

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Four

Module 1: Towards Insight – Reflection and Meditation

Introduction

This module, written by Ratnaguna, aims to help you develop skills whereby you can reflect on the Dharma in greater depth. After an introductory week, there are units exploring how we can reflect on our actions, on topics and on Dharma texts. The module concludes with two specific themes for reflection – the nature of the Buddha (*‘Buddhanussati’*) and impermanence (*‘anicca’*). As well as the specially written essays exploring the themes, there will be various exercises for you to explore in the groups and in your day-to-day life.

Week 1 – The Reflective Life

We don't really have anything to do – well, do we? Most of the time we could just be sitting back, as it were, and enjoying the universe. That's our major occupation. That's our real work – not to work. We need to get food to eat, clothing, a roof over our head, healthcare, a few books, transport of some kind... but the rest of our time and energy we can just devote to the contemplation of the universe, simply enjoying it all. This is how a Bodhisattva lives anyway.

Sangharakshita ¹

I lived for a few years at Vajrakuta – then the FWBO study retreat centre for men, in North Wales, not far from Snowdonia. The surrounding countryside is very beautiful and so sometimes when a friend visited me and if the weather was fine I would take them to Lake Vyrnwy, which was about an hour away by car.

It is quite a large lake, surrounded by hills, and it has a tree lined shore. Sometimes there was a wind and the surface of the lake was choppy. Sometimes though the air was very still, and the surface of the lake was also very still, almost like a mirror reflecting the trees, the hills, and the sky almost perfectly. On days like this, one of the things that I liked to do was to bend over so that I could look at the lake upside down! This had an interesting effect. I experienced the illusion that the reflection was the real image, while the real image was a reflection.

However, this essay is not about that kind of reflection. The title that I've chosen – 'The Reflective Life' – is a metaphor. When we speak of the mind reflecting, what do we mean? As well as having the primary meaning of a shiny surface of a lake or mirror throwing back light, the word reflection also has a secondary meaning: "The action of turning back or fixing the thoughts on some subject; meditation; deep serious consideration."

Going back now to lake Vyrnwy, I said that on windless days the surface of the lake was so still it was almost like a mirror. On other days, however, when there was a breeze, the surface was choppy so the reflections of the other shore and the sky were all broken up. There were flashes of light but no clear picture. It is just like this with the mind. Most of the time our minds are like the surface of a lake on a windy day our thoughts are all chopped up; broken, fragmentary, with hardly any continuity. On those days, just as the lake cannot reflect a true image of the further shore or the sky, so our minds are not capable of reflecting what is actually in front of us. So we need to learn to still our minds, to make them calm, still, and serene.

Papañca, vitakka, and vicāra

In Buddhism there is a word for this broken, fragmentary, chopped up state of mind: '*papañca*'. Papañca means something like mental or conceptual proliferation, or ludicrous dialogue! It also means illusion, even obsession. Moreover, it means obstacle or hindrance to spiritual growth. It is that state in which your conceptualising mind has run away with itself. One thing occurs to you and that reminds you of another, which in turn reminds you of something else, so that your mind flits from one thing to another never able to settle, just like a small bird flitting from branch to branch. Or, it is that state of mind in which you have become obsessed with something – perhaps from a sense of anxiety – and your mind worries over it, turning it over and over again, uselessly.

Although I said that papañca means mental or conceptual proliferation, this doesn't mean that the concepts themselves are at fault but rather the tendency towards *proliferation*. There is nothing wrong with concepts in themselves, in fact, they are helpful, even indispensable. Without concepts even the most simple of experiences would be very difficult to communicate, perhaps even impossible. Even asking someone to pass the salt at dinner requires the use of concepts.

So it is not concepts that are the problem but rather what we do with them. It is when we get carried away, even obsessed, that they become a hindrance to our spiritual growth. For most of us this probably means most of the time! We have to learn instead how to still our minds so that we are able to think coherently. Buddhism has two words for this state of mind: '*vitakka*' and '*vicāra*'. Vitakka means something like 'initial thought', while vicāra means 'sustained thought'. Vitakka – initial thought – refers to the first moment of attention when your mind grasps a subject. Vicāra on the other hand signifies the continued application of the mind to that subject. Considered together, they indicate the act of thinking, in the sense of a directed, purposeful mode of thinking. These modes of thought also relate to the process of meditation. In the first '*dhyāna*' (state of absorption), there are said to be five factors present in the mind: vitakka, vicāra, rapture ('*pīti*'), bliss ('*sukha*'), and one-pointedness ('*ekaggatā*'). In this state of mind one is concentrated, absorbed in the object of meditation, and this results in a feeling of happiness, even rapture.

So, when we are practising the mindfulness of breathing, for example, we take our awareness to our breath (this is initial thought). But then we try to keep our

awareness on our breath (sustained thought). If you have done the mindfulness of breathing you will know that the first step is quite easy, the second much more difficult. We often find that our mind keeps wandering away from the breath onto other subjects. This is papañca – conceptual proliferation. So when we become aware that we have forgotten about the breath, we bring our attention back and try to keep it there. When we enter the first dhyāna, we have become so concentrated and happy that our mind just stays on the object of meditation, whatever it might be. This means that we have moved from a state of papañca to a state of vitakka-vicāra, from a state of mental proliferation to a state of directed thought.

This very concentrated state of first dhyāna is, according to Buddhist texts, the ideal state in which to reflect. Our mind is like a calm, pure, and still lake and is therefore able to reflect clearly and decisively. Does this then mean that we should only reflect when we are in the first dhyāna? No, but it suggests a principle: thinking, reflecting, requires a certain amount of calm, peace, and stillness – the more the better.

In a sense, we reflect almost all the time but most of our reflections are disjointed, fragmentary, and undirected. We think about one thing for a little while (maybe only a few seconds!) and then, in a vague, associative sort of way we move onto something else, then something else. For instance, you may be reading this but then become aware of a slight pang of hunger and so you start thinking about lunch. Thinking about lunch you remember that you have made an arrangement to meet with a friend for lunch. This reminds you that there is something you want to ask your friend about when you see them: you want to ask them if there is any truth in the rumour that old so-and-so has split up with his wife and is having an affair with so-and-so. And this reminds you of a film you saw last week in which Kevin Costner was starring. Now who, you wonder, was the actress?

We need to learn to direct our thinking, make it more conscious, purposeful, and clear. We do this by learning to still our minds, not just in meditation but all the time. This is the practice of mindfulness.

The two kinds of thought

But then a question arises – once we have begun to calm our mind a little, what should we reflect on? Everything. We should reflect on everything that happens to us. We should reflect on how we respond or react to things that happen to us: on our feelings; on our relationships with other people; on how they respond to what happens to them; on what we read or hear; on the Dharma.²

Although I have said that we should reflect on everything, we must, nevertheless be careful here. The Buddha said something very important in this connection, something rather sobering, even alarming. He said, "Whatever you frequently think and ponder upon, that will become the inclination of your mind."

In the same discourse, the Buddha says that, before he was Enlightened, he decided to divide his thoughts into two classes: on one side he set thoughts of sensual desire, ill-will, and cruelty (unskilful thoughts) and on the other he set

thoughts of renunciation, friendliness, and compassion (skilful thoughts). He discovered that if he allowed himself to dwell in unskilful thoughts they led to suffering for himself and others. They obstructed Wisdom, caused difficulties, and led away from Enlightenment. Consequently, whenever an unskilful thought arose in him he abandoned it.

He then went on to say that if we *allow* our minds to dwell on unskilful objects, such as sensual desire, hatred and cruelty, then that will become the *inclination* of our minds. Conversely, if we allow our minds to dwell on skilful objects, such as renunciation, love and compassion, then that will become the inclination of our minds. In other words, it will become habitual. In short, we will *become* what we think about.

That is quite a thought isn't it? If you allow yourself to have occasional unskilful thoughts, let us say hateful thoughts, if you are not careful, you will become a hateful person. Conversely, if you allow yourself to have friendly thoughts, if you are careful, you will become a friendly person.

This reminds me of a verse from the Dhammapada, where the Buddha says:

“Do not underestimate evil, (thinking) ‘It will not approach me’. A water-pot becomes full by the (constant) falling drops of water. (Similarly) the spiritually immature person little by little fills himself with evil.

Do not underestimate good, (thinking) ‘It will not approach me’. A water-pot becomes full by the (constant) falling drops of water. (Similarly) the spiritually mature person little by little fills himself with good.” ³

You may think that a drop of water isn't very much – that it doesn't really matter. But, drop-by-drop, the jar fills with water. That little thought, and that one, and that one, all add up, and make you into what you are.

Coming back to the discourse on the two kinds of thought, the Buddha said that he saw nothing to fear in having skilful thoughts – they *didn't* lead to his or other's suffering, quite the opposite, even if he dwelt in them all day and night. However, he did conclude that it may be possible to think and ponder on even skilful things excessively – he found that too much thinking made him tired – and when he was tired he couldn't concentrate. So when that happened he stopped thinking, quietened and steadied his mind, and developed one-pointedness. In other words, he meditated.

So in this sutta the Buddha spoke not only about two kinds of thought – skilful and unskilful – but also about two kinds of activity: reflection and meditation. These two activities are complementary. Sometimes we need to think about things while at other times we need to stop thinking in order to still our minds. If we don't try to still our minds, through meditation for instance, it will be very hard to think clearly. Our minds will tend to be like the surface of a lake whipped up into waves by the wind. On the other hand, if we don't give ourselves time to reflect discursively, we won't be able to meditate effectively.

We *need* to reflect discursively. We need to think about our lives and so must give ourselves time to do this. We need to sort out all the impressions we receive, all the things we hear and read, and all our responses to those things. If we don't, then when we sit down to meditate, we find that we start thinking about such issues. I think this is one of the main reasons why so many people find meditation difficult; because they don't give themselves time to think about things. They do their thinking during meditation time, when they are trying not to think! Naturally, we all have a tendency to become distracted and even if we did give ourselves time to think through important topics we would still have some trouble controlling our wayward minds in meditation. However, we would find it easier to meditate if we gave ourselves sufficient time to think.

Activity, thinking, and meditating

Now I would like to go one step further than the Buddha. I am not suggesting I am wiser than he was, just that we are in a different situation from the people he was talking to in the discourse I have been discussing. He was talking to bhikkhus, to monks. As is well known, bhikkhus don't work. They don't have families. They are single and they spend most of their time meditating, studying the Dharma, and reflecting (at least they did in the Buddha's day!).

Most of us are not so fortunate; most of us live busy lives with jobs, while many people have families. The Buddha recommended to the bhikkhus that they alternate between thinking and meditating. I would like to add a third element to this – activity – and I would like to suggest that we need to alternate between these three things: activity, thinking, and meditating.

We need to engage in activity: to work, look after our families, shop, clean, run Buddhist Centres, teach the Dharma. However, skilful as these activities may be, it is possible to do them excessively and so to become tired. At such times we need to stop and reflect and/or meditate. Once we have done this and refreshed ourselves we can go back to the activity, whatever it is.

But I want to go one step further even than this. As well as doing all three things separately, we need to blend them. That is, we need to allow our meditation to inform our thinking and activity; we need to allow our thinking to inform our meditation and activity; and we need to allow our activity to inform our thinking and meditation.

Meditation stills the mind. It makes it calm, clear, and emotionally positive. So we need to allow meditation to influence both our thinking and our activity. I have already said that it is hard to think clearly without a basis of calm, but we also need to introduce this element into our activity – into our work. We should try to become like Bodhisattvas who, although working tirelessly for all beings, are internally still, quiet, and calm. They meditate even as they work.

The Buddha himself once spoke about this. He was talking about the qualities of a Stream Entrant – the one who has reached that point in their spiritual development from which they can never fall back from Enlightenment. They have entered the

stream that leads inevitably to Nirvana. The Buddha said that one of the characteristics of such a person is that – no matter how busy they are, no matter how much they may do for others – they never forget their training in ethics, meditation, and wisdom. And he gave a simile to make his point: It is like a cow with her calf. No matter how far the cow goes grazing in the field, she always keeps an eye on her calf. In this simile the grazing in the field is the activity that we engage in and the calf is our training in ethics, meditation, and wisdom. ⁴

Most of us live quite busy lives and, while there is nothing wrong with this in itself, we must make sure that we do not neglect other aspects of our practice – especially perhaps meditating, studying, and reflecting. Thinking clarifies our mind and with this clarity we can penetrate into the nature of reality, both in meditation and in activity. The classic Buddhist way of gaining Insight is to meditate, get into the first dhyāna, and then introduce a conceptual formulation of the Dharma – such as ‘All conditioned things are impermanent’. In other words – we introduce directed thinking into our (non-discursive) meditation. I suggest that we need to do this with activity too. We need to learn to reflect as we are acting, as we are working. For example, when something goes wrong at work or at home, we can use this opportunity to reflect, “How has this happened? What were the conditions which brought this about?” ⁵

But how can our activity inform our thinking and our meditation? Activity – skilful activity – produces energy. Not everyone is able to sit around meditating and thinking all day. The majority of us need to employ our physical energies as well in some kind of useful work. Otherwise it is only too easy to become lethargic, complacent, and apathetic, even lazy. Work can bring vigour to our thinking and meditating. Moreover, activity gives us plenty of material to think about and reflect on. In this way, we can blend activity, thinking, and meditation. Meditation stills and calms the mind; thinking clarifies the mind; and activity energises the mind, giving it concrete experience to work on.

Getting started on reflection

I want to conclude by suggesting ways you might get started on learning how to reflect. First of all, you have to learn to do nothing! By that I do not mean that you have to learn how to be distracted! By doing nothing I do not mean watching the TV, listening to the radio, or reading the newspaper. I do not even mean reading a good book – even a Buddhist one – but simply doing nothing. I suggest that you make time to do nothing every day – perhaps start with ten minutes a day and, once you get used to that, extend it to twenty, thirty minutes, even an hour!

Try to make time in your life for reflection – make time or it probably won’t happen. Put it in your diary. Many of us have a daily meditation practice, why not have a daily reflection practice too? Or even daily ‘do nothing’ practice! Many people find it very difficult to do nothing; they get jumpy, they fall asleep, they feel guilty, or have an uneasy feeling that they should be doing something.

