

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras – Foundation Year
Part 5: Buddhism and the Triratna Buddhist Community, Devotional Practice

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Week 1: An Overview of the Buddhist Tradition

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 Buddhas 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 Buddhas 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 so often used – ‘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 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.

The Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṃghikas

By perhaps 150 years after the death of the Buddha a split had developed in the early Sangha, between those who called themselves the Sthaviras – or ‘elders’ – and those who termed themselves the Mahāsāṃghikas – those of the greater Sangha, or perhaps those who were in the majority. The exact details of the dispute are blurred by time, but we can conclude that the Sthaviras were a conservative group who were concerned to keep to the letter of the teachings, who emphasised a highly regulated monastic life, and who opposed any innovations. The Mahāsāṃghikas on the other hand seem to have felt that the ‘Elders’ had lost touch with the spirit of the Buddha’s teachings, they took a more liberal attitude to innovations which expressed the spirit of the teachings in new ways, they placed a less exclusive emphasis on monasticism, and they were more concerned to include styles of practice suited to householders. They may also have preserved teachings and practices dating back to the Buddha which the Sthaviras had come to ignore.

‘Hīnayāna’ and Mahāyāna

The dispute between Sthaviras and the Mahāsāṃghikas prefigured a major parting of the ways between different styles of Buddhism. At around the beginning of the Christian Era the spiritual descendants of the Mahāsāṃghikas seem to have coalesced into a new movement called the Mahāyāna, the Great Vehicle or Great Way. 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 Theravada school of South-east Asia, which traces its heritage back to the Sthaviras.

The followers of the Mahāyāna called the path practised by the spiritual descendants of the Sthaviras the ‘Hīnayāna’, the Lesser Vehicle or Small Way, indicating that they thought it was less universally applicable, and led to a lesser goal. They criticised followers of this path 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 felt that the so-called Hīnayānists had 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

Mahāyāna Buddhists re-emphasised the importance of cultivating a warm compassionate attitude towards other living beings. They developed a more explicit stress on selfless action for others. And they developed a new version of the Buddhist spiritual ideal, distinct from the older ideal of the 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 ‘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.

Cosmic Vision

Mahāyāna Buddhists tended to see the Buddha as an archetype of Enlightenment that could be contacted in meditation – or even as a force in the universe – rather than as limited historical being. They explored and expanded this archetypal, mythic realm of practice, connecting in meditation with a range of different Buddha and Bodhisattva figures associated with different aspects of the Enlightened Mind. They developed a vast vision of a magical, multidimensional universe in which we can align ourselves with cosmic forces working for the Enlightenment of all beings, and they expressed this vision in amazing, rambling sūtras, which can read like grand spiritual science fiction, and are a far cry from the usually quite down-to-earth suttas of the Pāli Canon of the Theravada.

Skilful Means

Mahāyāna Buddhism tended to see all the teachings and practices of Buddhism as ‘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. After all, the Buddha himself had said that his vision would be incomprehensible to human beings, and he had only decided to teach because he realised that we could be helped to grow to the point where we would see the truth for ourselves. So he had in effect admitted that his teachings were a skilful means to help us grow, rather than the incomprehensible truth itself, and he had also said that compared to all the possible truth teachings, the ones that he had given for his time and place were like a handful of leaves compared to all the leaves in the forest.

So, because all teachings are skilful means, the Mahāyānists saw nothing wrong with developing new teachings and practices to suit different temperaments, lifestyles, and cultures, as long as these were within the spirit if not the letter of

the Buddha's teaching. This allowed them to be far more flexible and effective 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 creativity as either a good or a bad thing, but it is probably both. On the one hand Mahāyāna Buddhism has helped far more people to grow towards Enlightenment than would have been possible if it had kept strictly to the practices taught by the historical Buddha. 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 powerful symbols and rites to contact and engage the full subconscious energies of the individual, and to use these energies to propel the practitioner towards Enlightenment. Tantric Buddhism is an 'esoteric' tradition, in the sense that 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.

Vajrayāna Buddhism grew out of the Mahāyāna, and it uses magical ritual, mantras and visualisation practices to strive for the aim of Mahāyāna Buddhism – Enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings. Perhaps as a reaction to the high-flown cosmic perspectives and metaphysical speculations of the Mahāyāna, the Vajrayāna emphasises direct experience. It therefore developed a new understanding of the 'Three Refuges' in which one's guru was seen as embodying the Buddha; the particular Buddha or Bodhisattva into whose visualisation practice one had been initiated was seen as the Dharma; and the *ḍākinī* – the challenging, inspiring 'sky-dancer' – was seen as representing the Sangha.

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 which the disciple should pass through.

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.

Some Schools:

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 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.

