group. Be prepared to discuss what such images of mandalas evoke for you.
6. Have you ever experienced a particular place or time as somehow special, and found that old habits go into abeyance, and positive states become easier to access, at least for a while? (For example, this sometimes happens when we go on retreat.) Do you think that the Dedication Ceremony could help to strengthen or create this effect?

The Refuges and Five Precepts

The Three Refuges

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Dutiyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Tatīyampi Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatīyampi Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi
Tatīyampi Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Translation

Homage to Him, the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Perfectly Enlightened One!
To the Buddha for refuge I go.
To the Dharma for refuge I go.
To the Sangha for refuge I go.

For the second time to the Buddha for refuge I go.
For the second time to the Dharma for refuge I go.
For the second time to the Sangha for refuge I go.

For the third time to the Buddha for refuge I go.
For the third time to the Dharma for refuge I go.
For the third time to the Sangha for refuge I go.

The Five Precepts

Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Kāmesu micchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Musāvāda veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Surāmeraya majja pamādatthānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi
Sādhū Sādhū Sādhū

Translation

I undertake to abstain from taking life.
I undertake to abstain from taking the not-given.
I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct.
I undertake to abstain from false speech.
I undertake to abstain from taking intoxicants.

The Positive Precepts

With deeds of loving kindness, I purify my body.
With open-handed generosity, I purify my body.
With stillness, simplicity, and contentment, I purify my body.
With truthful communication, I purify my speech.
With mindfulness clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

The Threefold Pūjā

1. Opening reverence

We reverence the Buddha, the Perfectly Enlightened One, the Shower of the Way.
We reverence the Dharma, the Teaching of the Buddha, which leads from darkness to Light.
We reverence the Sangha, the fellowship of the Buddha's disciples, that inspires and guides.

2. Reverence to the Three Jewels

We reverence the Buddha, and aspire to follow Him.
The Buddha was born as we are born. *
What the Buddha overcame, we too can overcome;
What the Buddha attained, we too can attain.

We reverence the Dharma, and aspire to follow it
With body, speech, and mind until the end.
The Truth in all its aspects, the Path in all its stages,
We aspire to study, practise, realize.

We reverence the Sangha, and aspire to follow it:
The fellowship of those who tread the Way.
As, one by one, we make our own commitment,
An ever-widening circle, the Sangha grows.

(* Or 'The Buddha was a man, as we are men.')

3. Offerings to the Buddha

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer flowers:
Flowers that today are fresh and sweetly blooming,
Flowers that tomorrow are faded and fallen.
Our bodies too, like flowers, will pass away.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer candles:
To Him, who is the Light, we offer light.
From His greater lamp a lesser lamp we light within us:
The lamp of Bodhi shining within our hearts.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer incense:
Incense whose fragrance pervades the air.
The fragrance of the perfect life, sweeter than incense,
Spreads in all directions throughout the world.

The Dedication Ceremony

We dedicate this place to the Three Jewels:

To the Buddha, the Ideal of Enlightenment to which we aspire;

To the Dharma, the Path of the Teaching which we follow;

To the Sangha, the spiritual fellowship with one another which we enjoy.

Here may no idle word be spoken;

Here may no unquiet thought disturb our minds.

To the observance of the Five Precepts

We dedicate this place;

To the practice of meditation

We dedicate this place;

To the development of wisdom

We dedicate this place;

To the attainment of Enlightenment

We dedicate this place.

Though in the world outside there is strife

Here may there be peace;

Though in the world outside there is hate

Here may there be love;

Though in the world outside there is grief

Here may there be joy.

Not by the chanting of the sacred Scriptures,

Not by the sprinkling of holy water,

But by our own efforts towards Enlightenment

We dedicate this place.

Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,

May the lotus petals of purity open;

Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,

May the vajra-wall of determination extend;

Around this Mandala, this sacred spot,

May the flames that transmute Saṃsāra into Nirvana arise.

Here seated, here practising,

May our mind become Buddha,

May our thought become Dharma,

May our communication with one another be Sangha.

For the happiness of all beings,

For the benefit of all beings,

With body, speech, and mind,

We dedicate this place.

Text purpose-written by Vadanya.

Introduction

The Tiratana Vandana is a set of traditional Pāli verses of praise and respect for the Three Jewels. Tiratana means ‘Three Jewels’; vandana means salutation, respect, homage, veneration and worship. In the Triratna Pūjā Book Tiratana Vandana is translated as ‘Salutation to the Three Jewels’, but if the word ‘salutation’ does not mean much to you, you could just as well translate it as ‘Praise of the Three Jewels’, ‘Homage to the Three Jewels’, or even ‘Worship of the Three Jewels.’

The benefits of chanting

In the Triratna Buddhist Community the Tiratana Vandana is often chanted before the morning meditation – although of course it can be performed at any time of day or night. Perhaps most people’s first experience of it is simply as a beautiful chant in a language we do not understand, that mysteriously seems to help us settle down to meditate. This simple act of chanting with others – even if we have only a very hazy idea of the meaning of the words – can be an excellent preparation for meditation. It requires attention and mindfulness, and the act of chanting with others takes us out of our tight focus on ourselves, which can be such an obstacle to meditation. The rhythm of the chant can help to relax us, its liveliness can wake us up, and its beauty can open us up to positive emotions and higher states. But to benefit fully from chanting the Tiratana Vandana we need to know the meaning of the words we are saying, so that – although we are chanting in Pāli – something of this meaning can perfume our minds as we chant.

Structure

The Tiratana Vandana is divided into three parts – relating to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – and each part consists of two sections. The first section on each Jewel lists some of its qualities, allowing us to call these qualities to mind and connect with our admiration for them. This act of calling positive qualities to mind and praising them is an essential prerequisite to respect and commitment – if we are not aware of something’s good qualities we have no basis for respecting and admiring them. In the second section on each Jewel this praise then moves on to become a desire to Go for Refuge. This second section is the same for each Refuge, with just one word altered – Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha – so that it serves as a repeated chorus in the chant. We will look at the three sections of praise to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha first, then explore the meaning of the ‘chorus’ that is repeated for each Jewel.

The Buddha

The Tiratana Vandana starts with same line as the Refuges and Precepts: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*. As with the Refuges, the very first words – *namo*

tassa, meaning ‘respectful salutations to him’ – calls to mind a physical gesture of respect, reminding us to place our hands together in the añjali mūdra. *Bhagavato* is often rendered into English as ‘Blessed One,’ but Sangharakshita has pointed out that the word has a host of connotations in Buddhism and in Indian culture. *Bhagavato* implies someone who stands out from everyone else, someone who has the highest spiritual qualities, someone awe-inspiring, someone sublime, someone auspicious. The Buddha is also *arahato* – worthy or noble – and *sammāsambuddhassa* – really and truly awake.