If you feel this way I suggest making a cup of tea. Tea is a great soother – it is very conducive to reflection. Just make a cup of tea and drink it – look at the cup,

look at the brown liquid, the steam rising from the cup, the reflections on the surface of the tea. Feel the heat of the cup on your hands, taste the tea. Wonderful! We are so accustomed to the idea that we should always be doing something useful. Try being absolutely, gloriously useless – at least for a few minutes! Look at something – vase of flowers, a plant, the view out of your window, even the wall. Or go for a walk. Some people reflect most effectively when they are walking. You could even take a small notebook to write down any ideas that occur to you. As you sit or walk thoughts will occur to you. Notice what things you think about – you can learn a lot about yourself that way. Do you think about cars, flowers, food, sex, literature, other people, yourself, the Dharma, or what?

When a thought occurs to you, try to choose whether you are going to think about it or not. Most of the time we are at the mercy of whatever subject happens to present itself to us so that we are not so much ‘thinking’ as ‘being thought’. Often we do not choose what to think about. We have to learn to make choices.

Try to reflect on things from a Dharmic perspective. That is, think about the same things as you usually do but from the point of view of the Dharma. For example, you may have noticed that you are getting older. Perhaps you have a few grey hairs that weren’t there before or the ‘crow’s feet’ around your eyes are a little more pronounced. Perhaps you are a little more prone to fat around the stomach. You are not quite as good looking as you used to be. Now there are a number of trains of thought that could come from the fact that you are ageing. You could, for instance, worry about it or get depressed. You could start thinking about what you could do to slow down the ageing process: perhaps enrol in a gym or go to your local health shop and buy some vitamins and creams. You could start thinking about ways to disguise the ageing process: cosmetics, hair dye, clothes with a different cut to disguise your growing stomach. Perhaps you might even consider cosmetic surgery.

Alternatively you could think about the ageing process – your ageing process – from a Dharmic perspective. You might use this fact as an opportunity to develop insight. "I’m growing old. I’m moving towards death. All conditioned things are impermanent, including me. What does this mean? What is the significance of life? Why are we born only to grow old and die? What is the point of it all?" In this way, instead of the fact of our ageing being something unpleasant, unwelcome, to be dismissed from the mind or fought against, it becomes an opportunity for liberation. The demon of impermanence becomes a kind teacher.

We need to study the Dharma in order to learn to look at things from this Dharmic perspective. Whenever we think about things, we think about them from a certain point of view, and very often we are not aware of our point of view. We have learned to look at things in a particular way from our parents, our teachers at school, our friends, the society we grew up in, from the entertainment industry. Often, we don’t realise that it is the very way we look at things – the point of view from which we look – that is the problem.

Ageing is only a problem if you want to remain young forever. Well – that is a problem because we can’t remain young forever. It isn’t possible. Ageing itself

isn't a problem but our desire to remain young most certainly is. You can't stop the ageing process. You may be able to slow it down a little – or at least cover over its effects a little – but eventually you will get old, unless of course you die before that! But you can change your attitude; you can transform your desire for everlasting youth into a desire for the deathless.

Studying the Dharma is so important because it gives us what I have called a Dharmic perspective; it encourages us to see things, and think about things, from the perspective of Enlightenment rather than from the perspective of craving or aversion.

Three things to remember when reflecting

1. *When you first start your practice of doing nothing, you may not enjoy it very much.* You may in fact find it unpleasant, and you may wonder why you are doing it. One thing you have to realize is that, as with any worthwhile activity, enjoyment comes as a result of working at it. If you are used to listening to pop music for instance, listening to classical music is not very easy; it sounds alien, and is not very enjoyable. But if you keep at it the more refined beauty of classical music begins to reveal itself and you start to enjoy it. Effort comes first, enjoyment later.
2. *Reflecting is not worrying!* Many people are anxious by nature and when they have nothing else to do they start worrying about things – all sorts of things. I know because I'm one of them! So, if you are like me you have to beware of this and not fall into worrying. Be careful of 'obsessing' on a topic – going round and round, not getting anywhere, just getting into a more and more anxious state. I have found that if I make sure that I have time to do nothing then I am less prone to anxiety.
3. *Bear in mind the fact that time spent on reflection is never wasted; it always bears fruit.* You may think that I'm now contradicting something I wrote above, where I said that time spent doing nothing is a useless activity. Now I am saying that it is never time wasted. But the contradiction is only apparent. It depends on what you mean by useful or useless. Time spent doing nothing, simply reflecting, won't get the mortgage paid, it won't get the shopping done, won't make money for the Dharma, it won't show any tangible results, but it will help you to get to know yourself. It will help you to deepen your experience of yourself, make you calmer and more positive, clarify your mind and understand Reality. In short, it will help you to move towards Nirvana.

Notes:

1. *Wisdom Beyond Words*, page 189
2. *Dvedhavitakka Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 19*, Bhikkhus Ñānamoli and Bodhi's translation. Wisdom Publications.
3. *Dhammapada, Chapter 9, 'Evil'. Verses 121 – 122*. Sangharakshita's translation.
4. *Kosambiya Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 48. 12*:

Again, a noble disciple considers thus: "Do I possess the character of a person who possesses perfect vision?" What is the character of a person who possesses perfect vision? This is the character of a person who possesses perfect vision: although he may be active in various matters for his companions in the holy life, yet he has a keen regard for training in the higher virtue, training in the higher mind, and training in the higher wisdom. Just as a cow with a new calf, while she grazes watches her calf, so too, this is the character of a person who possesses perfect vision.

Translation by Bhikkhus Ñānamoli and Bodhi, slightly amended.

5. We will be looking at this in some detail next week.
6. People who are susceptible to depression also have to watch out for this tendency, called 'rumination'. This is the tendency, when in a low mood, to think about and try to work out why we are unhappy. 'Ruminating' in this way tends to keep us in the low mood, rather than help us out of it. (See '*Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy for Depression, by Segal, Williams and Teasdale*', pages 33-37. Guilford.) In traditional Buddhist terms this is an aspect of papañca – obsession.

Suggested Further Reading:

How to Be Free – Tom Hodgkinson

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/How-be-Free-Tom-Hodgkinson/dp/0241143217>

Wisdom Beyond Words – Sangharakshita. Introduction to Part Four: The Greater Mandala, pages 183-194. Windhorse Publications.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=495>

Questions:

1. What is a concept?
2. What is the relationship between concepts and insight?

3. "...if we don't give ourselves time to reflect discursively, we won't be able to meditate effectively." Do you think this is true?
4. "We should try to become like Bodhisattvas who, although working tirelessly for all beings, are internally still, quiet, and calm. They meditate even as they work." Is this really possible, or is it perhaps an unattainable goal? Have you had any experience analogous to this?
5. "Activity – skilful activity – produces energy." Is this true? In all situations?
6. Do you 'do nothing' regularly in your life? If so, how does it make you feel?
7. What kinds of thing do you normally think about? (You don't need to tell anyone else the answer to this – but it may be useful to you to know!)

Week 2 – Reflection in Action

The most important thing to remember is that the first duty is to carry on the correct discipline by oneself within one's own heart, and one must not pick and choose for one's own selfish desires either one or other of the two conditions of life – I mean the life of activity or the life of calm... the less one understands and knows about these two conditions of life ... the more careful should one be to value them both and remember that they are both only two aspects of one uniform condition.

Hakuin⁷

There is a story that someone once asked Sangharakshita how they could become as wise as him, and that he replied, “Reflect on everything that happens to you.” I don't know whether or not this conversation actually took place, but it's very good advice. It points out that every experience we have – pleasant, unpleasant, profound, mundane, inspiring, dull – can be ‘food for thought’, can be an opportunity to take our understanding deeper. I would add though that we should not only reflect on everything that *happens* to us, but also everything that *we do*. Reflecting on our actions (of body, speech and mind) can give us very valuable, if sometimes painful, insights into ourselves.

To explore this topic we're going to look at two transcriptions – the first from a lecture by a French philosopher and the second from a Q&A session with Sangharakshita.

Gabriel Marcel is known as the first existential philosopher and he was also a practicing Christian, so he is sometimes categorized as a Christian Existentialist. He had some very interesting things to say about reflection in everyday life in a series of lectures he gave in Aberdeen between 1948 and 1950.⁸ Let's begin our exploration by considering what he has to say in a lecture called ‘Primary and Secondary Reflection’. He begins with the example of how reflection can begin when we mislay something – here he talks about a watch and we have to remember that, in 1948, he wasn't talking about a wristwatch but a watch kept in the pocket. We can easily make this relevant to us if we substitute our wallet or purse for his watch:

Reflection has its roots in the daily flow of life

“I shall start with the simplest examples I can find, to show how reflection has its roots in the daily flow of life. I put my hand, let us say, into my pocket to take my watch out. I discover that my watch is not there; but it ought to be there; normally my watch is in my pocket. I experience a slight shock. There has been a small break in the chain of my everyday habits (between the act of putting my hand in my pocket and that of taking out my watch). The break is felt as something out of the way; it arrests my attention, to a greater or a less degree, according to the importance I attach to my watch; the notion that a valuable object may be lost arises in my mind, and this notion is not a mere notion but also a feeling of disquiet. I call in reflection to help me...”

Reflection is attention directed towards a small break in the daily chain of habit

“It is very clear in the example I have chosen, and in every similar example, that reflection is nothing other than attention, in the case where attention is directed towards this sort of small break in the daily chain of habit. To reflect, in this kind of case, is to ask oneself how such a break can have occurred. But there is no place here for the kind of purely abstract speculation which, of its very nature, can have no practical outcome; what I have to do is to go back in time until I recall the moment when the watch was last in my possession. I remember, let us say, having looked at the time just after breakfast; therefore at that moment everything was still all right. Between then and now something must have happened to the watch. My mental processes are rather like—there is no avoiding the comparison—the actions of a plumber who is trying to trace a leak. Was there perhaps a hole in my pocket? I look at my pocket and discover that there is no hole. I continue with my task of alert recapitulation. Say that I succeed in recalling the fact that there was a moment when I put the watch down on a table; I shall go, of course, to see whether it is still on the table; and there, let us say, the watch still is. Reflection has carried out its task, and the problem is solved.”

Reflection is never exercised on things that are not worth the trouble of reflecting about

“Let us notice, however, even in connection with this almost childishly simple example, that I have made my mental effort because something real, something valuable, was at stake. Reflection is never exercised on things that are not worth the trouble of reflecting about. And, from another point of view, let us notice that reflection in this case was a personal act, and an act which nobody else would have been able to undertake in my place, or on my behalf. The act of reflection is linked, as bone is linked with bone in the human body, to living personal experience; and it is important to understand the nature of this link. To all appearances, it is necessary that the living personal experience should bump into some sort of obstacle. One is tempted to use the following sort of metaphor. A man who has been travelling on foot arrives at the edge of a river where the bridge has been carried away by a flood. He has no option but to call a ferryman. In an example such as that which I have just cited, reflection does really play the part of the ferryman.”

Ethical reflection

“But the same sort of thing can happen, of course, at the level of the inner life. I am talking to a friend, and somehow I let myself be drawn into telling him something which is an actual lie. I am alone with myself again, I get a grip on myself, I face the fact of this lie; how was it possible for me to tell such a whopper? I am all the more surprised at myself because I have been accustomed to think of myself, up to the present, as a truthful

and trustworthy person. But then what importance ought I to attach to this lie? Am I forced to conclude that I am not the man I thought I was? And, from another point of view, what attitude ought I to take up towards this act of mine? Ought I to confess the lie to my friend, or on the other hand would I make myself ridiculous by doing so? But perhaps I ought to make myself ridiculous, to let my friend laugh at me, as a sort of punishment for having told him the lie in the first place?

As in the previous example, what we have here is a kind of break; that is to say, I cannot go on just as if nothing had happened; there really is something that necessitates an act of readjustment on my part.”

Reflection and friendship

“But here is a third example that will give us an easier access to the notion of reflection at the properly philosophical level. I have been disappointed by the behaviour of somebody of whom I was fond. So I am forced to revise my opinion of this friend of mine. It seems, indeed, that I am forced to acknowledge that he is not the man I believed him to be. But it may be that the process of reflection does not halt there. A memory comes back to me – a memory of something I myself did long ago, and suddenly I ask myself, “Was this act of mine really so very different from the act which today I feel inclined to judge so severely? But in that case am I in any position to condemn my friend?” Thus my reflections, at this point, call my own position into question.

Let us consider this second stage. Here, again, I cannot go on as if nothing had happened. Then, what has happened? There has been this memory and this sort of confrontation that has been forced upon me, of myself and the person I was judging so harshly. But what does ‘myself’ mean here? The point is that I have been forced to ask myself what I am worth, how true I ring. So far I had taken myself, so to speak, for granted, I quite naturally thought of myself as qualified to judge and eventually to condemn. Or perhaps even that is not quite the case: I used to behave or, what comes to the same thing, I used to talk like a man qualified to judge others. In my heart of hearts, I did not really think of myself as such a man... Here, for the moment at least, this process of reflection may terminate. Such reflections may leave me in a mood of anguish, and nevertheless I have a certain sense of being set free... It is as if I had overturned some obstruction in my way.

But at this point a twofold and important realization is forced upon me; on the one hand, I am now able to communicate at a broader level with myself, since I have, as it were, introduced the self that committed the dubious act to the self that did not hesitate to set itself up as the harsh judge of such acts in others; and on the other hand—and this cannot be a mere coincidence—I am now able to enter into far more intimate communication with my friend, since between us there no longer stands that barrier which separates the judge on the bench from the accused man in the dock.”

It could be objected that trying to recollect where he mislaid his watch is not really reflection in the sense that we mean, but Marcel is showing how the ‘roots’ of reflection are found in the daily flow of life. That is, in trying to remember all his actions in the last few hours so that he might find his watch, his mind is performing a very similar action as when he reflects more philosophically. He is trying to show us that everyone is capable of reflection, it’s not something that only ‘intellectuals’ do – in our terms, if you can think about where and how you may have mislaid something, then you can reflect on the Dharma.

He also shows us that ordinary daily life offers us many opportunities for reflection. These opportunities are present most of the time, we don’t have to go looking for them – if we’re mindful we’ll notice them. But to make use of these opportunities we have to be prepared to be completely honest with and about ourselves. Marcel shows us with penetrating clarity that with awareness and honesty, reflection can be a way (perhaps *the way*?) for us not only to come to deeper understandings of ourselves, but also to dissolve the barriers that may exist between us and our friends.