As would be expected from a school that traces itself back to the Sthaviras, the Theravada is a conservative tradition – the name Theravada means ‘way of the elders’. Theravādin Buddhists place great emphasis on the historical authenticity of their teachings. They tend to reject the scriptures of other schools as not being based on the words of the Buddha, and to frown on any innovations. Theravada Buddhism puts a heavy emphasis on the monastic life – in the Theravada tradition the word Sangha refers only to monastics.

For those able to lead the monastic life, the Theravada 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, as well as the absence of true selfhood in human beings. 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 we are encouraged to completely entrust ourselves to Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light, in the certain knowledge that we are already 'grasped never to be released' by the compassion of the Absolute. The only 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 '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'. No doubt this is an example of Mahāyāna 'skilful means', but, perhaps unfairly, it is an example that 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 Buddhism practised in India before the great monastic universities were destroyed by the Moslem 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 to 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 there are not enough years in a lifetime to complete it, and in practice the earlier stages are 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,
 - a) Would you have sided with the Sthaviras or the Mahāsāṃghikas?
 - b) Which ‘yāna’ appeals to you most?
 - c) 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’, by 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 DharDO Rimpoche 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 first hand 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 Buddhas 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?

Week 3: The Distinctive Emphases of Triratna

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.

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.)

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.

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.

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 are 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.

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?

Week 4: Ritual and Devotion (1) – The Purpose of Ritual

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

retarded 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 honoring someone or something higher that one honors 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 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?

***Week 5: Ritual and Devotion (2) – Some Devotional Practices
used in the Triratna Buddhist Community***

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 *sādhu* three times. As you probably know, *sādhu* is an expression of joy and celebration. In the Pāli Canon, when men and women were 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 sādhus.

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 unskillful 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 mūdra, 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?

Practices Referred to in the Text

The Refuges and Five Precepts

The Three Refuges

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa

Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Sanghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Dutiyampi Sanghaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Tatiyampi Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Tatiyampi Dhammaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi

Tatiyampi Sanghaṃ saranaṃ 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
Sādhu Sādhu Sādhu

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’ – ‘svākkhāto’ – 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’ – ‘sanditṭhiko’. 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’ – ‘akāliko’, 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’ – ‘paccaṭam veditabbo viññūhi’ti’. (‘Paccaṭam’ 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’ – ‘ujupaṭipanno’. ‘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 añjali 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' – 'anuttaraṃ 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 pariyaṅtam saraṇam gacchāmi’. The Pāli words ‘jivata pariyaṅtam’ mean ‘until the end of life’, while ‘saraṇam gacchāmi’ 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 Saṅgharakṣita 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’ – ‘Ahaṃ vandāmi sabbada’.

There are no other reliable refuges, there is nothing else that is a Refuge – ‘N’atthi me saraṇam annaṃ’. The Buddha is the supreme, unsurpassed Refuge for me – ‘Buddho me saraṇam 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: ‘Jayamaṅgalaṃ’ – ‘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’ – ‘Svākkhāto’ – 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’ – ‘sandīṭṭhiko’ – 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’?

Tiratana Vandana – Pāli Text and Translation

The Buddha Vandana

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsaṃbuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsaṃbuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsaṃbuddhassa

Iti'pi so bhagavā araham̐ sammā-sambuddho
vijjā-carana sampanno sugato
loka-vidū, anuttaro purisa-damma-sāratī
satthā deva-manussānam̐
buddho bhagavā ti
Buddham̐ jīvita pariyantam̐ saranam̐ gacchāmi

Ye ca Buddha atītā ca
Ye ca Buddha anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Buddha
Aham̐ vandāmi sabbadā
N'atthi me saranam̐ aññam̐
Buddho me saranam̐ varam̐
Etena sacca-vajjena
Hotu me jayamaṅgalam̐

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
sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko
opāyiko paccatam̐
veditabbo viññūhī'ti
Dhammam̐ jīvita-pariyantam̐ saranam̐ gacchāmi

Ye ca Dhammā atītā ca
Ye ca Dhammā anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Dhamma
Ahaṃ vandāmi sabbadā
N'atthi me saranāṃ aññaṃ
Dhammo me saranāṃ 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
ujupaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
ñāyapaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
sāmīcipaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
yadidaṃ cattāri purisayugāni
aṭṭha purisapuggalā
Esa bhagavato sāvakaśaṅho
āhuneyyo, pāhuneyyo, dakkhineyyo
añjalikaraṇīyo anuttaraṃ
puññaṅkhattam lokassā'ti
Sanghaṃ jīvita-pariyantam saranāṃ gacchāmi

Ye ca Sangha atītā ca
Ye ca Sangha anāgatā
Paccuppannā ca ye Sangha
Ahaṃ vandāmi sabbadā
N'atthi me saranāṃ aññaṃ
Saṅho me saranāṃ 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!

Week 7: Ritual and Devotion (4) – The Sevenfold Pūjā

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 unskilful 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 unskilful 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 irruption 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?