The next verse then emphasises the truth of what has been said: ‘Such indeed is he’ (‘Iti’pi so’). He really is like this. He truly is awake, while we are still asleep and dreaming; and because he is not compulsively chasing dream pleasures and running away from dream fears, he is free, while we are imprisoned by the delusional reality we experience. He is ‘equipped with knowledge (*vijjā*) and practice (*carana*).’ In other words his Insight is not merely an intellectual understanding – he walks his talk, and he is not like some intellectuals who spin a fine web of words, but whose lives are ruled by the same conventional worldly concerns as everybody else. He has attained to real happiness (*sugato*), because he is living in reality, not in delusion. And he is the ‘Knower of the Worlds’ (*loka-vidū*) – his vision is beyond anything we can conceive, beyond anything we can imagine.

For all these reasons he is ‘the Unsurpassed Guide of those to be tamed’ – *anuttaro purisa-damma sārati*. The Pāli word *purisa-damma*, which is translated as ‘men to be tamed’ in the Puja Book, according to Sangharakshita means something more like, ‘those who wish to be more controlled’, or perhaps even ‘people of the Dharma.’ We count ourselves as people who wish to be more controlled, and less in slavery to greed hatred and delusion; so he is the teacher we need to follow. He is ‘Unsurpassed’ or foremost, (*anuttaro*), far above any other teacher, and therefore far more important to us than any currently fashionable writer or thinker.

These words in praise of the Buddha may mean something to us, or they may not bring up much in the way of an emotional response. We need to use our imagination to bring them to life, and to engage our emotions with them. We need to make an imaginative effort to conjure up for ourselves a Buddha who is not just an ordinary human being – even if he is more psychologically and emotionally ‘sorted out’ than most – but a being of a different order, someone who experiences a higher and truer reality, and is seeking to save us from our unnecessary suffering by opening our eyes to this different dimension of being. The Buddha is beyond our present experience, and imagination and faith are the faculties by which we can experience at least a glimmer of his nature. If we can experience something of this glimmer, then reverence and Refuge will follow naturally. If we cannot, our Buddha Refuge is likely to be half-hearted.

The Dharma

The second part of the Tiratana Vandana starts with a hymn in praise of the Dharma – ‘Dhamma’ in Pāli – in which we call to mind the positive qualities of the teaching, and our gratitude, respect and reverence for it. The teaching is described as *bhagavatā Dhammo* – the Dharma of a Buddha, the teaching of ‘the Richly Endowed One.’ This is no ordinary teaching, on a par with the other systems of thought. In Sangharakshita’s words

The Dhamma [is] an expression in words... of the ultimate reality of things. The Dhamma as the Buddha’s teaching ... [is] His communication of, His experience of, the ultimate reality of things. [It] is the Dhamma which has issued from the mind, or the spiritual realization, of a Buddha, a perfectly enlightened one, and not something

which has been fabricated intellectually, or put together in an eclectic manner from sources.

This is a teaching that comes from a higher dimension of being. It is a teaching worthy of reverence, to which we can honourably bow our heads; and it is not to be compared with any other teaching we may come across.

This Dharma is also ‘well communicated’ – *svākḥhāto* – and put into a form that we can understand, using not only rational discourse, but also parables, metaphors, and poetic imagery. We could relate this idea to our own experience, calling to mind the way the Dharma spoke to us when we first came across it, and recalling those teachings that particularly inspire us now.

The teaching is also ‘immediately apparent’ – *sandiḥhiko*. It has an observable effect, which we do not need to wait for the next life to experience. If we practice the metta bhavana, for example, we will notice an effect on our emotions and our relationships with others. If we go on retreat, our mental states will be altered. This is a matter of experience, not speculation. We could call to mind at this point the ways in which the Dharma has affected us, stimulating our faith that it will have ever greater effects in the future.

The Dharma is ‘perennial’ – *akālika*, which means timeless, free from time, or outside of time. At one level this may point to the fact that the Dharma is like a message from a higher dimension of reality, a dimension that is outside of time. At a more down-to-earth level it means that the essence of the Dharma is true in any historical period and in any culture, even though it may be in conflict with the values and worldviews that happen to be fashionable in any particular era. To quote Sangharakshita again:

So the Dhamma is eternal in this sense, it's a truth that remains true irrespective of particular instances or circumstances. It's as **valid now** as it **was in the Buddha's time**. There are certain things that have got mixed up with the Dhamma historically, which were valid then, useful then, but not valid now, not useful now, that's a different matter. But the basic fundamental principles remain eternally true and eternally valid.

The Dharma is also ‘of the nature of a personal invitation’ – *ehipassiko*. The Pāli *ehi* literally means ‘come’, and *passiko* means ‘see’. So it is the ‘come-and-see Dharma’. Nobody is forcing us to practice it. We are invited to try it out, to see if it works. We keep practicing because we know from experience that it does us good. We have benefitted from it in the past, and we expect to benefit in the future.

Then the Dharma is ‘Progressive’ – *opanayiko*. *Opanayiko* means leading forward or leading onward. The Dharma leads us forward step by step and stage by stage, opening our eyes gradually, as our whole inner being develops. It is a path of organic growth that is progressive and evolutionary, so it does not ask us to take on anything we are not ready for, and there are always practices we can do that suit our present condition.

Finally the Dharma is ‘to be understood individually by the wise’ – *paccatam veditabbo viññūhi'ti*. (*Paccatam* means ‘personally’; *veditabbo* means ‘to be known’; *viññūhi'ti* means ‘by those who are wise’, or ‘by those who understand.’) The Dharma is not a dogma we must accept on blind faith. We need to explore it, to understand it for ourselves, and to make it our own.

The Sangha

As with the Buddha and Dharma, the third part of the Tiratana Vandana opens with a number of epithets in praise of the third Jewel, the Sangha. The Sangha is referred to as *Bhagavato sāvakaśaṅgho* – the spiritual community of those who are disciples of, those who are open to, the Buddha and his teaching. This Sangha is ‘happily proceeding’ – *supaṭipanno*. The members of this community proceed well and happily, treading a positive path, moving forward on a path of practice, and they are doing this happily. They are also ‘uprightly proceeding’ – *ujupatipanno*. *Uju* means ‘straight’, so this could be taken to mean that the members of the Sangha are on the direct, straight path to spiritual progress; but the word ‘uprightly’ used in the translation seems to carry a strong hint of ethical uprightness, also implying that the Sangha proceeds ethically, with integrity and honesty, and with the upright dignity that an ethical life confers.

The Sangha are also ‘methodically proceeding’ – *ñāyapaṭipanno*. They practice systematically, according to a definite method, where each stage builds on what went before. In the words of Sangharakshita:

It suggests regular steps or systematically. For instance people who haven't done much in the way of meditation think that meditation means just sitting down and musing. But there is a method, a systematic technique almost, of getting concentrated, like counting the breaths or doing the mettā bhāvanā in a certain sequence of stages. There's a definite way of going about it, it's a practical thing. There are certain definite things to be done in a certain order. It doesn't just happen. So it's this which is covered by the word *ñāya*. You go about it methodically, systematically, in a practical sort of way, not just in a vague general dreamy kind of way. So the community of the Buddha's disciples are proceeding methodically, they're taking concrete positive steps, in a methodical practical way, to ensure that they do develop. They don't just meditate, they do the mindfulness of breathing, or they do a visualization practice or they do the recollection of the elements; there's no such thing as just meditating, not unless you're very advanced and can just sit down and go into a higher state of consciousness. So one goes about it methodically.