In the following section Sangharakshita shows how insight can arise in the midst of daily life. These are transcriptions of sections from a Q&A session he did with some Order members from *windhorse:evolution* in 1993.⁹ The section begins with questions specifically about working in team-based Right Livelihood, but the discussion broadens out to include how insight can arise within ‘extreme situations’, bereavement, and when experiencing intensely unskillful mental states, such as anger or jealousy:

Conditions for the arising of insight

Ruchiraketu: Some of us have been working at Windhorse for eight years already, and could be there another ten or more years, it could even be a whole lifetime... Then this question [arises]; is that life-style conducive to developing insight? ... I think the question has come up that maybe work is something that you do for a while to get your energy going, something like this. But then it is necessary to have a more refined approach, as represented by some sort of retreat-like situation, in order to have the conditions for developing insight.

Sangharakshita: I would say that one of the characteristics of insight is, by its very nature, it is not dependent on any particular set of conditions. It could be that for certain people, at certain times, certain situations are more conducive to the development of Enlightenment. But in principle, by its very nature, insight does not depend on any particular set of conditions, because insight arises within situations of non-insight. Or its arising depends on situations or conditions that are not those of insight. If you see the Transcendental as completely discontinuous with the mundane, well nothing of the mundane is any nearer to the Transcendental than anything else. So that nothing, ultimately, is more favourable to the arising of insight than anything else (insight being insight into the Transcendental). So I think one needs to bear that in mind...

Also the general Buddhist trend of thought is that you are more likely to develop insight on the basis of śamatha meditation, on the basis of śamatha. But on the other hand we have got so many case histories of, say Zen monks, say Zen masters, who have developed insight in quite different situations. I'm just saying this speculatively, I'm not sure whether maybe it is to some extent a cultural thing: in India they do tend to take things more easily, and are maybe more inclined to meditation perhaps than say the Japanese. Well then in India they developed this tradition of insight arising in dependence on meditation. But that doesn't seem to be the pattern necessarily outside India, especially say in Japan.

So I think we can approach this with an open mind – you know, not necessarily thinking that you have to have a very deep experience of meditation before any kind of insight can arise. I don't think that is necessarily the case. It can arise in any situation, and in dependence on any set of conditions, none of which are ultimately any nearer to insight than any other. So we find Zen monks having insight experiences when they are chopping wood or even in the toilet, [and] all sorts of other situations.”

Extreme situations

But having said that it does seem that insight is more likely to arise if the situation is an extreme situation. Well if you're say in a meditative situation, that situation can take an extreme form just due to stress of personal problems, or even philosophic difficulties, or because you are being urged by a very demanding master. But without those things I think you don't get it, even in the meditative situation. If there is no great pressing philosophical problem that you are desperate to solve, or an acute personal problem that you have just got to get over, or a master who is standing over you with a stick. If you don't have any of those things I think the meditative situation is not very likely, *just by itself*, to provide a basis for the development of insight. Other situations outside the meditative situation, if they do push you to the edge, they can be situations in which insight could arise.

Now you'll know whether, in the course of your work in Windhorse, if you are pushed to the edge in that way. I don't know because I'm not, as everybody knows, I've not done the vans or anything remotely like that (laughter). But you would know it if there are situations where sometimes you are pushed to the edge. Well for instance one way in which they can be pushed to the edge, I imagine, is perhaps when things aren't going very well. Maybe there are financial problems, and you tell yourself, “Well yes there are these problems, but what is the challenge?” Not to be disturbed, and just face the possibility of total failure with equanimity. That's the challenge. That's the edge towards which you are being pushed. That you are not, you know, deep down really concerned, ultimately concerned, about success or failure. At least not in a personal sense. Well that is just one little example, you can probably think of others.

Recalling the Dharma

Satyaloka: So round that you need to be able to reflect though. I mean you can be pushed to the edge, and just fall over the edge. What you need is to be able to make use of that extreme situation. I mean presumably the extreme situation in itself isn't conducive to insight. What you are talking about is being pushed in a certain way and having...

Sangharakshita: You have to be able to recall the Dharma in that situation, which you can do in an instant, yes? But you need to be able to recall the Dharma in that situation. Just as even when you are having a really beautiful meditation, you need to be able to return and as it were to a lower level, and develop vitakka/vicāra and start reflecting. But within the more as it were practical and active situation you may have to think much more quickly.

Keturaja: Would you need a certain level of śamatha in such an intensive situation to be able to sort of contain that experience and be able to apply the Dharma?

Sangharakshita: I think there only insight really helps. Because śamatha after all is only mundane, and it can be overthrown by other negative mundane factors. We know many stories that illustrate that. A monk can spend five, ten, fifteen years just absorbed in śamatha, and can be completely thrown when he comes out of his cave within half an hour. It is only the insight, the vipassanā, which can't be overthrown. So that's in a way part of the pushing you to the edge. That no amount of śamatha is really going to help you. The calm and equanimity that you need at that point is not that of meditation, which is only mundane. You need the calm and equanimity which comes out of some degree of insight.

Kuladitya: But that sounds like we need the insight to gain the insight!

Sangharakshita: You need at least an intellectual appreciation of that kind of equanimity to know that there is such a thing. That you know from your general study of the Dharma. You know that there is a difference between the temporary equanimity that you get with a practice of meditation, and the much deeper equanimity that you get as a result of your insight into reality, to use that term (though perhaps ultimately it doesn't mean very much).

Satyaloka: But in that case one of those [teachings] might have been reflected upon on retreat in śamatha conditions, and turned over and clarified. Which is a bit different to saying just having an intellectual appreciation. So in that case you would need meditative conditions, that would have conduced to a clearer understanding of that, so that in that particular situation when it comes to mind it's...

The importance of Dharma study

Sangharakshita: I would say probably study would help more, if there was anything of that nature present. You know, study would help more, otherwise you are only saying that if you have already got insight it is more easy to develop insight again. But we are considering the situation where perhaps you haven't ever developed insight before. If you have developed a degree of insight in a meditative situation well obviously that will help you in the work situation. So vice-versa, if you have developed insight in the work situation, well that is going to help you develop further insight when you do get into the meditative situation.

Kuladitya: So it is clarity of thought, which we would have got through study, some sort of reflection within study, which would help us in this extreme situation at work.

Sangharakshita: So you say, "A-ha this is an extreme situation. This is where I have an opportunity to develop insight. I won't let myself just be swayed by hope or fear, anxiety, whatever."

Keturaja: So one would need to be able to have an attitude within work that the possibility of insight was there.

Sangharakshita: Well presumably by the mere fact that one is an Order Member, that you are aware of that all the time... Also there are your spiritual friends. You might have a spiritual friend at your elbow who may not be a fierce Zen guru, but at least can remind you, "Well look, why get upset, just stay balanced." and that may be enough.

Kuladitya: It sounds a bit as if we need to stay practising when we are in these extreme situations. What I tend to find is if something goes wrong, I'll get angry, which takes me off the horns of the spiritual dilemma. So it's almost like if I can only stay practising, that will make...

Anger as an opportunity for insight

Sangharakshita: But on the other hand you mustn't think in terms of *superimposing* the practice on what you are actually doing. What you are actually doing *is* the practice. And even if you get angry, it's not enough to say, "Oh no, I mustn't get angry." That is just, as it were, on the *śamatha* level [whereas we] are thinking in terms of trying to develop insight. Well what is this anger? Who is getting angry? Just even stay with the experience of anger, without expressing it, and look into it. Who is getting angry? Who is this I who is so upset? But not try to, as it were, smother the anger, or just to calm it down. That's not enough. That's just dealing with it as though it was a hindrance to *śamatha* – which you can do – but we are talking about the possibility of developing insight. You may say paradoxically, if you are thinking in terms of developing insight, it may be more helpful to stay with the anger than to calm it down, provided you

don't give outward expression to it of course. But if you can't help giving outward expression to it, if it is there, well then you have to calm it down... *Satyaloka*: I wonder if we can come back to the topic of insight from a different angle. I wonder if we can return to the model which you first spoke about. It struck me it was one of intensity, whereas perhaps the model of dhyāna and vipassanā, on the basis of dhyāna, is maybe one of depth. So I was thinking of an image that Kamalashila uses in his book ¹⁰ [it] is of laying a jewel on a beautiful cushion, a beautiful piece of cloth. It's almost like your refined consciousness just has an aesthetic appreciation of the jewel of the truth. Or sometimes the image is used of a lake, and dropping a stone into a lake. Whereas what you were talking about was one more of intensity, which struck me more like a rock and a flint, say striking and creating a spark. And I was just thinking practically about the example you gave of reflecting in the moment. You were talking about being in an existential situation, and then bringing to bear a Dharmic thought. In connection with that I was wondering, in a way, how to do that? I think I have done that. You do come up very [strongly against the] frustrations of saṃsāra trying to do what we are doing. You put your energy into something, you want it to happen. It doesn't happen. And to a degree I *do* reflect, "Oh well that is the nature of saṃsāra." But that doesn't produce insight.

Bereavement

Sangharakshita: I don't think there is a 'how'. I was thinking of the analogy of a serious bereavement, because it often seems to happen in connection with that. Well, people *do* have a measure of insight, but they don't think, "How shall I go about developing insight in this situation?" It just happens. And I think when it happens you have to be able to recognize, "A-ha! This has happened! Let me try to deepen this, and in a sense retain this."

Kuladitya: So the weight of the experience itself does the job.

Sangharakshita: Supposing someone near and dear to you is about to die. You don't, as it were, just say to yourself, "Ah this is a situation in which I could develop insight." It doesn't really happen like that. You are so caught up in the experience, and you have to allow yourself to be caught up in it. But in the midst of the experience itself, it can open up a feeling of detachment, a sense of impermanence of things, that you have got to give up everything in the end, you will have to part – and that can be an insight experience. And when you have that, you recognize that, and you try to develop it and deepen it. But clearly you will have that sort of experience, I mean if your whole life has been oriented to the Dharma usually, though sometimes it happens even in the case of people who don't have any connection with the Dharma. It's a human thing. But they may be less likely to follow it up and deepen it, if they in a sense won't be able to recognize what is happening.

Or when you have a very cruel disappointment, well you have a flash of insight. The insight is into the intensity of your own desire that something should happen, and you see the limitations of that. And you can see it, how it has led to an experience of suffering. It's an insight, and you can dwell upon that and develop it.

Satyaloka: That is in a way what I am interested in, the 'how'. You've given an example that life just throws up death, bereavement. In a work situation here we're looking at insight within Right Livelihood and what sort of models might be appropriate to us developing it.

Sangharakshita: Well all the models that I have mentioned really, you know, are appropriate. Models of bereavement, disappointment...

The importance of reflecting on experiences of insight

Satyaloka: You talked about at least having the clarity through study of the Dharmic framework that you were going to bring to bear on that. You said that you just...

Sangharakshita: After having, as it were, that flash of insight let's say, you'll have a framework within which to fit the insight. It's not that the framework enables you to produce the insight... the existential experience, the life experience, which includes of course your previous practice of the Dharma, has brought about that experience.

Aparimana: Although I presume reflecting quite thoroughly outside of work on the kind of frustrations one normally experiences, I would have thought that something like that, some sort of outside reflection would also be helpful or beneficial.

Sangharakshita: Well presumably that one should be doing as a regular feature of one's Dharmic life anyway.

Aparimana: That would be a supportive condition.

Sangharakshita: Indeed, yes, yes.

Satyaloka: So you are saying you can't... *make* it happen. The intensity of the experience will affect you, you then put that in a Dharmic context. But you can't bring the, "Ah here we are, I've just been disappointed, here I am on the phone, I've just been disappointed, how can I reflect on this Dharmically?" That's what I thought you meant when you quickly bring to mind a...

Sangharakshita: Well, you *can* do that, but I think as it were the more genuine situation, with regard to the development of insight, is that you actually do have, at least momentarily, an experience of insight – insight into the real nature of the situation, and then you bring your reflection to

bear upon that to deepen it and broaden it as it were. But you can reflect on any situation in a Dharmic way, intense or otherwise. But that wasn't quite what I was talking about.

Ratnaketu: That momentary experience of insight, is that necessarily conceptual or intellectual?

Sangharakshita: Well, the English word itself is suggesting in-sight. It is just like a seeing. It may not be accompanied by any discursive mental process. You just see, that is how it is. You just see what a fool you have been [*makes an anguished sound*]. You just see it. You don't go through a whole mental process about it, thinking about it discursively. It's just blindingly obvious you've been a fool, you just see it. It is like that.

Kuladitya: And feel it.

Sangharakshita: And feel it, maybe the feeling comes an instant later.

Satyaloka: So maybe my view of Insight, with this capital I, you're talking there about realizing you've been a fool and seeing something, and it touching you. That seems quite down to earth.

Sangharakshita: But then you have to bear that in mind that, "Yes, I was a fool." and not let it slip away. Because once you start thinking, "Well no it was understandable, I'm not all that to blame, I wasn't really a fool." you lose the insight. Or you just forget about it. You remember Nietzsche's aphorism? He says something like – I think I am paraphrasing a bit – "Memory says 'Oh you did that', pride says 'oh no you didn't'". Pride wins. You can repress it, smother it.

Kuladitya: Or re-write the history of it. It seems to link in with one of the sections in *Wisdom Beyond Words* where you talk about Prajñā-pāramitā humiliating us by bringing us up against reality, as it were. And we need to put ourselves in situations where we are humiliated spiritually.

Sangharakshita: Where our limitations are exposed, and we can't escape from recognizing them.

Kuladitya: That is coterminous with the beginnings of part of the stages into insight. That sort of experience, in that it is eroding our...

Sangharakshita: Yes, an approach. Not *the* approach, but *an* approach. Well I think there are all sorts of greater and lesser situations where there is a little bit of insight where we pass it over, we allow ourselves to forget it. So we need to reflect on our own experience, and where there is a little bit of insight just try to deepen it, incorporate it, integrate it.

Jealousy

... Sometimes the powerful emotions are very instructive here... Jealousy is one of the strongest of emotions, and also one of the most negative. So if you start experiencing very violent jealousy (it is usually experienced in the area of sexual relationships) it really tells you a lot about yourself, and it is really something to reflect upon. Because jealousy is an emotion that persists, so you have got a permanent object. You can be there for hours if not days. You can sort of [ask], "Why am I feeling this?" You know, just go into it. "Why this feeling of jealousy? What is at the bottom of it? What does it mean? What am I being?" This can be a means of developing insight, into yourself and therefore through yourself into reality so to speak. Or when you are very angry with someone. But jealousy is particularly good because it is a very unpleasant, painful emotion. You don't get any satisfaction out of it. You can get satisfaction out of being angry, you can't get satisfaction out of being jealous. It is just painful, and very strong. You can't ignore it.

... So there are all sorts of opportunities of developing insight, but we usually overlook them. Well this is assuming one has a general Dharmic background of course...

Ratnaketu: So in the same way you could, if you have a very strong positive emotion, you can look into that.

Sangharakshita: You could but it is not quite the same thing, it hasn't got the same existential edge, in a way unfortunately. When you suffer you are really up against your ego. As I have said before, people ask, "Why do I suffer?" but who asks well, "Why am I happy?" Suffering makes you think and reflect, usually happiness doesn't. If anything it makes you forgetful. Well that is the time to watch out – when things are going well, and you feel happy and so on and so forth. That is when you are likely to make mistakes.

Notes:

7. From *The Embossed Tea Kettle*, quoted in *Readings from the Refuge Tree of the Western Buddhist Order*, page 33.
8. From *The Gifford Lectures* series, *The Mystery of Being: Reflection and Mystery 1948–1950*. Chapter V: Primary and Secondary Reflection: The Existential Fulcrum.
9. *Q&A with the Windhorse Trading Chapter*, 26th December 1993.
10. *Meditation: the Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight*.

Questions:

1. Marcel writes: “...it is necessary that the living personal experience should bump into some sort of obstacle.” Can you think of any instances of this in your own life? Were you able to reflect on what happened and learn from it?
2. Ethical reflection. Can you think of any times when you have been forced to reflect on yourself in the way that Marcel describes, springing from your own ethical lapses?
3. Reflection and friendship. Can you think of any times when you have judged a friend quite harshly, but have then had to admit that you have done something similar yourself? If so, did the self-knowledge that the reflection brought about result in your feeling closer to your friend?
4. Sangharakshita says: “... I would say that one of the characteristics of insight is, by its very nature, it is not dependent on any particular set of conditions... So that nothing, ultimately, is more favourable to the arising of insight than anything else.” But if this is so, why do we try to cultivate favourable conditions for living the spiritual life – in fact, why do we practice the spiritual life at all?
5. Have you ever had the presence of mind to reflect in an intensely difficult situation? If so, did you manage to gain some sort of insight into yourself and/or the situation?
6. Have you ever remembered to bring reflection to bear on an intensely unskilful state, such as anger or jealousy? If so, did you gain some insight into yourself?
7. Do you believe that it’s possible for you to gain insight in the midst of everyday life, or do you think it can only really happen on retreat, when doing a lot of meditation?

Week 3 – Reflection on a Topic

Information is endlessly available to us: where shall wisdom be found?

Harold Bloom¹¹

In Peter Ackroyd's novel *The Plato Papers*, set 2,000 years into the future, the novel's protagonist, Plato, looking back at our time, says of us:

"I soon discovered that they always wished to communicate in the shortest possible time, the most simple piece of information seemed to amuse them, as long as it could be gathered instantaneously... the faster an action could be reported, the more significance it acquired. Events themselves were not of any consequence, only the fact that they could be known quickly. Now you are silent... how could I have invented such a reality?"

This seems an accurate description of our age – with 24-hour news channels we get to hear about, and often see, events that are happening all over the world *as they are happening*, or at least very soon afterwards. And the world-wide-web gives us instant access to information at the push of a button.

This week we're going to explore the practice of reflecting on a topic, whether that is a text, a teaching, or a 'truth'. It could even be an image or a poem. The main thing is that we learn to reflect on just one thing, and in doing this we're choosing depth rather than breadth – wisdom rather than information.

The development of wisdom cannot be hurried. Reflecting on a topic takes time and patience. There is also a certain renunciation involved because while we're reflecting we're not 'taking in' any new information – so we may need to give up our thirst for new knowledge, new 'data', and give ourselves instead to the slow, painstaking task of understanding something more deeply. We cannot reflect in a hurry, we need to feel that we have 'all the time in the world' because deeper understanding happens in its own time. We cannot 'schedule it in' to our busy timetable. This is why, if we want to learn how to reflect, we first need to learn how to do nothing because it is out of the 'spaciousness' of doing nothing that our minds can open out. This spaciousness allows our mind to range freely and unhurriedly around and through whatever it is we have chosen to consider.

You need to have a sense of timelessness. I don't mean that you enter into the infinite, but that you *feel* that you have all the time in the world – that there is nothing for you to *do* – that it's *ok* to do nothing, to achieve nothing. You might think that you don't have the time for this – you have to earn a living, clean the house, do the shopping etc. Firstly I would answer that that is a pity, and that it might be a good thing to take a look at your life to see if there is anything you can stop doing, because having time to reflect is important. Secondly I would say that to enter into that 'timeless realm' of reflection doesn't necessarily require a lot of time ('timeless' doesn't mean 'lots of time'). You need to feel that you have all the time in the world, even though you may not have. You enter into the timeless realm when you give up looking for results – when you stop trying to meet targets.

So if you've only got ten minutes to spare you can enter into the timeless realm by not trying to fill that time up with something useful. Reflection is not useful. To reflect you need to feel free – you need to feel that it's ok to be totally useless. Sangharakshita once said that for every hour of 'listening' (and 'listening' includes reading), we should spend at least 100 hours of reflecting. But how do we do that? Perhaps you find it difficult to control your unruly mind – perhaps you experience a lot of papañca – mental proliferation – and not very much vicāra – directed thought. The art of reflecting requires that we learn the skill of vicāra, so how do we do this?

Writing as a way of thinking

Few people think more than two or three times a year. I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.

George Bernard Shaw

Someone once asked Sangharakshita how they could learn to think, and he suggested that they write about the same topic for half an hour every day. A few years ago, while on a two-month solitary retreat, I decided to do this. I chose as my subject 'Stream Entry and the Three Fetters', and I bought two exercise books to write in. At first I felt a certain inner resistance to doing it and it took me a few days to get down to it, but one day I opened my exercise book and began.

On the first day I simply wrote down everything I already 'knew' about the three fetters – that is, everything that I had learned about the topic, from Sangharakshita, the Pāli texts and so on. The second day was more difficult – now what should I write? I sat there for some time, bringing my mind back whenever it wandered off, fighting with the urge to do something else and trying to ignore the little voice saying, "This is a waste of time." However, I did manage to write something, and this felt like a small triumph, because it was my own! "Hey, it's possible to have an original thought if I sit here long enough!" As the days went by sometimes I sat there at a loss, not having anything to write about at all, but on other days it was as if the flood doors opened and I wrote pages, sometimes going on for well over an hour. In fact I had to go out and buy another exercise book!

Later I wrote to Sangharakshita, telling him about what I had been doing, and he invited me to give a talk on Stream Entry at the Order Convention the following year. The talk I gave – *Reflections on the Stream* – was qualitatively different from any talk I had previously given, coming as it did from my own reflections, whereas talks that I had previously given had largely been re-workings of Sangharakshita's teachings. That talk was later transcribed and published in *The Western Buddhist Review*, and it gave me great confidence in my ability to think independently and creatively.

When you write down your thoughts, you 'objectify' them. There they are, on the page. This can be a great help in directing your thinking because you can always refer back to them, whereas if you are just sitting down to think, your thoughts can be a little elusive – "What was that thought I just had? How did it relate to what I

was thinking earlier? What *was* I thinking earlier?” etc. Also, a thought that seemed significant while it was still ‘in your head’, can be seen to be a little naïve when seen on the page. You can also review your writing later and decide which thoughts may be worth pondering further, and which you can discard.

Inner dialogue

However, it’s not necessary to write in order to think. The important thing is that you learn to keep your mind on the topic in the best way that you can. In his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot writes about the practice of ‘inner dialogue’:

*“Meditation – the practice of dialogue with oneself – seems to have held a place of honour amongst Socrates’ disciples. When Antisthenes was asked what profit he had derived from philosophy, he replied ‘The ability to converse with myself’”.*¹²

When we reflect we converse with ourselves. A good way to start is to ask yourself questions and try to answer them. For instance, you might be thinking about the Threefold Way of ethics, meditation and wisdom, and you might ask yourself why, or how, the practice of ethics conduces to concentration. Here’s how the conversation might go:

“That’s a little strange isn’t it? It must be something to do with integration.

But then what does integration mean, when applied to the human mind? How can a mind be ‘unintegrated’?

I thought that unintegrated simply meant distracted, or easily distracted, but if the practice of ethics leads to concentration, I suppose there must be an ethical dimension to distraction.

We talk about ‘integrity’ – ‘a man of integrity’ is someone who is trustworthy, who can be relied upon, because they cannot be swayed by selfish motives, because they’re ethical I suppose.

So there’s something about ethical practice and being ‘whole’, ‘integrated’. So an unethical act must tend towards disintegration, dispersal.

Is that true? How about in my case – when I’m distracted, is that necessarily an unethical state? What do I mean by ‘unethical’?”

And so on, following the argument through, trying not to get distracted from your main theme. If you keep pursuing your argument you will make breakthroughs in your understanding, and your wisdom will deepen.

Reflection is a deepening of the self

Let me repeat a point here though that Gabriel Marcel made in his lecture on reflection¹⁴ – you’ll only make the mental effort to reflect on those things that you

care about. If you don't care very much about the connection between ethics and concentration, for example, then you won't bother to think it through and you won't have any breakthroughs in your understanding. It has to matter to you, even though you may not always know at the time *why* it matters – sometimes that only becomes clear later. This is one of the great benefits and joys of reflecting – that it is not merely a mental exercise in ideas, but is also an enlargement of self awareness. We reflect so that we understand something more deeply, but the process also involves understanding ourselves more deeply. Often the reason why we have a relatively shallow understanding of something is not through lack of information but because we are relatively shallow. Our understanding deepens as we deepen.

A few years ago I was reflecting on Amitābha and his seed syllable Hrī. I had read Lama Govinda's essay where he makes the connection between the red colour of Amitābha and his seed syllable, and the mental state of hrī – shame: we blush red when we become conscious of having committed an unskilful act. I was thinking about this for some time, not appearing to make any headway, when suddenly I remembered my father, who was living alone and isolated in London. I suddenly felt great shame that I hadn't made more effort to visit him and alleviate his suffering and I then realized why I had become interested in Amitābha and his seed syllable – it was because there was some dark area of my life that I needed to light up – I was ashamed at my own behaviour and I needed to access that shame. When we reflect we call *ourselves* into question.

Learning from inner contradictions

You may notice as you reflect that you have certain inner contradictions, and you may also notice that you have a tendency to 'turn away' from these contradictions because they make you feel uncomfortable. However, it's good to resist the urge to turn away – in fact, it's much better to 'turn towards' them because in your inner contradictions *there is something to be learned*. For instance, you may have a positive emotional response to the idea of renunciation, yet you find that you have not renounced very much. One possible response to our inner contradictions is to feel bad about ourselves – "I feel strongly about renunciation, but I never renounce anything – how hypocritical I am." It's best to resist this urge to give ourselves a hard time because that doesn't seem to help us to deepen our understanding (anyway, having inner contradictions is not the same as being hypocritical, it is more the result of a lack of integration, and reflection helps us to become more integrated).

I find a more helpful response is to have an attitude of *curiosity* – "How strange that I feel very positively towards renunciation, yet I find that I don't renounce very much. Why should this be the case I wonder?" *There is something to be learned*. What that is you can't predict, but it will be something about yourself that you haven't yet understood – or, to put it in less cognitive terms, underneath the contradiction is an aspect of you that is unresolved, that is suffering, and that wants to change. I sometimes feel as if an unresolved aspect of myself draws attention to itself, rather as a physical wound does – as Rumi says: "Don't turn away. Keep looking at the bandaged place. That's where the light enters you." It is

as if my longing for wholeness causes me to become interested in a topic that will expose that inner contradiction so as to bring about a resolution.

Difficulties and problems

Sangharakshita's distinction between a difficulty and a problem is very useful in this respect. A difficulty can be solved by using our intelligence and by making an effort. A problem however, "Cannot be solved on its own terms, even while the terms of the problem cannot be changed. Strictly speaking, a real problem cannot be solved at all – that's the beauty of it. At the same time, it *must* be solved." ¹⁵ It *must* be solved because problems only arise from issues that really matter to us, and while they are unsolved they are painful. Because they are painful we don't want problems and in fact we tend to see them as obstacles to our spiritual development. Problems, however, do not stand 'in the way' of our spiritual development, they are an important aspect of it, and we need to learn to live with them – even more, we need to welcome and embrace them.

It's not always easy to tell the difference between a difficulty and a problem, and we usually begin by treating a problem as if it were a difficulty, that is, we apply our intelligence and effort to the task of solving it. In fact this is probably the best way of finding out if you have a difficulty or a problem; if you manage to solve it, then it was a difficulty, if it remains as a problem even after your best efforts, then you have a problem! However, I have noticed that very often people don't *recognize* their problem as a problem, and continue to treat it as a difficulty, often causing themselves needless frustration, self-doubt and despair. Here's a question you can ask yourself: "Have I been struggling with a difficult aspect of myself for a long time, say five, ten or even twenty years?" If the answer is, "Yes." then you can ask yourself another question: "Have I overcome that difficulty?" If the answer is, "No." then congratulations, you have a problem! In fact you probably have a few problems, at least I hope that you do, because if you have no problems, you have no spiritual life.

Have patience with everything unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps, then, far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

Rainer Maria Rilke ¹⁶

What does it mean to, "*live your way into the answer?*" It means that through living with the problem, the painful, insoluble problem, by not turning away from it, you eventually become a different person, a person for whom it is no longer a problem.