The final way in which the Sangha is said to be ‘proceeding’ is *sāmicipaṭipano*. In our Puja Book this is translated as ‘correctly proceeding’, but in his seminar on the Tiratana Vandana, Sangharakshita gave a more inspiring interpretation – harmoniously proceeding, proceeding together, proceeding in harmony. We do not just practice the Dharma for our own spiritual progress, we practice to create a harmonious community, and this is essential to our development as individuals. Harmony among its members would be an important part of any adequate definition of the Sangha.

The possibly rather puzzling ‘four pairs of individuals, these eight persons’ (*cattāri purisayugāni, aṭṭha purisa puggalā*) referred to in the translation are all those in whom an element of Insight has arisen, from the ‘stream entrant’ who has broken the first three fetters out of the ten that are traditionally said to bind us, and is now irreversibly destined for Enlightenment, up to the Arahants who have achieved complete liberation. This *Ārya Sangha* or Noble Sangha is traditionally divided into four levels of progress according to the number of fetters broken, and as there are men and women at each level, we have four pairs of types of member of the *Ārya Sangha*, or eight types of person.

This fellowship of the Buddhas disciples is worthy of worship (*āhuneyyo*), worthy of hospitality (*pāhuneyyo*), worthy of offerings (*dakkhineyo*), and worthy of salutation. It is worthy to be bowed to with the hands held together in the anjali mudra (*añjalikaraniyo*). And the reason that these people are worthy of this level of respect is that they are ‘an incomparable source of goodness to the world’ – *anuttaram puññakhettaṃ lokassā’ti*.

At this point we could call to mind all the great figures of the Buddhist tradition, as well as all the unknown people who have made their own contribution, and we could include any present-day members of the Sangha we have a particular respect for. We could connect with our sense of gratitude for the great gift these people have given us, and perhaps imagine ourselves bowing to them respectfully, with folded hands. What would the world be like, what would life be like – we might reflect – if nobody had ever developed beyond the confused level of the ‘worldling’, driven this way and that by desire, aversion, and deluded views? What would the world be like if nobody had lived by a higher and deeper vision of how things could be, and passed it on to others? What would the world be like if the Buddha’s realization had simply sunk in to oblivion, because there was nobody to pass it on to the people of the future? People with greater vision, people whose very being is larger and more universal than the norm, people who transmit the Dharma to future generations – such people are indeed an ‘incomparable source of goodness to the world.’

The ‘chorus’

After each part of the Tiratana Vandana in praise of one or another of the Three Jewels, there is a verse that is repeated, with just the one difference – the word Buddha, Dharma, or Sangha. In this ‘chorus’, the awareness of the positive qualities of the Three Jewels that we have been connecting with in the verses of praise turns into commitment – a desire to Go for Refuge to each of the Three Jewels.

We chant, ‘All my life I Go for Refuge’ to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha – *jivata pariyantam saranam gacchami*. The Pāli words *jivata pariyantam* mean ‘until the end of life’, while *saranam gacchami* means ‘I go for Refuge.’ Having called to mind the qualities of each of the Three Jewels, we are now in a position to Go for Refuge to them. We know what we are Going for Refuge to. And we are not just expressing a passing enthusiasm here, we are making a definite commitment, for as long as this life lasts. As Sangharakshita has pointed out, our commitment has a ‘once-and-for-all’ quality about it:

... a commitment which is not for life is hardly a commitment. So if you really commit yourself there's a sort of quality of absoluteness about it. You can't see beyond this life, so in practical terms it means you commit yourself for life.

But despite this once-and-for-all quality, Going for Refuge is also something we do continuously and continually. We need to constantly renew our commitment, to keep it alive as a factor that informs the way we live.

This commitment somehow transcends time – it is for life – and it is to something that is itself timeless: it is to all the Awakened of the past, future, and present, as well as to all the Truth-Teachings, and to all manifestations of Sangha, throughout time. To all manifestations of the Three Jewels in the past (*atita ca*), yet to be (*anagata*) or that now are (*paccupanna*), ‘My worship flows unceasingly’ – *Aham vandami sabbada*.

There are no other reliable refuges, there is nothing else that is a Refuge – *N’atthi me saranam annam*. The Buddha is the supreme, unsurpassed Refuge for me – *Buddho me saranam varam* –

and the same is true of the Dharma and Sangha. Our commitment to this truth is a powerful force that can have a real impact on us and on our world, which is a cause for joy. So the Tiratana Vandana draws to a close by invoking this power – ‘by the virtue of this truth’ (*etena saccavajjena*) and then ends with a final outburst of joyous well-wishing: *Jayamaṅgalam* – ‘May grace abound, and victory!’



Questions for reflection and discussion

Your group and study leader may think it is more appropriate either to discuss these questions fully, or else to learn to chant the Tiratana Vandana together, and then to discuss selected questions in any time remaining. Either way, please reflect on the questions before the session.

1. Do you think of the Buddha as your “Unsurpassed Guide”, whose teachings come from a higher and deeper perception of the truth than those of other teachers, writers or thinkers? (Be honest!) Who else influences your thinking?
2. Think of some ways in which, as far as you are concerned, the Dharma has been “well communicated” – *svākṣhāto* – and put into a form that you can relate to. Which books, talks, teachings, stories, myths, rituals or images have spoken to you particularly strongly?
3. Think of some ways in which the effects of practicing the Dharma have been “immediately apparent” – *sandiṭṭhiko* – in your own experience.
4. The Tiratana Vandana calls the Dharma “timeless” – *akāliko*. When the Dharma seems to conflict with contemporary ways of thinking, do you tend to:
 - a. Assume that the Dharma should be updated to reflect our superior modern knowledge, or
 - b. Assume that contemporary world-views are limited in some ways, because they are not based on the vision of a Buddha?
5. Can you think of examples where each of these conclusions might be more appropriate?
6. Which of the descriptions of the Sangha given in the Tiratana Vandana seem to apply to your local Sangha? (For example, do the Order Members and mitras at your Centre seem to be “happily proceeding”, and so on?)
7. Think of some members of the Sangha (past and present, and from any tradition) who you admire and respect. Reflect on why you admire them, and be ready to share this with the group.
8. In what ways are such people “an incomparable source of goodness for the world”?

The Buddha Vandana

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Iti'pi so bhagavā araham sammā-sambuddho

vijjā-carana sampanno sugato

loka-vidū, anuttaro purisa-damma-sārati

sattā deva-manussānam

buddho bhagavā ti

Buddham jīvita pariyantam saranam gacchāmi

Ye ca Buddha atītā ca

Ye ca Buddha anāgatā

Paccuppannā ca ye Buddha

Aham vandāmi sabbadā

N'atthi me saranam aññam

Buddho me saranam varam

Etena sacca-vajjena

Hotu me jayamaṅgalam

Translation

Such indeed is He, the Richly Endowed: the Free, the Fully
and Perfectly Awake, Equipped with Knowledge and Practice,
the Happily Attained, Knower of the Worlds, Guide Unsurpassed
of Men to Be Tamed, the Teacher of Gods and Men, the Awakened
One Richly Endowed.

All my life I go for Refuge to the Awakened One.