The pleasure of reflection

I'm afraid that I may be giving you the impression that reflection is hard and unpleasant work, involving struggles with your 'inner contradictions' and 'insoluble problems'. However, while reflection does sometimes confront us with difficult truths, most of the time I find it pleasurable. In fact it's one of the things in life I most enjoy doing, and I try to make sure that I have as much time as possible to do it. More than that, I have recently begun to feel that my best, most enjoyable, reflective times are aesthetically pleasing. When I sit down in my armchair for two or three hours, looking out of the window at nothing in particular (usually at the sky), away from 'things that have to be done', my mind settles down into an open, appreciative state. This state may be what the ancient Greek philosophers Epicurus and Pyrrho called '*ataraxia*', which is, "...a limpid state, characterized by freedom from worry or any other preoccupation ... synonymous with the only true happiness possible for a person."¹⁷ Perhaps the nearest Buddhist terms for this state are *śamatha* or *prasāda*.¹⁸

The best, most creative reflection is done from this state of mind because it allows us to be objective. By 'objective' I obviously don't mean a cold, detached state of mind, but a state in which self-interest is temporarily suspended. This means that even reflecting on 'difficult' personal truths, such as our inner contradictions or problems, can be pleasurable.

Notes:

11. *How to Read, and Why*, page 19.

12. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Page 91.

13. See also Padmavajra's booklet *Listening, Reflecting and Meditating*, where he lists six kinds of reflection, pages 8-16. Padmaloka Books.

Also, Kamalashila's book on meditation, chapter 9: Reflection.

14. See Week 2 of this course 'Reflecting on Action', page 2.

15. *Transforming Self and World*, page 39 .

16. *Letters to a Young Poet*.

17. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ataraxia>

18. We will be looking at these two terms and their importance for reflection over the next few weeks.

Suggested Further Reading:

Listening, Reflecting and Meditating, Padmavajra, pages 8–16. Padmaloka Books.

<http://www.padmaloaka.org.uk/shopbooklets.html>

Meditation – the Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight, Kamalashila, chapter 9 – Reflection.

Book: <http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=342>

Read online: <http://www.kamalashila.co.uk/page7/page7.html>

Philosophy as a Way of Life – Pierre Hadot. Chapter 3: Spiritual Exercises, Part 2; Learning to Dialogue. Pages 89-93.

<http://tinyurl.com/c6x3yf>

Questions:

1. “... for every hour of ‘listening’ (and the sense of ‘listening’ includes ‘reading’ here), we should spend at least 100 hours of reflecting.” Do you agree with this? Or is this advice meant only for thinking types, not for faith-types?
2. Thinking about your own practice of reflection – what would you say is the ratio between ‘listening’ (learning) and reflecting in your case?
3. I have suggested two ways in which you might develop reflection – writing and ‘inner dialogue’. Can you think of any other ways?
4. Do you recognize any ‘inner contradictions’? If so, what is your attitude towards them? Are you harsh and judgmental about them, or are you able to regard them with curiosity and perhaps even humour?
5. Do you recognize any ‘problems’ in your own spiritual life? If so, are you able to see them as ‘the path’ rather than ‘obstacles on the path’?

Week 4 – Reflecting on Texts

...we have forgotten how to read: how to pause, liberate ourselves from our worries, return into ourselves, and leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us. This, too, is a spiritual exercise, and one of the most difficult.

Pierre Hadot ¹⁹

Whether we have forgotten, or in fact never knew how to read, doesn't really matter, what is important about this quotation is that it gives us some clues as to how we should try to read Buddhist texts. Actually Hadot is not referring to Buddhist but ancient Greek and Roman texts, but the same principle applies – we should try to read them just as we try to meditate. Ours is a very literate culture in which the written word is ubiquitous, from newspapers to internet sites to advertising hoardings to lists of ingredients in packaged food – we can even read our cornflakes packet at breakfast! The disadvantage of this is that we get into the habit of reading for information only and don't know how to read to obtain wisdom. This is a different skill entirely – Hadot says that it is a spiritual exercise, "...and one of the most difficult."

Preparing your state of mind to read a text

Before we read a text we may need to prepare ourselves. If we're in a bad mood or a state of craving we may find Buddhist texts boring or irritating and we may be quick to find fault with them. The *Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā* begins:

*Call forth as much as you can of love, of respect, and of faith!
Remove the obstructing defilements and clear away all your taints!
Listen to the perfect wisdom of the gentle Buddhas,
Taught for the weal of the world, for heroic spirits intended.*

Love, respect and faith – we need to approach Buddhist texts with these states of mind. The Sanskrit word that Conze translates as 'love' is *prema*, which is usually a term used to denote romantic or sexual love, the 'near enemy' of *mettā* – sometimes referred to as 'sticky' love! Here though the word is used in a much more positive, spiritual sense, and this shows us that in reading texts, the meaning of a word may shift depending on the context. You may be surprised to find that you need to develop *love* before you read a Buddhist text, but it illustrates the fact that you need to be in an emotionally positive state in order to really understand the Dharma. Negative (or more precisely, unskilful) states of mind are selfish in nature, making it difficult to understand the Dharma, which is essentially 'without self'.

'Respect' is *gaurava*, from the term *guru*, and its literal meaning is 'weighty', meaning 'significant'. When we read a Buddhist text we need to give it due respect, making sure we are in a fit state to receive it. This is why Buddhist texts are treated with great reverence in traditional Buddhist cultures, where people wrap them in precious cloths, place them on shrines, and never put them on the

floor. Buddhist texts are expressions of the Dharma; the Truth, and so we need to treat them with great respect, as we would a teacher, never reading them casually or in a distracted state.

‘Faith’ is Conze’s translation of *prasāda*, which also means clearness, brightness, pellucidity, purity, calmness, tranquility, absence of excitement, serenity of disposition, good humour, and is often translated as ‘*serene faith*’²¹. This definition points to an interesting connection between clarity and faith – they are not in opposition, but are two different aspects of the same state of mind. We sometimes hear of religious faith being opposed to reason, but in Buddhism they are not opposed. Of course there are spiritual and transcendental states that are beyond the rational mind and some texts are written in a deliberately non-rational style as a way of helping us to access these states. But there is a difference between the non-rational and the irrational – Buddhism is not irrational. Approaching a text with faith doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t be critical, in fact an important aspect of faith is to ask questions of the texts you read. In a sense to think is to doubt – that is, we need to be free to entertain the possibility that the text is not true. Our relationship with Buddhist texts is different from the relationship of, say Christians or Muslims with their texts – Buddhist texts are not ‘the word of God’ that have to be believed, even if they seem to contradict reason and common sense. In fact, if we ask questions of the text we are more likely to understand it more deeply, bringing about deeper faith.

Remove the obstructing defilements and clear away all your taints! Of course if we really did that we would be Enlightened! What this really means is that we should suspend any unskilful mental states for the time that we read Buddhist texts – ideally we would suspend the five hindrances and enter into at least access concentration, if not the first *dhyāna*. In other words, we would enter into a state of *śamatha*, making us ready to receive the wisdom of the text – *vipassanā*.

So this opening ‘preliminary admonition’ from the *Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā* asks quite a lot of us. It tells us the ideal way to read Buddhist texts, but the reality is that many people would hardly ever read them if they waited for such a state to arise! The principle is that we should try to be in as skilful a state as possible. However, we can turn this around and say that reading Buddhist texts is a very good way of putting us into a skilful state, even into a state of *śamatha*. Perhaps we can say that if you are going to read a text you need to at least be aware of the state you are in before you begin. If you realise that you are in an unskilful state then you can take that into account. If, for instance, you are aware of aversion before you begin to read then you are less likely to ‘project’ that aversion onto the text – you realise that it’s you, not the text that is the problem. With that awareness you can allow the text to help you get into a more skilful state. Without that awareness you are likely to find fault with the text, which will give you a ‘reason’ to allow your aversion to grow, blaming the text for being stupid etc.

How to reflect on texts

*We go unwinding the woof
from the web of meaning*

*Words of the Sutras
day by day come forth*

Head on, we chase the mystery of the Dharma.

Hui Yung²²

Whatever the text you're reading, whether it is an ancient traditional work or a contemporary book, it's best to read the whole thing first. This first reading will give you an overview and will also inhibit the common feeling of wanting to rush ahead to see what's next. On the second reading you can pause and reflect on specific passages that you don't fully understand, or that don't seem to make sense, or that interest you, or that you don't agree with, or that seem to contradict another passage in the text, or that you don't like.

How do you reflect on these passages? In much the same way as I described in last week's essay about reflecting on a topic. The only thing I would add concerns anything you read that you find yourself disagreeing with. There seem to be basically two kinds of people involved with Triratna – those who find it necessary to try to agree with everything the Buddha or Sangharakshita says or writes, and those who find it easy to disagree. When confronted with a passage they disagree with the first type feels very uncomfortable, assumes that they and not the text must be wrong, and tries very hard to change their view or opinion to that of the writer or speaker of the text. The second type knows no such conflict and simply assumes that they are right and that the text is either corrupt or simply wrong.

I would like to suggest a middle way between these two approaches, both of which prevent a valuable opportunity for deeper reflection and insight. In the *Kalama Sutta*, after warning the Kālāmas against relying on ten unreliable criteria by which to test the truth or falsity of a teaching, the Buddha tells them to rely on their own experience and on what is 'praised by the wise' (interestingly this second criteria is often omitted from quotations from and teachings about this sutta).²³ If you find yourself in disagreement with a Buddhist text there is an apparent conflict between these two criteria. Someone who you consider to be wise is teaching something that, in your experience, is untrue. What to do?

The first type of Buddhist will tend to take the text seriously and dismiss his own opinion. The second type will tend to take his own opinion seriously and dismiss the text. Both of these responses are essentially lazy. Actually you need to take both sides seriously, and it is only when you do that that you can embark upon a serious reflection on the matter. Taking the text seriously means that you entertain the possibility that *you could be wrong* (which is not the same as assuming automatically that you *must* be wrong). Taking yourself seriously means that you entertain the possibility that *the text might be wrong* (which is not the same as

automatically assuming that it *must* be wrong). Taking both sides seriously demands both faith and honesty. Now you can get to work. What is the truth? If you take both sides seriously you may even find that you have a problem – perhaps even a problem as big and as spiritually fruitful as the Bodhisattva Ruciraketu in the *Sutra of Golden Light!*²⁴

Reading Sangharakshita

Some Buddhist traditions (such as Zen and the Tibetan traditions) place a strong emphasis on having a personal relationship with a teacher, and this has caused some people involved in Triratna to feel that they are missing out because they don't have that sort of relationship with their teacher, Sangharakshita. However, it is possible to develop a 'relationship' with a text, and therefore with the author of a text. Reading texts is in fact an act of spiritual friendship – the speaker or writer is sharing their wisdom with other beings out of compassion. When you read and try to understand the texts, then you are entering into a spiritual friendship with the writer/speaker.

Sangharakshita is, in my opinion, a man of very deep insight and has an exceptionally clear mind. He writes very precisely and carefully, which demands a corresponding degree of care on our part when we read him. It's true that the books he has written (as opposed to the books that have been edited from transcriptions of his seminars or lectures) were written in an 'old fashioned' style, and are not as easy to read as some other contemporary writers. However, it is well worth the effort to read his books because, apart from the wisdom expressed in them, you get to know him too.

Reading traditional texts

One of the things about Triratna that puzzles and dismays me is why so few people seem to read traditional Buddhist texts. Some people don't read any Buddhist books at all while others read mainly contemporary Buddhist writers. Some of these writers are very good and of course they write in a more modern idiom, sometimes addressing contemporary issues, and this can be very useful. However, all Buddhist writers draw on the ancient Buddhist texts for their knowledge and inspiration (at least I hope they do!) and I like to go back to the original sources. I also encourage others to do the same because these ancient texts are full of practical and inspirational material, not to mention wisdom.

It's true that they are often not easy to read – there are all sorts of obstacles to overcome, such as the unfamiliar style of writing, the references and allusions to things and people with which we may not be familiar, and sometimes the literary style of the translator. We have to learn to read them, and this takes time and patience. We may also need a guide – someone who has studied the texts and can illuminate them for us. In this respect we are very lucky indeed in having easy access to transcriptions of seminars Sangharakshita has given on many ancient texts (see <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/seminars>), some of which have been edited and published as books.²⁵ I would recommend that you read a few of

these seminars because in them Sangharakshita teaches us *how to read* Buddhist texts.

However, once you have read a few of these seminars and have learned, to some extent, how to read a text, I would then suggest that you choose a text and reflect on it yourself *before reading the commentary*. Reading commentaries can make us lazy – we can let the commentator do all the work for us. A good sequence is to read a text, reflect on it, then read a commentary on the text, and then reflect on that. Remember – for every one hour of reading, a hundred hours of reflecting!

Where to start?

If you're not used to reading ancient Buddhist texts you may feel a little daunted by the vast amount of material now available in translation – Hīnayāna, Mahayana, Vajrayāna, canonical and non-canonical, Indian, Tibetan, Chinese, Japanese – where to start? It's probably best to start with the Pāli Canon because with these texts we get about as near as is possible to the Buddha's teaching, and they are usually fairly simple and practical. The *Dhammapada*, *Sutta Nipāta* and *Udāna* are all simple, beautiful books, and Sangharakshita has led seminars on them, which you can find on <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/seminars>. The *Majjhima Nikāya* is a longer book, and Bhikkhu's Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi have published an excellent translation.²⁶

Bhikkhu Thanissaro's website <http://www.accesstoinsight.com> is an invaluable resource – nearly every sutta in the Pāli Canon is translated into English (often with more than one translation) and you can download them for free.²⁷ Once you have reflected on a few of these texts you can move onto the Mahayana and Vajrayāna.

However, it's also good to 'follow your nose' – simply follow your interests. I have found that if a text, or something in a text, fascinates or attracts me, *there is always something in it* for me – there is some treasure buried there, something in that text that I need to know, that I need to realise, that will help me to grow.

It's also worth reading texts that you don't like! Of course we tend to avoid whatever we don't like, but you might try reading it anyway to see what happens. I've always disliked Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* because it has intimidated me. His instructions and exhortations are so uncompromising that I have always felt that I am an inferior Buddhist when I read it, unable to meet the required expectations. Perhaps this is why Pierre Hadot says that reading texts is one of the most difficult of spiritual practices – and certainly when we read a Buddhist text we are encountering an Enlightened mind, and this encounter can feel very uncomfortable. However, while on a solitary retreat recently, I recited part of it and found, to my surprise, that I enjoyed it! Perhaps I have changed!

It's a good idea to read more than one translation of a work if you can. A translation is inevitably an interpretation of a text (a translator has their own understanding (or not!) of Buddhism, and they cannot help but interpret the text in the light of that understanding). Sangharakshita once said that reading a translation

is like looking at the reverse side of a tapestry – the colours and general shapes are all visible but the precise expression of the original is obscured. By reading more than one translation you can get a little closer to the original meaning, and this can make a lot of difference when you are reflecting on a text.

What do you make of the following?:

Believe nothing, no matter where you read it or who has said it, not even if I have said it, unless it agrees with your own reason and your own common sense.

The Buddha

This is something I downloaded on the internet and I've also seen it on a postcard. Did the Buddha really say that? I can't remember coming across this in the Pāli Canon, or any other canonical work, and I would be surprised if the Buddha did say it. Is it perhaps a corrupted version of what he says in the *Kalama Sutta*?

It is proper for you, Kālāmas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are bad; these things are blameable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them.

Some things to watch out for

If the first of the two quotes above is indeed a bowdlerized translation of the *Kalama Sutta* then it is only an extreme version of what we all tend to do – read our own meanings and values into a text. This is perhaps another reason why Hadot thinks that reading texts is one of the hardest of spiritual exercises – because it is so hard to read what the text *actually* says. Goethe was aware of this difficulty when he wrote, “*Ordinary people don't know how much time and effort it takes to learn how to read. I've spent eighty years at it, and I still can't say that I've reached my goal.*”

We also need to be aware of our cultural conditioning and prejudices. In the example above, it would seem that the ‘translator/interpreter’ was trying to read into the text a form of rationalism. Our cultural prejudices can be invisible to us, so that we don't even realise that we're judging a text by them. If on the other hand we are unable to read our cultural prejudices into a text (because the text is simply too clear for us to do that) we might instead disagree with it, without realizing that our ‘disagreement’ is merely our own prejudice.

Another thing we need to try to be aware of is our resistance to really understand and take in the Dharma, because to do that we would simply have to change. So

we find reasons for disagreeing with the text, or we find them ‘boring’ or ‘repetitive’. In last week’s essay I said that, “To think is to doubt.” What I meant by doubt in that context was to have the honesty and integrity to test a teaching against reason and experience. There is of course another form of doubt, which is merely a rationalization of our resistance to the Dharma – our resistance to really look at ourselves and change. As Hadot says in the quote at the beginning of this essay, we need to, “...leave aside our search for subtlety and originality, in order to meditate calmly, ruminate, and let the texts speak to us.” Here is Shih Te, a Chinese poet from the 8th Century:

*My poems are poems;
Some people call them sermons.
Well, poems and sermons share one thing:
When you read them you’ve got to be careful.
Keep at it. Get into detail.
Don’t just claim they’re easy.
If you were to live your life like that,
a lot of funny things might happen.* ³⁰

Living with a text

While it can be a good thing to read many books and texts to gain a broad knowledge of Buddhism, it’s also good to spend some time on a few, or even just one, so that you can gain a depth of understanding. Sangharakshita’s axiom, “More and more of less and less.” is relevant here. It’s good to ‘live with’ one text for a while, for many months, or even years. In this way you develop a ‘relationship’ with the text, even a friendship.

I recently decided to give a series of talks on the 4th and 5th chapters of the *Sutta Nipāta*, considered by many scholars to be the oldest parts of the Pāli Canon. Ten years previously I had given a talk on them and had felt that there was much more in these texts to be explored, not only on the ‘horizontal’ level (there was much more to explore in terms of what I then understood about the texts) but also on the ‘vertical’ level (I intuited that there was much more for me to understand about the texts). I took them on a solitary retreat and thought about them for an hour or two each day. They are simple texts, not intellectually demanding, and after a few days I began to feel a little worried – “There is not much in these texts after all, and I shall have nothing to say in my series of talks.” However, by just ‘living with’ these texts, returning to them every day, slowly *they revealed themselves to me*.

A text *slowly* reveals itself because you can only understand it to the extent of your spiritual development. You’ve probably had the experience of hearing teachings in one of Sangharakshita’s recorded lectures that you hadn’t *heard* when you first listened to it a few years previously. ³² The reason for this is that you were *not ready* to hear it the first time you listened – you were not sufficiently spiritually developed. Some time later you have become a different person so are able to *hear* the teaching that you need. In a similar way, when you reflect on a text over a period of time you understand it more deeply to the extent that *you* deepen.

In the *Diamond Sutra* the Buddha says:

“... It is not possible, Subhuti, that this discourse on the Dharma could be heard by beings of inferior resolve, nor by such beings as have a self in view, a being, a soul, or a person. Nor can beings who have not taken the pledge of Bodhi-beings either hear this discourse on Dharma, or take it up, bear it in mind, recite it or study it. This cannot be.”

Commenting on this passage Sangharakshita says, “At the bottom of this the general principle is that you are drawn to a teaching when you are ready for it. It is as though the teaching is moving towards you at the same time that you are moving towards it.”³⁴ Pierre Hadot says, “...let the texts speak to us.” I have just written about texts ‘revealing themselves’, and Sangharakshita here talks about texts ‘moving towards’ us – all these phrases suggest a relationship, with the text playing an active role. This may seem strange, in that a text is just a piece of paper (or perhaps the screen of a monitor) with words on it. A text is inert, without consciousness, so how can *it* relate to us? Assuming that a text is a teaching given by an enlightened or partially enlightened being, it will be multi-layered, by which I mean that it will be possible to understand the teaching at different levels. Understanding the teaching at a lower level will not exhaust the meaning – there will be higher or deeper understandings to be gained, and in this sense the text *has more to say than that which we are able to hear, or understand, presently*. So in a sense the text is *waiting* for us to understand the meaning more fully or deeply and *speaks to us, reveals itself, or moves towards* us when we are ready.

The difference between information and wisdom

This is the difference between information and wisdom. Information is easily available and has no depth, so when you receive the information there is nothing more to be learned. Thus our relationship with information is fleeting and shallow. Wisdom has depths that we do not – cannot – access immediately, and the only way to access these depths is to *come into relationship* with the text, pondering it, revisiting it from time to time, and allowing ourselves to change so that we can access the deeper meanings. Thus to reflect on a text is not to gain more information about it – although that may also happen – but to become a different person. You will also have learned to love and respect the text, and your faith will have deepened.

... there are some truths whose meaning will never be exhausted by the generations of man. It is not that they are difficult; on the contrary they are often extremely simple. Often, they even appear to be banal. Yet for their meaning to be understood, these truths must be lived, and constantly re-experienced. Each generation must take up, from scratch, the task of learning to read and re-read these old truths.

Pierre Hadot³⁵

Notes:

19. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, page 109. Here ‘ruminate’ is a translation of a French word – I don’t know which one - but Hadot obviously doesn’t mean ruminate in the sense in which it is used in modern psychology (see note 6 in the first essay of this series – *The Reflective Life*).
20. *Verses on the Accumulation of Precious Qualities*, page 9. Translated by E. Conze, Four Seasons.
21. From the *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*, Monier-Monier Williams.
22. *Translating Holy Books* (Chinese, 4th-5th Century), translated by J.P. Seaton in *The Poetry of Zen*.
23. Some people like to point out that the Kālāmas were not followers of the Buddha, and that therefore his criteria for acceptance or rejection of a teaching are not to be used by Buddhists, who have gone for refuge to the Buddha and who should therefore accept the Buddha’s teachings out of faith. It is always good to remember who the Buddha was talking to because he did tend to adapt his teaching to suit different people, and what he said to one person or group of people may or may not be universally applicable. However, it seems to me that what the Buddha said to the Kālāmas is applicable to Buddhists as well as non-Buddhists. After all, as a Buddhist, if you find that something the Buddha (or any other teacher) has said is in disagreement with your own experience, what are you supposed to do, discount your experience and force yourself to agree with the Buddha? Is that even possible?
24. See Emmerick’s translation, published by the Pali Text Society, page 3. Also Sangharakshita’s commentary on this passage in *The Bodhisattva’s Dream*, from the lecture series *Transforming Self and World*. Also published as a book of the same name, pages 35-51.

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X15>

Book:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=730>

25. See, for instance, *Wisdom Beyond Words*, *Living With Awareness*, *Living With Kindness*, and *Song of a Yogi’s Joy*.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/index.asp>

http://www.sangharakshita.org/online_books.html

26. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications.

27. There is an excellent article by John Bullitt called *Befriending the Suttas – Tips on Reading the Pali Discourses* on <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>.
28. Translated by Soma Thera.
29. Quoted by Hadot, page 109.
30. From *The Poetry of Zen*, translated by Sam Hamill and J.P Seaton. Shambala.
31. Along with the *Rhinoceros Sutta* from the first chapter. Not everyone is convinced that these texts are, in fact, earlier than other parts of the Canon. See, for instance, Thanissaro’s comments in *The Aṭṭhaka Vagga (The Octet Chapter) – An Introduction*, on <http://www.accesstoinsight.org>.
32. “A person hears only what they understand.” Goethe.
33. Quoted in *Wisdom Beyond Words*, page 154.
34. Ibid.
35. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, page 108.

Suggested Further Reading:

Befriending the Suttas – John Bullitt.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org>

The Glory of the Literary World – Sangharakshita, in *The Priceless Jewel*, page 159.

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=165>

Book: http://www.sangharakshita.org/online_books.html

Questions:

1. “We sometimes hear of religious faith being opposed to reason, but in Buddhism they are not opposed.” Is this true? In every case?
2. “There seem to be basically two kinds of people involved with Triratna – those who find it necessary to try to agree with everything the Buddha or Sangharakshita says or writes, and those who find it easy to disagree.” Do you recognize yourself in either of these caricatures? Is there perhaps another ‘type’?

3. "...it is possible to develop a 'relationship' with a text, and therefore with the author of a text. Reading texts is in fact an act of spiritual friendship". Is this true, or just wishful thinking?
4. What would you say were the main 'cultural conditioning and prejudices' that you have inherited?
5. Do you think that any of your values are in disagreement with traditional Buddhist values? If so, how have you come to terms with that disagreement?
6. "A text *slowly* reveals itself because you can only understand it to the extent of your spiritual development." Is this true? Isn't it possible to have an intellectual understanding of a text that over-reaches your spiritual development?
7. Is there a Dharma text that you particularly like, and have returned to again and again? If so, has your understanding of that text changed over time?

Week 5 – Contemplating the Buddha

*Confident, recollect the immeasurable Buddha.
Your body pervaded with rapture,
You'll be at the height of continual joy.*

The last two weeks of this module are devoted to meditative reflection (vipassanā), which I'm going to call contemplation to distinguish it from the more discursive kind of reflection we've been exploring so far. To contemplate is, "To look at with continued attention, gaze upon, observe." and it comes from the Latin 'contemplare', which is, "An open place for observation marked out by the augur." i.e. a soothsayer, diviner, or prophet. ³⁷

This week we'll be contemplating the Buddha by practising *Buddhanussati* – 'Recollection of the Buddha', and next week we'll be contemplating impermanence, so you could say that we'll be contemplating Nirvana and Samsāra. *Buddhanussati* is one of a set of meditation practices – actually a number of sets – called the *anussatis* (recollections) . There is a set of three *anussatis* – *Buddhanussati*, *Dhammanussati*, and *Sanghanussati* – and the Tiratana Vandana is made up of these three *anussatis*, which list the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha respectively. There is also a set of six *anussatis*, which consists of the three that I've just mentioned plus ethics, generosity and the devas. There is also a list of ten *anussatis*, but we needn't go into them now!

I'm sure you know that in order to practice contemplation you first need to develop a basis of calm absorption and positive emotion (śamatha) – ideally you would be in the first dhyāna or at least access concentration. ³⁹ Here is what the great Tien Tai meditation master Chi-I says in his treatise on meditation *Stopping and Realizing* ⁴⁰:

There are many different paths to Nirvāṇa, but the most important one for us is the path of dhyāna. Dhyāna is the practice of mind control by which we stop all thinking and seek to realize the Truth in its essence. That is, it is the practice of 'stopping and realizing'... Stopping is a refreshment of the lower consciousness, while realizing may be compared to a golden spade that opens up a treasure of transcendental wealth. Stopping is an entrance into the wonderful silence and peacefulness of potentiality (dhyāna-samāpatti); while realizing is an entrance into the riches of intuition and transcendental intelligence (matti-prajñā). As one advances along this path, he comes into full possession of all means for enriching himself and for benefiting others. ⁴¹

One of the great benefits of practising *Buddhanussati* is that it is both a śamatha and a vipassanā practice – that is, it helps to develop both 'stopping' and 'realizing'. In his book *Buddhist Meditation*, Vajjirañāna Mahāthera writes, "The Samadhi attained through this meditation serves two purposes; the purification of mind and the induction of insight..." ⁴² How is this so? Through the faculty of faith.

The *Milinda-pañha* is an imaginative record of a series of conversations between the Bactrian Greek King Milinda, who ruled in the Punjab, and the Indian Bhikkhu Nāgasena. It was written in Pāli although it is not a part of the Tipiṭaka, or Pāli Canon.⁴³ At one point the King asks Nāgasena what the characteristic mark of faith is, and Nāgasena replies that there are in fact two characteristic marks: ‘tranquillization’ and ‘aspiration’ (or ‘leaping forward’).⁴⁴ The king then asks him to explain how tranquillization is a mark of faith, and Nāgasena replies:

“As faith, O king, springs up in the heart it breaks through the five hindrances, and the heart, free from these hindrances, becomes clear, pure, and serene.”

The king then asks Nāgasena to give a simile, which he does. A king and his army are marching through the land when they come to a river. They cross the river, causing the water to become ‘foul, turbid, and muddy’. The king then becomes thirsty and asks his men to bring him some water from the river to drink. Luckily they have brought with them the ‘water-purifying gem’, which, when placed in water, immediately causes it to become ‘clear, pure, and serene’. In this simile the water is the mind and the water-purifying gem is, of course, faith. The Pāli word translated as faith here is *pasāda*, which is the Pāli form of the Sanskrit *prasāda*.

This is a very important point – faith purifies the mind of the five hindrances, allowing us to enter into access concentration and the *dhyānas*. Traditionally there are six ‘*dhyāna* factors’ (*dhyānanga*) or skilful mental states that are present in *dhyāna*. These are one-pointedness (*ekaggatā*), initial thought (*vitakka*), sustained thought (*vicāra*), rapture (*pīti*), bliss (*sukha*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*) – the last one only emerging only in the fourth *dhyāna*. However, as Kamalashila says in his book on meditation “...we should not think that *dhyāna* consists only of these factors, for we will experience many other positive qualities too.”⁴⁵ Faith is one of these qualities, and we could see the four *dhyānas* as ever increasing and deepening stages of faith. In the first essay of this series – *The Reflective Life* – I said that the reason we are able to reflect effectively in the first *dhyāna* is because our mind is calm, still and pure, and because *vitakka* and *vicāra* are present. However, there is another reason why this is so – because of the presence of faith.