To all the Awakened of the past,

To all the Awakened yet to be,

To all the Awakened that now are,

My worship flows unceasingly.

No other refuge than the Wake,

Refuge supreme, is there for me.

Oh by the virtue of this truth,

May grace abound, and victory!

The Dharma Vandana
Svākkhāto bhagavatā Dhammo
sandittiko akāliko ehipassiko
opanayiko paccatam
veditabbo viññūhīti
Dhammaṃ jīvita-pariyantaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Ye ca Dhammā atītā ca
Ye ca Dhammā anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Dhamma
Ahaṃ vandāmi sabbadā
N'atthi me saraṇaṃ aññaṃ
Dhammo me saraṇaṃ varaṃ
Etena sacca-vajjena
Hotu me jayamaṅgalaṃ

Translation

Well communicated is the Teaching of the Richly Endowed One,
Immediately Apparent, Perennial, of the Nature of a Personal
Invitation, Progressive, to be understood individually, by the wise.
All my life I go for Refuge to the Truth.

To all the Truth-Teachings of the past,
To all the Truth-Teachings yet to be,
To all the Truth-Teachings that now are,
My worship flows unceasingly.
No other refuge than the Truth,
Refuge supreme, is there for me.
Oh by the virtue of this truth,
May grace abound, and victory!

The Sangha Vandana
Supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
ujupatipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
ñāyapaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
sāmīcipaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
yadidaṃ cattāri purisayugāni
aṭṭha purisapuggalā
Esa bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
āhuneyyo, pāhuneyyo, dakkhineyyo
aṅjalikaraṇīyo anuttaraṃ
puññaṃkhettaṃ lokassā'ti
Sanghaṃ jīvita-pariyantaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Ye ca Sangha atītā ca
Ye ca Sangha anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Sangha
Ahaṃ vandāmi sabbaḍā
N'atthi me saraṇaṃ aññaṃ
Śaṅho me saraṇaṃ varaṃ
Etena sacca-vajjena
Hotu me jayamaṅgalaṃ

Translation

Happily proceeding is the fellowship of the Hearers of the Richly Endowed One,
uprightly proceeding...,
methodically proceeding...,
correctly proceeding...,
namely, these four pairs of Individuals,
these eight Persons.
This fellowship of Hearers of the Richly Endowed One is worthy of worship, worthy of hospitality, worthy of offerings, worthy of salutation with folded hands, an incomparable source of goodness to the world.
All my life I go for Refuge to the Fellowship.

To all the Fellowships that were,
To all the Fellowships to be,
To all the Fellowships that now are,
My worship flows unceasingly.
No refuge but the Fellowship,
Refuge supreme, is there for me.
Oh by the virtue of this truth,
May grace abound, and victory!

Text purpose-written by Vadanya.

Introduction

The Sevenfold Pūjā is the most challenging of the devotional practices normally used in Triratna, but it can also be the most rewarding. It is an advanced practice that asks us to express states of mind that are almost certainly beyond us at the moment. The Sevenfold Pūjā is a rehearsal for a role we are not yet ready to play; but, like any rehearsal, its purpose is to prepare us for what is to come.

The origin of the pūjā

The words we use in the Sevenfold Pūjā come from a long poem called the ‘Bodhicaryāvatāra’ (‘Guide to the Path of Awakening’), written by the Indian monk Śāntideva, who lived around the year 700CE. However the Sevenfold Pūjā seems to have been an important practice for several hundred years before Śāntideva wrote his version. The particular verses that we use were selected by Sangharakshita from an unpublished translation of the Bodhicaryāvatāra, which – unlike the more scholarly published versions – has the virtue of turning Śāntideva’s Sanskrit poetry into English that is rhythmic and pleasing to chant.

The Bodhicaryāvatāra is a distinctly Mahāyāna text, and the Sevenfold Pūjā has a distinctly Mahāyāna flavour. This means that it emphasizes the Bodhisattva ideal of spiritual practice for the sake of all beings, that it invokes a host of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who can help us by their influence, and that its aim is to move us towards the arising of the Bodhicitta, the transpersonal ‘Will to Enlightenment’.

A Bodhicitta practice

We discussed the Bodhicitta in the last session of Part 4 of this course (it might help to re-read this), but because the Sevenfold Pūjā is essentially a Bodhicitta practice, it might be useful to say a few words about it here. We could think of the Bodhicitta as a current of spiritual energy, a stream of positive volition that is larger than any individual, but which we as individuals can align ourselves with, become receptive to, and ultimately express and be part of. This current of positive volition is what motivates the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, but it can also act through us, at our lower level, to the extent that we can get our small, self-preoccupied selves out of the way. This way of seeing the spiritual life offers a different perspective on the Buddhist path from the one we are probably used to, in which it is seen as a quest for Insight, but the goal is the same. Insight involves seeing beyond our delusion of separate self-hood to a much wider vision of interconnectedness, and getting ‘our small, self-preoccupied selves out of the way’ is both a preparation for, and an expression of, this Insight.

We should not turn this way of looking at the spiritual life into a religious dogma or a philosophical theory – it is essentially a poetic vision, a creative myth that gives our spiritual life a powerful imaginative context, and also overcomes some of the near enemies of genuine Buddhist practice, such as seeing it as an individualistic quest for pleasant mental states. The fact that this is a poetic vision does not mean that it is not ‘true’ – the nature of reality is almost certainly more like a vision or a myth than it is like any intellectual theory that can be expressed in words.

Because the idea of the Bodhicitta is poetic or mythic rather than intellectual, it is probably most easily expressed through an image. One good image for it is the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteśvara, in which the Bodhisattva of Compassion is shown as a single body with a multitude of arms, each holding a different implement, each offering something different to help beings evolve. Each arm of Avalokiteśvara is a distinct individual, but in another sense they are all united, all expressing the common purpose of the Bodhisattva. Using this image, we could say that the ultimate purpose of the pūjā is make us ready to offer ourselves to Avalokiteśvara, as one of his many arms.

A rehearsal

The Sevenfold Pūjā takes us through a series of guided reflections and visualizations that generate a progressive sequence of spiritual moods, each of which builds on and follows logically from the one before. This sequence culminates, in the Dedication of Merits and Self-Surrender section, in us giving ourselves to the Bodhicitta, dedicating ourselves to the cosmic project of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and offering our lives, talents and possessions to all beings.

For most of us this is something we can only do in our imagination at present. There are words in the last section of the pūjā – and perhaps before – that most of us cannot say wholeheartedly. But we should not worry too much about this. The Sevenfold Pūjā is a rehearsal. We are rehearsing the role of the trainee Bodhisattva, dressing in a robe that is several sizes too big for us. There is nothing dishonest about this. When we are children we play at different aspects of being an adult, as a preparation for taking on the role of an adult. When we rehearse the emotions of the last stage of the pūjā we are playing at growing up to our full stature. This will help us to do this fully in the future, and perhaps even to do it in some small measure right now. Eventually, if we persist, we will be able to say the words of the last section of the pūjā with a whole heart. Then all our problems will be over. To use Śāntideva's image, we will have found the philosophers stone that turns the heavy lead of our ordinary life into gold.

Worship

With mandarava, blue lotus, and jasmine,
With all flowers pleasing and fragrant,
And with garlands skilfully woven,
I pay honour to the princes of the Sages,
So worthy of veneration.

I envelop them in clouds of incense,
Sweet and penetrating;
I make them offerings of food, hard and soft,
And pleasing kinds of liquids to drink.

I offer them lamps, encrusted with jewels,
Festooned with golden lotus.
On the paving, sprinkled with perfume,
I scatter handfuls of beautiful flowers.

To open ourselves to the influence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we need firstly to be aware of them, so in the first stage of the Sevenfold Pūjā we extend an invitation to them, asking the Bodhicitta and its manifestations to visit us, to enter our awareness. We imagine ourselves extending this invitation by making the seven traditional Indian offerings to an honoured guest: flowers, incense, food, water for drinking, water for washing, the light of lamps, and perfume. It is as though we were welcoming a famous person whom we respect very highly into our home, knowing that they will be tired, hungry, thirsty and dusty from travelling to do us this honour. Inviting the Buddha or the Bodhicitta into our mind is like inviting a great king or queen into a small shabby flat – the least we can do is to offer them what they need to feel comfortable and welcome.

Mandarava are huge mythic flowers, as large as cartwheels and shining golden like the sun, which rain from the sky whenever the Buddha gives a particularly auspicious discourse. So with the very first word of the pūjā we are in a poetic, mythic realm, not in the world of everyday reality. From the very start we need to engage with the pūjā in this spirit – we need to give our everyday common-sense mind a holiday, suspend disbelief, and be willing to enter another dimension of experience. Most of us are practised at doing this – if we can enjoy any literature, opera, or films that depict something other than the ‘kitchen sink’ world of everyday routine, we know that we do not have to believe that what we are experiencing is literally ‘true’ to engage our imagination with it, and to allow it to transform our emotions.

Among the offerings of flowers we give ‘garlands skilfully woven.’ In India the tradition of honouring a person by garlanding them with colourful strings of flowers is still very much alive, and those who have experienced this will know that this is a very obvious and visible way of showing respect, and generates a joyful, celebratory atmosphere.

As well as putting us in a mood of respectful invitation, Sangharakshita has pointed out that the Worship section should also awaken a sense of beauty. The experience of beauty is one of the ways we connect with something higher than our ordinary workaday mind; it refines the consciousness and makes it tend towards a higher plane of being, and for this reason it is closely connected with śraddhā. If we can experience a sense of beauty in our imagination at the start of the pūjā we have taken a step towards the realm of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and we will find it easier to align our intentions with theirs. To evoke this beauty we need to use our imagination to conjure up the images in Śāntideva's verses as vividly as we can. We need to see the mandarava and other flowers in our imagination, in all their colourful exuberance; we need to smell the incense, which is so evocative of beautiful places and higher states of mind; we need to conjure up a picture of ourselves scattering flowers on a tiled mosaic pavement within a beautiful, mythic palace, ‘where canopies gleam with pearls, over delightful pillars, brilliant with gems, rising up from floors of clear, brilliant crystal’ – to quote the Bodhicaryāvatāra.

However the evocations of beauty used in the pūjā are rooted in Indian culture, and they do not always speak strongly to people from a different background. In Śāntideva's poem he also conjures up images of nature as offerings to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and this can be a more accessible way of connecting with a sense of beauty. We need to be creative in the way we engage with the pūjā, so if images of mountains, forests, starry skies or sunsets work better

for you, then conjure these up in your mind at the end of the 'Worship' section, and imagine yourself offering these to the Buddhas.

After the Worship section we normally chant the Avalokiteśvara mantra, while those who want to make offerings to the shrine. We invoke Avalokiteśvara at this point as the main patron of our pūjā because, of all the Bodhisattvas, he most clearly symbolizes the Bodhicitta.

Salutation

As many atoms as there are
In the thousand million worlds,
So many times I make reverent salutation
To all the Buddhas of the Three Eras,
To the Saddharma,
And to the excellent Community.

I pay homage to all the shrines,
And places in which the Bodhisattvas have been.
I make profound obeisance to the Teachers,
And those to whom respectful salutation is due.

A salutation is a respectful greeting; in the context of the pūjā it means bowing with the hands together in reverence, or perhaps even making full-length prostrations. Having invited the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas into our experience in the Worship section, we conjure up the image of ourselves bowing to them. By bowing we acknowledge that the Bodhicitta is bigger than we are, and that the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas stand above us. If we think our little individual self is as important as the Bodhicitta, we can hardly give ourselves to it. If we think we are on an equal level with the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we cannot be receptive to their influence. If we think like this we are stuck in narrow-minded arrogance, and the wide expansiveness of what one Buddhist teacher has called Big Mind cannot fit into that cramped space. So to free ourselves from this, and to make room for something bigger than ourselves as we currently are to enter our mind, we bow.

In fact we imagine ourselves bowing as many times as there are atoms in 'the thousand million worlds.' If we were to make all these bows one after the other the Salutation section would take rather a long time. But traditional commentaries advise us to imagine as we say these lines that there is a tiny replica of ourselves in each atom of the universe, and that they all bow in unison. So we visualize ourselves as the universe, and the universe as ourselves, and we bow to the highest values that the universe contains. By calling this image to mind we are stepping out of our small-minded identification with just one tiny human being, and identifying with something much larger, at least in our imagination.

Of course for us this is still a fiction, and we must not get too carried away by this abstract idea. We need to make this reverence more concrete, and to relate it to our actual experience. So the verses of the pūjā gradually bring us down to earth, asking us to bow to progressively more and more concrete and everyday manifestations of the Bodhicitta.

Firstly we imagine ourselves bowing to each of the Three Jewels. ('The Buddhas of the Three eras' are the Buddhas of the past, present and future; 'Saddharma' means the true, real Dharma; and of course the 'excellent community' is the Sangha.) Then we bow to 'all shrines/ and places in which the Bodhisattvas have been'; at this point we could imagine ourselves

bowing to actual shrines or pilgrimage sites we have come across. Then we also see ourselves bowing to ‘the teachers’, which of course could include past great figures of the Buddhist tradition, but might also include Sangharakshita, and any other teachers or spiritual friends who have helped us on our way. Finally we salute all ‘those to whom respectful salutation is due’: we express our respect for all practitioners of the Dharma, especially to those we can acknowledge as being further along the path than ourselves – and perhaps including some people around us in the shrine room right now as we chant the pūjā.

At the beginning of the Salutation section, as we chant the mantra, we have an opportunity to express our reverence for our ideals with our body, by bowing to the shrine, and perhaps even by making full length prostrations. What is appropriate depends on our own feelings, and on the context. In Sangharakshita’s words:

Some people (especially people experiencing a pūjā for the first time) react quite strongly to the practice of prostrations. So...we should be a little careful about prostration, and give consideration not only to our own devotional feelings but also to the susceptibilities of others who may be present. None the less, some form of physical salutation is important if we are to engage our emotions fully with this section and move forward from the stage of worship.

Going for Refuge

This very day
I go for my refuge
To the powerful protectors,
Whose purpose is to guard the universe;
The mighty conquerors who overcome suffering everywhere.