Next, the king asks Nāgasena to tell him about the second mark of faith – aspiration. He replies that, on seeing that the minds of others are freed, one leaps forward after the fruit of Stream Entry, or Once-returning, Non-returning, or Arahantship. The king once again asks him to give a simile. He says that a heavy rain has caused a river to flood and a great crowd of people are standing on the shore, wanting to cross to the other side, but, “...not knowing either the width or the depth of that river, stand terrified and hesitant on the shore.” Then a strong man comes along and leaps right across, and seeing this, the great crowd of people standing on the shore follow him. What this means is that faith not only clears the mind of the five hindrances, but is also a form of insight.

The great theologian and scholar of comparative religion Wilfred Cantwell-Smith wrote that faith has two aspects: insight and response.⁴⁶ It is a kind of seeing or recognizing of the truth and a ‘saying yes’ to it, i.e. a commitment to living in the

light of that truth and a striving to realize it fully. So Right View is not *only* an intellectual understanding of the Dharma, it's also an intuitive recognition of the truth – it includes faith.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James quotes from an article by Professor Leuba, who writes of the faith-state, which seems very close to the experience of insight:

When the sense of estrangement, fencing man about in a narrowly limited ego, breaks down, the individual find himself 'at one with all creation'. He lives in the universal life... That state of confidence, trust, union with all things, following upon the achievement of moral unity, is the Faith-state. ⁴⁷

The idea that faith can enable us to gain insight and even full Enlightenment is mentioned in parts of the Pāli Canon too. For instance in the epilogue to the 5th chapter of the *Sutta Nipāta*, (The *Parāyana*, or *Way to the Beyond*), the Buddha encourages Pingiya to use the power of faith to, "...go to the far shore of the realm of death." ⁴⁸ just as others have done before him.

Contemplating with the whole of our being – including the body

In the (Shorter) *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra*, the Buddha, describes *Sukhāvatī* (the 'Land of Bliss') to Śāriputra. At one point he talks about the beings that inhabit this land:

"Furthermore, Śāriputra, when the rows of palm trees and nets of tinkling bells in that Buddhafield sway in the wind, a sweet and enrapturing sound issues from them. This concert of sounds is, Śāriputra, like a set of heavenly cymbals, with a hundred thousand million playing parts – when these cymbals are played by expert musicians, a sweet and enrapturing sound issues from them. In exactly the same way, a sweet and enrapturing sound proceeds from those rows of palm trees and those nets of tinkling bells when they sway in the wind. When human beings in that world hear this sound, they remember the Buddha and feel his presence in their whole body, they remember the Dharma and feel its presence in their whole body, and they remember the Sangha and feel its presence in their whole body." ⁴⁹

The *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra* expresses the Dharma in mythical and symbolic terms, where 'the land' of *Sukhāvatī* is the state of *śamatha* and *vipassanā* conjoined. In this excerpt the 'sweet and enrapturing sounds' are symbolic descriptions of the state of *dhyāna*, from which the beings in that world practice the *anussatis* – that is, they contemplate the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. The point here is that when you contemplate, you should do so not only with your mind, but with the whole of your body too. What does this mean? Vajjirañāna Mahāthera gives us a clue when he writes:

In the mind of him who meditates on the Recollection of the Buddha, the thoughts arise repeatedly with reference to the Buddha's virtue. With the consequent exaltation of mind, full of joy and gladness, he becomes increasingly strengthened in faith and devotion. He realizes the Buddha in

his inner being and constantly feels that he is in the presence of the Buddha... There arises within him a feeling of a certain intimacy with the Buddha; for he keeps his mind constantly identified with the virtues of the Buddha, so that his body is, as it were, inhabited by a mind continually recollecting this virtue and thus it becomes worthy of adoration, as if it were a shrine. ⁵⁰

These two quotations show us how the Buddhānussati practice results in faith and tranquillity, but how can it lead to insight? You could say that there are basically two directions we can face when we're contemplating: we can face towards saṃsāra, considering its faults, or we can face towards Nirvāṇa, considering its virtues. When we recollect the Buddha and his qualities we are *imagining the Enlightened Mind*, and this act of imagination allows us to *enter into* the Enlightened state. As we contemplate each quality, that quality grows in us, and we begin to *become* that quality.

How to practice Buddhānussati

The traditional way of practising Buddhānussati is to reflect on the qualities of the Buddha as expressed in the *Buddhavandana* –

Iti'pi so Bhagavā, araham, sammā-sambuddho, vijjā-carana sampanno, sugato, lokavidū, anuttaro purisa-damma-sāratī, satthā deva-manussānam, buddho, bhagavā'ti

Here is Sangharakshita's 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.

You could also reflect on other texts that express the qualities of the Buddha, such as the *Purabheda Sutta* and *Piṅgiya's Praises* from the *Sutta Nipāta* ⁵¹, or the *Dhammapada* chapter 7, 'The (Supremely) Worthy', or chapter 14, 'The Enlightened One' These are all from the Pāli Canon of course, but there are many Mahayana Sutras that include praises of the Buddha and his qualities, and you could also contemplate them. ⁵² You could even take your favourite lines and verses from any one of these texts and meditate on them.

Another way of practising Buddhānussati is to visualize the Buddha, and it's possible that the Buddhānussati practice is the forerunner and inspiration for the visualization practices (known as *sādhana*) that Order members are given at ordination. When you visualize the Buddha you're reflecting on the Buddha's qualities through the imagination rather than through conceptual formulations. There are plenty of instances of this kind of contemplation in Mahayana Sutras, such as *The Sutra of Golden Light*. By visualizing the Buddha as the colour of gold, his fine features expressing serene joy, with golden light emanating from

him in all directions, lighting up the whole universe, we are *imaginatively* contemplating the Buddha's qualities. Bhante has spoken of the 'imaginal faculty', which is the integration, on a higher level, of reason and emotion, or we could say wisdom and faith. In *The Journey to Il Convento*, he says:

“Though I have spoken of the imaginal faculty, the expression should not, in a sense, be taken too literally. The imagination, or image-perceiving faculty, is not so much a faculty among faculties as the man – the spiritual man – himself. It is spoken of as a faculty because, in the case of the vast majority of people, it exists in such a rudimentary form that it appears to be simply a ‘faculty’ like, for instance, reason or emotion, or because it has not yet been developed or manifested at all. The imaginal faculty is, in reality, the man himself, because when one truly perceives an image one perceives it with the whole of oneself, or with one’s whole being. When one truly perceives an image, therefore, one is transported to the world to which that image belongs and becomes, if only for the time being, an inhabitant of that world. In other words, truly to perceive an image means to become an image, so that when one speaks of the imagination, or the imaginal faculty, what one is really speaking of is image perceiving image. That is to say, in perceiving an image what one really perceives is, in a sense, oneself.”

You could of course combine these two ways of contemplating the Buddha, and indeed *Pingiya's Praises* to the Buddha seem to be such a combination:

I cannot stay away from him for even a moment, brahman, from Gotama of great understanding, of great intelligence, who taught me the Dhamma which is to be realized by oneself and immediate, which is the destruction of craving, without distress, the likeness of which does not exist anywhere.

I see him with my mind as if with my eye, being vigilant day and night, brahman, I pass the night revering him. For that very reason I think there is no staying away from him.

My faith and rapture, mind and mindfulness do not stay away from the teaching of Gotama. In whatever direction the one of great wisdom goes, in that very direction I bow down.

Moving from reflection to contemplation

According to Vajjirañāna Mahāthera, “*The disciple who meditates on this subject should thoroughly understand the meaning of each word of the formula, and should meditate, recollecting the particular virtue of the Buddha expressed by each word.*” Here he is referring to both the second level of wisdom (thoroughly understand the meaning of each word...) and the third level (...and should meditate, recollecting the particular virtue ...) Firstly, you need to reflect on each word of the *vandana*, considering the various different definitions, their meanings etc. Then, when you have done that, you should meditate on them, not thinking very discursively about them, but rather simply letting them sink into your consciousness. Kamalashila puts this very well in his book, when he discusses insight meditation:

It is rather like gazing at a lovely jewel that has been laid on a piece of dark velvet cloth. We do not have to make any effort to see its beauty; more and more beauty simply reveals itself as we become more accustomed to looking. At this stage we do not even try, actively, to understand anything; we simply allow ourselves to be affected by the truth, by the reality of our contemplation.

You may remember that in the first essay of this course – *The Reflective Life* – I said that to reflect we need to learn to control and minimise *papañca* (mental proliferation) and develop *vitakka* and *vicāra* (initial and sustained thought, together making up what I called ‘directed thought’). In his book on meditation, Kamalashila translates *vitakka* as ‘thinking of’, and *vicāra* as ‘thinking about’. He then goes on to say that when we practice contemplation (*vipassanā*) we are ‘thinking of’ rather than ‘thinking about’ – that is, we are using *vitakka* rather than *vicāra*. I don’t think this a traditional understanding, but it’s useful, and with this model we can chart a progression from *papañca*, where our mind is all over the place and out of control; to *vitakka/vicāra*, where we are able to think about something without distraction; to just *vitakka*, where we are simply holding a thought or an image in our very still and tranquil mind.

Useful as this may be though, they are not hard and fast categories – they are more like a spectrum of experience, and at any one time we might be anywhere on that spectrum. You might begin practising *Buddhanussati* in quite a discursive way – taking each of the qualities of the Buddha in turn and thinking about them. But as you continue to practice you may find that all you need to do is to bring to mind one of the Buddha’s qualities and it has an effect on you even without thinking any more about it. Sometimes you might even find that all you need to do is think of the *word* Buddha or visualise his form. On other days, when your mind is more discursive, you may need to return to thinking about each of the qualities in order to stay engaged with the practice.

The benefits of practising *Buddhanussati*

The practice is mentioned a number of times in the Pāli Canon and its benefits are

the overcoming of fear and the development of a calm and joyful mind. Here is the Buddha talking to Mahānāma about the benefits of the practice:

His mind is not overcome with passion, not overcome with aversion, not overcome with delusion. His mind heads straight, based on the Tathāgata. And when the mind is headed straight, the disciple of the noble ones gains a sense of the goal, gains a sense of the Dhamma, gains joy connected with the Dhamma. In one who is joyful, rapture arises. In one who is rapturous, the body grows calm. One whose body is calmed experiences ease. In one at ease, the mind becomes concentrated.

The Buddha even goes on to say that he should practice this at all times, rather as Pīngiya describes:

Mahānāma, you should develop this recollection of the Buddha while you are walking, while you are standing, while you are sitting, while you are lying down, while you are busy at work, while you are resting in your home crowded with children.

But my favourite list of benefits comes from Chi-I's treatise on meditation:

In the state of dhyāna... when our minds and bodies are quiet and tranquil, then all of a sudden there comes into the memory a recollection of the inconceivable merits and purity of all the Buddhas...As soon as we are dwelling in such remembrances of the Buddha's transcending attainments and merits, we feel springing up in our dhyāna-minds the development of a spirit of respect for all sentient life and a feeling of fraternity with them; we feel unfolding powers of Samādhi, and a sense of joy and bliss pervades both body and mind that wraps us in a feeling of righteousness and safety. At such times we are never disturbed by the appearance of any bad developments nor evil manifestations. When we retire from our dhyāna practice, our body seems light and active and we feel so confident in the possession of good qualities, that we expect everyone whom we meet will respect us and respond to our good will.

Getting started on the Buddhānussati practice

Before you start actually contemplating the text of the *Buddhavandana* you will need to do some preparatory work. As Vajjirañāna Mahāthera says above you 'Should thoroughly understand the meaning of each word of the formula'. To help you to do this I have taken some extracts from the seminar Sangharakshita did on the *Tiratana Vandana*, where he takes each word of the *Buddhavandana* and explains their various meanings. I have also given the Pāli-English Dictionary's translations of each word. Using these, you will be able to make your own rendering of the vandana, taking your preferred translations of each word (see below). Doing this preparatory work will help you to engage with the text in a personal way, which will help you to contemplate the Buddha more effectively.

Having done this, there are a number of possible ways to do the practice: you can use the translation that you have written in the class, having your translation in front of you and reflecting on each word in turn. You can also download the recorded guided meditation by Ratnaguna or Dayanandi and listen to that:

<http://tinyurl.com/cgwwsd>

The advantage of this is that you won't need to keep opening your eyes to look at the text. The disadvantage is that you won't be using your own translation. Thirdly, you can use the script provided at the end of the essay, which is a transcription of the recorded guided meditation. The advantage of this is that the script uses most of the possible translations of each word, so you will get quite a comprehensive version of the vandana. Then, if you decide to use a script, either your own or the one provided, you can contemplate just a part of the script in any one meditation session, taking just a few, or even just one or two of the qualities, and contemplating those.

Before doing the practice you may want to spend a little time doing a session of śamatha meditation – the mindfulness of breathing or mettā bhāvanā for example – although as the Buddhanussati is itself both a śamatha as well as a vipassanā practice, this is not essential.

Notes:

36. *Tekicchakani*, from the *Theragata* 6.2. Thanissaro's translation.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org>

37. All definitions from *The Oxford Universal Dictionary*, 1965.

38. Literally 'mindfulness' (*sati*) arising repeatedly.

39. For a full discussion of this, see Kamalasila's book *Meditation: The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight*, chapter 5.

40. More commonly known to us as *Dhyana for Beginners*, part of which is published in *A Buddhist Bible*. In this text 'stopping' is samathā and 'realizing' is vipassana.

41. *A Buddhist Bible*, page 439. Translated by Bhikshu Wai-tao and Dwight Goddard.

42. *Buddhist Meditation*.

43. Although it is so revered in Burma that they have included it in the *Sutta Pitaka*, in the *Khuddhaka Nikaya*, or *Miscellaneous Collection*.

44. *Sampasādana* and *sampakkhandana*. Interestingly, sampasādana comes from pasāda, which is the Pāli form of the Sanskrit prasāda, which we encountered in

week 3 when I quoted a verse from the *Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā*. Prasāda, you may remember, means clearness, brightness, pellucidity, purity, calmness, tranquillity, absence of excitement, serenity of disposition, good humour, serene faith.