Wholeheartedly also I take my refuge
In the Dharma they have ascertained,
Which is the abode of security against the rounds of rebirth.
Likewise in the host of Bodhisattvas
I take my refuge.

There is not much point in admiring the stream of positive intention that is the Bodhicitta unless we are willing to live in a way that aligns us with it, rather than putting us in conflict with it. There is not much point in revering the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas unless we are willing to heed their advice. So the next stage of the pūjā is Going for Refuge – our admiration for the ideal leads to a commitment to live and practice according to it. So we commit ourselves to the Three Jewels; we commit ourselves to practice in a way that will help us to grow to be more like the ideal we admire.

So we Go for Refuge ‘This very day’ – if we mean it, we will want to act on it now, not put it off to some better time. (Now is the only time there is.) In Śāntideva’s verses, what we go for refuge to firstly are ‘the powerful protectors’, rather than just the historical Buddha Śākyamuni. This reflects the way the Buddha Refuge is seen in Mahāyāna Buddhism, in which the Buddha Principle is seen as manifesting itself through a range of different archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

But in what sense are these Buddhas ‘protectors’? In what sense do they ‘guard the universe’? And how can we say that they ‘overcome suffering everywhere’, when there is obviously still so much suffering in the world? In Sangharakshita’s words:

... the sense in which the Buddhas are said to be ‘protectors’ is not that they ‘guard the universe’ in the way... God is supposed to, or protect us from worldly disasters.... It is that they keep open the way to Enlightenment.

From a Buddhist perspective, the only way to finally overcome suffering is to awaken. The Buddhas ‘overcome suffering everywhere’ because they help beings who are open to their influence to move towards Enlightenment, wherever they happen to be. They protect those who practice according to their advice from negative states and lower realms of being, not from worldly misfortunes.

As well as Going for Refuge to the Buddhas, we also commit ourselves to ‘the Dharma they have ascertained’, and to the Sangha, referred to here as ‘the host of Bodhisattvas.’ This is a distinctly Mahāyāna way of describing the Ārya Sangha, or ‘Noble Sangha’, which is seen as the community of those in whom the Bodhicitta has arisen. But as Sangharakshita has often pointed out, the distinction between this Mahāyāna Noble Sangha and the ‘stream entrants’, arahants and so forth of the Hīnayāna or ‘lesser vehicle’ is a false one. What is supposed to distinguish the bodhisattvas from the arahants is that they practice for the well-being of all, rather than just to liberate themselves from suffering; but in fact anyone who has achieved a degree of Insight in whatever ‘vehicle’ of Buddhism will have seen beyond the distinction between self and other, and will be motivated by concern for others as well as by desire for their own well-being.

After the Going for Refuge section from the distinctly Mahāyāna Bodhicaryāvatāra, we normally chant the Refuges and Precepts in Pāli, the language of the so-called ‘Hīnayāna’ Theravādin school, underlining the fact that there is no difference in the meaning of Going for Refuge in these two major strands of Buddhism. It is particularly relevant that we chant the Precepts at this point, because they give us practical, down-to-earth guidelines about how we can align our behaviour with what is positive, and so open ourselves to its influence. To the extent that our life is not governed by the Precepts we will be cut off from the current of positive intention that manifests through the advanced practitioners of the Dharma; so committing ourselves to a skilful life is the logical next step after inviting these exalted beings into our environment and expressing our reverence for them.

Confession of Faults

The evil that I have heaped up
Through my ignorance and foolishness –
Evil in the world of everyday experience,
As well as evil in understanding and intelligence –
All that I acknowledge to the Protectors.

Standing before them
With hands raised in reverence,
And terrified of suffering,
I pay salutations again and again.

May the Leaders receive this kindly,

Just as it is, with its many faults!
What is not good, O Protectors,
I shall not do again.

Having committed ourselves to the Precepts, we may become painfully aware of all the ways we do not yet practice them. We may see the habits that keep us stuck in our small perspective, and the patterns that stop us being a hand of Avalokiteśvara. So we need to acknowledge this, and not try to brush it under the carpet. We need to see the obstacles that stand in our way, or our practice will be based on self delusion. So the next stage of the pūjā is confession: we acknowledge the unskilful tendencies that block us from higher states, we express regret for the actions that created them, and we decide to behave differently in the future.

Unfortunately the very word confession brings up a negative reaction in some people, usually because of associations with Christianity. But this is not confession in the Christian sense: we are not asking for forgiveness for disobeying god, we are simply acknowledging the reality of our present state, and motivating ourselves to do something about it.

The use of the word ‘evil’ may seem reminiscent of Christianity, but we should not let this sidetrack us – we have all accumulated a burden of negative tendencies through our unskilful actions, committed out of ‘ignorance and foolishness’. These actions are ‘evil in the world of everyday experience’, and the deluded views that led to them are ‘evil in understanding and intelligence’. We acknowledge all this ‘with hands raised in reverence’, seeing ourselves in the presence of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (‘the protectors’ again.) Imagining ourselves making our confession to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas helps us to see ourselves as we might look through their eyes. On the one hand this can help us to see our flaws more clearly; on the other hand it can dispel any self-hatred or harsh judgmentalism – the Buddhas understand why we are as we are, and their response is entirely one of compassion.

As for the next line – ‘terrified of suffering’ – Sangharakshita says this:

Some people are very uncomfortable with the phrase ‘terrified of suffering’... perhaps reminded of Hellfire sermons... However it is not the Buddhas who inflict suffering on us, but our own evil deeds operating through the law of karma... There is no notion of judgment, retribution, or punishment here. The Buddhas’ attitude towards us will always be one of mettā and compassion... You are simply reminding yourself... that unethical actions have unpleasant consequences... Sometimes people have said to me that they simply are not terrified of suffering. If this is really so, it can only be due to lack of imagination.

We ask the ‘Leaders’ to ‘receive this kindly’, not because we are asking for forgiveness, but because of its ‘many faults’: in the eyes of a Buddha any confession we make will be riddled with unawareness and self-deception, but we can trust that they will see all this through kindly eyes. Finally we undertake not to repeat our unskilful patterns, so that we can move forward.

Rejoicing in Merit

I rejoice with delight
In the good done by all beings,
Through which they obtain rest
With the end of suffering.

May those who have suffered be happy!

I rejoice in the release of beings
From the sufferings of the rounds of existence;
I rejoice in the nature of the Bodhisattva
And the Buddha,
Who are Protectors.

I rejoice in the arising of the Will to Enlightenment,
And the Teaching:
Those Oceans that bring happiness to all beings,
And are the abode of welfare of all beings.

If we have genuinely decided to leave our unskillful actions behind we may feel a sense of relief and lightness after the confession section, but in case we still feel heavy-hearted at seeing all the work that we still need to do, in the next section of the pūjā we lift our spirits, by focusing on the positive rather than on what needs to change. Our unskillful patterns are only part of the picture. There is also a lot of goodness in the world, and in ourselves. So we call other people's positive qualities to mind – and maybe also our own – and we rejoice in them.

In the Salutation section we started at the highest, most general level, and worked down to the concrete particulars; in the Rejoicing section we take the opposite approach. We start by calling to mind all the many everyday manifestations of positive intention we see around us – 'the good done by all beings' – and we celebrate them, we rejoice in them. We also reflect that these skilful actions are not something that harm the people who do them – in fact they are the source of their only real happiness. Through such actions people gradually end the suffering of being whirled around the Wheel of Life by greed, hatred and delusion, so we rejoice in this: 'I rejoice in the release of beings/From the sufferings of the rounds of existence.'

From such everyday manifestations of skilfulness we then move to the 'Nature of the Bodhisattva/And the Buddha' – we could take this to mean the Bodhicitta itself, which is their true nature, and which we can imagine as the stream of energy behind all positive actions. We rejoice in 'The arising of the Will to Enlightenment' – the eruption of the Bodhicitta in the mind-stream of beings. And we rejoice in 'the Teaching' – the Dharma – reflecting as we do so that the Bodhicitta and the Dharma are the source of true happiness; they are the '...oceans that bring happiness to all beings,/And are the abode of welfare of all beings.'

As well as raising our spirits after the self-examination of the confession section, the rejoicing in merits represents an important stage in the process of opening ourselves to the Bodhicitta. An important aspect of identifying with something larger than ourselves is that we rejoice in its successes. If we support a football team, identifying ourselves with it, we rejoice every time any of its players scores a goal. So we start by identifying ourselves as a supporter of the Bodhicitta, and we rejoice in its successes – we rejoice in all skilful actions, whoever does them, and in all positive qualities, whoever has them. But we do not want to just stay a supporter of the Bodhicitta, we want to play on its side. If we play for a sports team we do not only rejoice when we score a goal ourselves, we rejoice when anyone on our side scores. So even if we are a minor player in the Bodhicitta's team, we do not just aim for our own spiritual progress, our own meditation, our own Insight. We aim for and rejoice in everybody's spiritual progress, everybody's merits, anybody's Insight. If other people have insights or develop positive qualities, it is as good as if we had done so ourselves – or nearly so. This does not stop us from striving for them, any more than we stop trying because we are not the only member of a

team; but what is important is the overall effort, and not just our personal success. So by rejoicing in all the manifestations of the Bodhicitta we are beginning to identify ourselves with it, firstly as a supporter, and then as an active part of its 'team.' We are no longer just admiring the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, we are beginning to identify with the project they are engaged in, and to want to play our part in it.

Entreaty and Supplication

Saluting them with folded hands
I entreat the Buddhas in all the quarters:
May they make shine the lamp of the Dharma
For those wandering in the suffering of delusion!

With hands folded in reverence
I implore the conquerors desiring to enter Nirvana:
May they remain here for endless ages,
So that life in this world does not grow dark.

In the sixth stage we imagine ourselves asking the Buddhas to stay in this realm, teaching the Dharma and exercising their positive influence. So we ask them to '... shine the lamp of the Dharma/For those wandering in the suffering of delusion' – which of course includes us. This section refers to a story in which the Buddha supposedly had a choice between entering final Nirvana and staying on the earth to teach, and chose the former because he was not asked to stay. It is also linked to the idea that following the Bodhisattva path involves a decision not to enter the bliss of Nirvana, but to postpone full Enlightenment in order to help other beings. This is essentially a poetic metaphor, and we should not take it literally. It points to the fact that those following the Bodhisattva path are not seeking bliss for themselves alone, but see their practice in a much larger perspective. But this does not mean that they have postponed Enlightenment, it means that they do not grasp at it for selfish reasons – which makes it all the more likely to arise.

The Buddhas do not need to be asked to 'remain here for endless ages' – it is intrinsic to their compassionate nature that they will do so. The point of this section is not to persuade the Buddhas to do something they might prefer not to do, it is to express and strengthen our receptivity to them. The Buddhas' ability to teach depends on us. They cannot force their influence on us – we must want to be taught. So we express this, to remind ourselves rather than to influence the Buddhas, by asking them for the gift of the Dharma.

We might think that as Buddhists we will of course want the Buddhas to teach and influence us. Of course we will be receptive. But sadly that is not the case. Very often we come to the Dharma with a head full of preconceived views and personal likes and dislikes, and we want the Dharma to fit in with all of these. We want the Bodhicitta to fit itself to our conditioning, rather than to liberate ourselves from our conditioning in order to be open to the Bodhicitta. The teaching of the Buddhas will not fit comfortably into the worldly viewpoint of any age or culture, including ours. So to be receptive to the Buddhas we need to have an open mind about ideas that cut across what we were taught in our education, what the media say, and what all our non-Buddhist friends and colleagues seem to take for granted. When we ask the Buddhas to teach we are signalling this willingness to cut through the jungle of the ideas we have inherited, to get back to the radical simplicity of the truth.

The Entreaty and Supplication section is normally followed by a reading from a Buddhist text – after all, we have just asked for a teaching. This reading should be what is called in Sanskrit Buddhavaca – the voice of the Buddha – which means that it should be from a canonical source. This reading is normally followed by the Heart Sūtra, which we chant in unison; from the Mahāyāna point of view the Heart Sūtra contains the very essence or ‘heart’ of the Dharma. We will explore the Heart Sūtra later in the Mitra course – but it is worth saying something now about the mantra with which it closes, the Mantra of Perfect Wisdom, or Prajñāpāramitā. We could translate this as meaning: ‘Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, what an Awakening! Wonderful!’ (The last word, svaha, is an expression of celebration and wonder, which one American author has translated as Wow!) If we have gone at least a little beyond our normal narrow viewpoint and had at least a little of this ‘Wow!’ experience, we will be ready for what comes next – transference of merits, and then self-surrender.

Transference of Merit and Self-Surrender

May the merit gained
In my acting thus
Go to the alleviation of the suffering of all beings.
My personality throughout my existences,
My possessions,
And my merit in all three ways,
I give up without regard to myself
For the benefit of all beings.

Just as the earth and other elements
Are serviceable in many ways
To the infinite number of beings
Inhabiting limitless space;
So may I become
That which maintains all beings
Situated throughout space,
So long as all have not attained
To peace.

We now come to the culmination of the Sevenfold Pūjā, in which, in our imagination at least, we open ourselves to the Bodhicitta, express our desire to join the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in their task of Enlightening the universe, and dedicate ourselves to the welfare of all beings. The pūjā began with a relatively small act of giving – making offerings – and it now comes full circle, ending with a supreme act of generosity: the offering of ourselves.

This begins by us giving away ‘The merit gained/In my acting thus’ to help alleviate ‘the suffering of all beings.’ This needs some explanation. ‘Merit’ (Sanskrit puṇya) is a metaphor that is widely used almost everywhere in the Buddhist tradition. It stands for the spiritual impetus and positive character traits that are the reward of skilful action and spiritual practice. Sometimes it seems to be thought of as a sort of currency, like money, that we can store for the future, spend on ourselves, or give away. Merit produces happiness, spiritual success, and even worldly luck. So the spiritual life could be thought of in quite selfish terms, as a process of gathering merit for our own benefit. Mahāyāna Buddhism tried to work against this possibility by stressing that we should not try to store up merit for our own sake, but give it away, dedicating it to the progress of all beings. (Of course by selflessly giving our merit away we

generate even more merit than we started with!) This ‘dedication of merits’ simply points to the fact that ideally we should not just be practising the Dharma for our own sake, but should use the positive qualities it brings us to benefit others as well as ourselves. By taking part in the pūjā we have generated a certain amount of merit, so, as the first stage of giving ourselves to all beings, we give them the merit we have just created.

But not only do we give up the merit we have just earned, we give away all our merit – our merit ‘in all three ways’ means the merit generated by all our skilful actions of body, speech and mind. We give away our possessions, no longer seeing ourselves as owning them for our own ends, but dedicating them to the cause of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. And, perhaps most challenging of all, we give away ‘My personality throughout my existences’ – we no longer cling to the contingent, conditioned self we have become, with its burden of habits, views, and arbitrary likes and dislikes, but give up this old self to make space for something greater to arise.

Having let go of what keeps us imprisoned in our limited idea of ourselves, in the last section of the pūjā we express the hope that we can become like the five traditional elements – earth, water, fire, air, and space – **which pervade everywhere without boundaries**, and ‘**Are serviceable in many ways/To the Infinite number of beings.**’ We want to be part of ‘**That which maintains all beings**’, as the elements maintain all beings. And we express the determination to keep up this attitude for as long as needed – ‘**So long as all have not attained/To Peace.**’

This last section of the pūjā is a rehearsal for the spiritual death that will open the way for the rebirth we call the arising of the Bodhicitta, so it is mainly relevant to the latter two stages in Sangharakshita’s description of the process of spiritual development, which are spiritual death and spiritual rebirth. But most of us are not ready for this yet. We probably still have some work to do on the first two stages of this process: integration, and the development of positive emotion. This does not mean that the sevenfold pūjā is irrelevant to us. We can engage fully with the earlier stages, and we can at least begin to open up to the emotions described in this last stage. In Sangharakshita’s words:

... [those who are not yet ready] can still get some taste of the Bodhicitta, even though it will not be a full arising... They can act in the Bodhisattva spirit to whatever extent they are capable of doing so. Just as the Bodhisattva aspires to give whatever support he can to the beings of the whole cosmos, so on your own level, if you are at least trying to practice the Bodhisattva ideal, that should naturally involve giving whatever support you can to those within your immediate environment, your spiritual community. If you are not functioning in a supportive way, if you just regard the spiritual community as a convenience to your spiritual development, you are living more in accordance with... the narrowest interpretation of the arahant ideal. Taken in this narrow, extreme form, that ideal becomes self-defeating, because you cannot really help yourself without helping others. If you think in terms of helping yourself to the exclusion of helping others, you have a very rigid idea of self and others, and as long as that fixed view is there you can’t even gain Enlightenment for yourself.

Concluding mantras

The pūjā normally ends with the Padmasambhava mantra chanted in unison, followed by a set of concluding mantras chanted three times each in call and response. The figures invoked by these mantras will be explored later in the mitra course, but meanwhile you may want to find out more about those that appeal to you. By all means see them in your mind’s eye as you

chant, and feel their presence. The pūjā then finally closes with the word shanti – Sanskrit for peace – repeated three times. Often at the end of the pūjā there is indeed a deep sense of peace, as though something powerful and mysterious had been present, and left an echo in the minds of those taking part. You may find this an excellent time to sit on in meditation.



Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What offerings would you make to invite the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas into your awareness, if all practical constraints were removed, and you could give whatever you find most beautiful?
2. Do you use your visual imagination in the pūjā, or are you mainly affected by the words themselves, or by the act of chanting, or even by your physical posture? (There is no right answer to this: some people are very visual, others respond more strongly to words, and others are more influenced by their physical experience. Ideally we would bring all these elements into the pūjā.)
3. How do you feel when you bow and make offerings to the shrine? Do you feel any resistance to doing so? Does it affect your emotions and state of mind?
4. Does the confession section leave you lighter, or heavier-hearted? (Or unaffected?) Do you think that remorse and regret for past unskillfulness is a help or a hindrance to our spiritual progress?
5. Look around you this week for skilful behaviour and positive qualities in the people you come across, which you could rejoice in. Choose a few examples, and share them with the group.
6. If you met the historical Buddha today, what would stop you from being fully receptive to his advice? What would you need to let go of in order to be fully receptive to his teaching?
7. Do you look forward to a sevenfold pūjā, or tend to avoid them? Do you enjoy pūjā when you are taking part? How do you tend to feel at the end of pūjā?

Year One Reference Materials



1.1

GOING FOR REFUGE TO THE THREE JEWELS

Being a Buddhist – What is a Buddhist?

Going for Refuge, Sangharakshita.

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=09>

Dimensions of Going for Refuge, Sangharakshita.

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=154>

Commitment and the Spiritual Community, Sangharakshita.

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=142>

Levels of Going for Refuge, Sangharakshita.

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=137>

The History of My Going for Refuge, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/the-history-of-my-going-for-refuge-sangharakshita-classics/>

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<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X14>

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<http://www.sangharakshita.org/bookshelf/human-enlightenment.pdf>

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<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/a-guide-to-the-buddhist-path/>

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<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=01>

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The Sangha

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http://freebuddhistaudio.com/blogfiles/Readings_from_the_Pali_Canon_Booklet.pdf

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<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.4.01.than.html>

Friendship as the Goal, from *Buddhism and Friendship*, Windhorse Publications.

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1.2

EXPLORING BUDDHIST PRACTICE – ETHICS

The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Sangharakshita.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=161>

The Ten Pillars of Buddhism, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/the-ten-pillars-of-buddhism-sangharakshita-classics/>

Not About Being Good, Subhadramati, Windhorse Publications.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/not-about-being-good-a-practical-guide-to-buddhist-ethics/>

The Principles of Ethics: Right Action, Sangharakshita. His seminar lecture on ethics, and part of Module 2, Year Two – *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path*.

<https://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=50>



1.3

EXPLORING BUDDHIST PRACTICE – MEDITATION

Sāmaññaphala Sutta, online text.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.02.0.than.html>

A System of Meditation, Sangharakshita.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=135>

A Guide to the Buddhist Path, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/a-guide-to-the-buddhist-path/>

Buddhist Meditation: Tranquillity, Imagination and Insight, Kamalashila, Windhorse Publications.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/buddhist-meditation-tranquillity-imagination-and-insight/>

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<http://www.kamalashila.co.uk/page7/page7.html>

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Wildmind: A Step-by-Step Guide to Meditation, Bodhipaksa, Windhorse Publications.
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Wildmind, meditation resource website.
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1.4

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What is the Dharma?, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications.
<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/what-is-the-dharma/>

Wisdom Beyond Words, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications.
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Wisdom Beyond Words – Heart Sutra, Sangharakshita.
<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=73>

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A Guide to the Buddhist Path, Sangharakshita, Windhorse Publications.
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<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/ritual-and-devotion-in-buddhism/>



1.5

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Sangharakshita, a New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition, Subhuti, Windhorse Publications.
<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/product/sangharakshita-a-new-voice-in-the-buddhist-tradition/>

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<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X05>

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