45. *Meditation: The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight*, Page 70.

46. *Faith and Belief: The Difference Between Them*. Pages 158-163. Oneworld, Oxford.

47. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, page 247. Taken from *Studies in the Psychology of Religious Phenomena*, American Journal of Psychology, vii. 300. (1896). I have omitted a reference to God, because the quotation makes perfect sense without it.

48. K.R.Norman's translation, in *The Rhinoceros Horn*, page 185.

49. From the Sanskrit version of the Sutra, translated by Luis O. Gomez in *The Land of Bliss*, page 18.

50. *Buddhist Meditation*.

51. Chapter 4, *Atthagavagga*, sutta 10, and the epilogue of chapter 5, *Parayana*, respectively.

52. Just to take two examples – Ratnākara's praises of the Buddha in chapter 1 of the *Vimalakirti Nirdeśa*, and Ruchiraketu's praises of the Buddha in chapter 3 of *The Sutra of Golden Light*.

53. In *The Priceless Jewel*, page 57.

54. *Meditation: The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight*, Pages 89 – 90.

55. *Mahānāma Sutta 2*, AN 11. 13. Thanissaro's translation.

<http://www.accesstoinight.org>

56. *Dhyāna for Beginners*, from *A Buddhist Bible*, page 480.

Suggested Further Reading:

The Journey to Il Convento, Sangharakshita (in *The Priceless Jewel*, Windhorse Publications).

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=163>

Questions:

If you have time you can reflect on these questions, but your main task this week is to prepare for and practice the Buddhanussati meditation, so if you have limited time and have to choose, do the latter.

1. In *The Questions of King Milinda*, Nāgasena says, “*As faith, O king, springs up in the heart it breaks through the five hindrances, and the heart, free from these hindrances, becomes clear, pure, and serene.*” Why should this be the case?
2. The writer of *The Questions of King Milinda*, and Wilfred Cantwell-Smith seem to agree that faith is a form of insight. What do you think are the implications of this?
3. I have written, “When you contemplate, you should do so not only with your mind, but with the whole of your body too.” What do you think this means?
4. Chi-I says that as a result of practising Buddhanussati, there arises within us, “*A spirit of respect for all sentient life and a feeling of fraternity with them.*” Why do you think this should be the case?
5. What are your feelings towards the Buddha?

Buddhanussati Practice

Below is a document on the Buddhavandana, followed by a script of the 'Contemplation of the Buddha' meditation, which you can use if you are unable to access, or prefer not to use, the recorded meditation.

The Buddhavandana

This week you'll be practicing the Buddhanussati meditation – Recollecting the Buddha – by contemplating the words of the Buddhavandana. To help yourself to engage with this practice, you can study and reflect on each of the qualities of the Buddha as expressed in the words of the vandana. Here it is in Pāli:

*Iti'pi so Bhagavā, araham, sammā-sambuddho, vijjā-carana sampanno,
sugato, lokavidū, anuttaro purisa-damma-sāratī, satthā deva-manussānam,
buddho, bhagavā'ti.*

Here is Sangharakshita's 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.*

And here is Thanissaro's translation:

*Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy & rightly self-awakened,
consummate in knowledge & conduct, well-gone, knower of the
cosmos, unexcelled trainer of those who can be tamed, teacher
of devas and human beings, awakened, blessed.*

To help you to understand more fully what each word means, I've copied below the relevant parts of the seminar that Sangharakshita did on the *Tiratana Vandana*. Following this I've given you the main definitions of each word from the Pāli-English Dictionary.

Extracts from the Tiratana Vandana seminar: the Buddha Vandana

Iti'pi so means 'he is indeed' or 'indeed he is'. *Iti* is 'thus', *pi* is an emphatic particle (indeed) and *so* means 'he'.

Bhagavā: probably the term by which the Buddha is most commonly addressed by his disciples in the Pāli texts. Where he is addressed as 'Blessed One' or 'Lord' the word being translated is Bhagavā. The word derives from the word *bhaga*, 'fortunate' or 'lucky'. Bhagavā – *one who possesses fortune or blessings, one who possesses positive or good qualities*. In a spiritual context Bhagavā came to mean one who possesses positive spiritual qualities, spiritual blessings, i.e. the Buddha. The word was used by the disciples to refer to the Buddha as their spiritual friend

and teacher. It's an emotional term expressing great respect and devotion for the qualities of the Buddha. It suggests something positive and also impressive. One of the later derived meanings is *the sublime one* – the Buddha is spiritually impressive, awe-inspiring, sublime.

Arahant: Literally means 'worthy' or 'worshipful', originally in a worldly sense (as in worshipful mayor) but through usage in a spiritual context came to mean *one spiritually worthy in the highest sense*. More specifically in the Buddhist context it came to mean one who has destroyed all fetters, all defilements, and impurities. Popular etymology explains it as *Arahanta* or *Arihanta*, *Ari* meaning 'enemy', *Hanta* meaning 'to destroy'. So *Arhant* means one who has destroyed all enemies – the enemies of the defilements or the enemies of the passions and so on. In a sense, the term *Bhagavā* emphasises what the Buddha is, what he has become in all his positive spiritual qualities, while the term *arahant* emphasises what the Buddha is not: What he has escaped from or conquered, emphasising his purity, tranquillity, his freedom from internal conflict, his complete transcendence of all states of spiritual limitation or bondage.

Sammā Sambuddho: 'The Holy and Perfectly Enlightened One'. The word Buddha originally meant one who understood, in the spiritual sense of understanding Truth or Reality. *Sam* is a prefix meaning 'full' or 'complete', so combining *sam* and *sammā* in this term is a heaping of superlative upon superlative, which we could render as *Wholly, Completely Enlightened, or Fully and Perfectly Enlightened*. So *Sammā Sambuddho* is the whole, complete Buddha, combining the *Bhagavā* and *Arahant* aspects, and embodying the goal Buddhists aim towards: uniting an experience of compassion and tranquillity with wisdom, purity and boundless spiritual creativity. The term *Sammā Sambuddho* might better be rendered as *The Infinitely Creative One*.

Vijjā-carana-sampanno:

Sampanno means 'fully and completely endowed with'.

Vijjā means 'knowledge' – essentially the same as *Bodhi*. An appreciative, almost aesthetic, understanding. A whole, a perfect understanding, whereas *avidyā* or *avijjā* is the opposite. So broadly speaking, *vijjā* or *vidyā* represents *Bodhi* or Enlightenment.

Carana literally means *walking* but it also means *practice* or *living*. It's from the same root as *carya* – as when we say that the *Bodhisattva's carya*, the *Bodhicaryā*, the *Dharmacarya*, *Brahmacarya*, it's all from the same root, *carana*, to walk, to go, to live.

So *vijjā carana* is '*understanding and implementation*', you could even say theory and practice, except that it's not just theory; it's an actual realization. So you've got the two sides, you've got the inner realization and the external - the outer practical exemplification, and the Buddha is fully endowed with both.

Sugato: ‘*The Well-gone, Happily Attained, The Happy One*’. The Buddhas are smiling. The spiritual life should be a life of increasing emotional positivity and happiness, and Enlightenment itself is described as the Supreme Bliss.

Lokavidū: ‘*Knower of the world*’. There are two ways of looking at this:

1. The Buddha comprehends/sees through conditioned existence: e.g. it arises in dependence on conditions, is impermanent, can’t give permanent satisfaction, doesn’t possess ultimate reality of its own.
2. The Buddha knows the minds of people, understands the conditions under which they live, understands society, i.e. the Buddha knows the world both spiritually and in a more mundane sense.

Anuttaro purisa-damma-sāratī:

Anuttaro means the ‘highest’ or ‘best’ or ‘supreme’. The Buddha is the highest or best or supreme guide for those who wish to restrain themselves or to direct their energies in the right way. Sometimes *anuttaro* is taken as a separate epithet, not as an adjective of *purissa-damma-sāratī*. In which case it’s simply ‘*the Buddha is the highest*’ – the highest kind of being, the fully enlightened, liberated individual.

Sāratī is ‘charioteer’, *ratha* is ‘chariot’, *saratha*, ‘the man who goes with the chariot’; the charioteer. Charioteer in the sense of leader or guide. So the Buddha is the charioteer, the leader or guide, for *purissa*, for ‘the man or men’, *damma*, ‘who wish to be controlled’ – or perhaps better – *for men of control*, or *men who want to control themselves*. It could be translated as restraint, the charioteer, *the leader or guide for men who wish to restrain themselves*, who wish to direct their energies properly.

Satthā deva manusānam:

Satthā is ‘teacher’, even *guru*, *deva manusānam* is ‘of gods and men’. So the Buddha is described as *the teacher of gods and men*.

The Buddha is the teacher, the guide or the shower of the way for all forms of sentient conditioned existence, whether lower or higher, grosser or more refined, and the devas, the gods of popular mythology, are regarded as coming in the latter category, and therefore as being in need of teaching.

Bhagavā’ti: ‘*ti*’ is an abbreviation for *iti*, ‘thus’. *He is like that*.

Definitions of the words of the Buddhavandana

(from the Pāli-English Dictionary)

Bhaga – Luck, lot, fortune.

Bhagavant – Fortunate, illustrious, sublime.

Araham – To be worthy of, to deserve, to merit.

Sammā – Connected, in one. Thoroughly, properly, rightly; in the right way, as it ought to be, best, perfectly.

Sambuddha – Well understood.

Vijjā – Possessed of wisdom.

Carana – 1. Walking about, grazing, feeding. 2. The foot. 3. Acting, behaviour, good conduct.

Sampanna – 1. Successful, complete, perfect. 2. Endowed with, possessed of, abounding in... e.g. *vijjā-carana-sampanna* – full of wisdom and goodness.

Sugata – Faring well, happy, having a happy life after death

Loka – ‘Space, open space’. World, primarily ‘visible world’, then in general as ‘space or sphere of creation’, with varying degrees of substantiality. Often (unspecified) in the comprehensive sense of ‘universe’. Sometimes the term is applied collectively to the creatures of this or other various worlds, thus ‘man, mankind, people, beings’.

Vidū – Clever, wise, knowing, skilled in.

Anuttara – ‘Nothing higher’, without a superior, incomparable, second to none, unsurpassed, excellent, pre-eminent.

Purisa – Man.

Damma – To be tamed or restrained; esp with ref. to a young bullock.

Sāratī – Charioteer, coachman.

Satthā – Told, taught.

Deva – A god, a divine being.

Manussa – A human being, man.

Now make your own translation, using your preferred translations of each Pāli term:

Homage to the Buddha (Buddha Vandana)

Itipi'so _____

Bhagavā _____

Arahaṃ _____

Sammā Sambuddho _____

Vijjā-carana sampanno _____

Sugato _____

Lokavidū _____

Purisa-damma _____

Sāratī _____

Anuttaro _____

Satthā deva manusānaṃ _____

Buddho _____

Bhagavā'ti _____

Contemplating the Buddha (The Buddhanussati Practice)

Itipi'so – Really, he is like this:

Bhagavā – The Blessed One

Richly Endowed with all positive / spiritual qualities,

Sublime,

Araham – The (supremely) Worthy One,

Excellent,

Free,

Who has destroyed all defilements and impurities.

Sammā Sambuddho – Wholly and Perfectly Enlightened,

Fully and Completely Awakened,

Who Fully and Completely Understands,

The Infinitely Creative One.

Vijjā-carana sampanno – Equipped with Knowledge and Practice,

He lives [in accordance with] his full and complete understanding,

He Exemplifies his Inner Realization,

Sugato – the Happy One,

The Happily Attained

Lokavidū – Who knows the world as it is,

Who has seen through conditioned existence.

Anuttaro Unsurpassed,

The Highest,

Supreme,

Incomparable,

Excellent,

Purisa-damma-sāratī – The Charioteer,

Leading others on the path of restraint,

Helping beings to re-direct their energies towards higher consciousness, to liberation.

Satthā-deva-manusānam – Teacher of gods and humans –

Teacher of all levels of existence.

Buddho – Awakened,

Enlightened,

Wise,

The One Who Understands.

Bhagavā'ti – The Blessed One

Richly Endowed with all positive / spiritual qualities,

Sublime,

He is like that.

Week 6 – Contemplating Impermanence

*I'll tell you a secret –
“All things are impermanent!”*

Ryokan ⁵⁷

This week we're going to be exploring the contemplation of impermanence (*anicca*), and to do this we need to have developed a basis of tranquillity (*śamatha*). So now we hit a problem. How often do we manage to get into dhyāna or even access concentration in our daily meditation practice, that is, when we're not on retreat? I would guess not very often for most of us. So how is it going to be possible to practice the contemplation on impermanence? Chi-I says something quite surprising in this regard in his treatise on meditation. Stopping and realizing, he says, are like the two wheels of a chariot or the wings of a bird – if we develop just one but not the other our spiritual life will be unbalanced. This of course suggests that we need to practice contemplation as much as we practice tranquil meditation, but how do we reconcile this statement with the need to develop tranquillity before embarking on contemplation? The answer seems to be that reflecting on an aspect of the Dharma is itself a way of developing tranquillity:

Often during the progress of the sitting the mind will become darkened or obscured or inattentive or unconscious or sleepy. On such occasions we should practice a reflecting insight; ... If, as soon as we employ insight, we notice that the mind is more serene and pure as well as tranquil and peaceful, then we know that insight was adapted to our need and we should employ it at once, in order to complete the pacification. ⁵⁸

So, just as tranquillity is a necessary preparation for contemplation, contemplation is also a way of developing tranquillity. The philosopher Gabriel Marcel says something similar:

...there can be no contemplation without a kind of inward regrouping of one's resources, or a kind of ingatheredness; to contemplate is to ingather oneself in the presence of whatever is being contemplated, and this in such a fashion that the reality, confronting which one ingathers oneself, itself becomes a factor in the ingathering. ⁵⁹

In our terms, although we need to develop tranquillity (ingatheredness) before we can effectively contemplate, contemplating can itself help us to develop tranquillity. Why should this be the case? There are two reasons I think. Firstly, the Dharma is inherently peaceful, so when we contemplate it we tend to become tranquil. ⁶⁰ Secondly, because of the factors of interest and engagement. You may find that at times the contemplation of some aspect of the Dharma concentrates your mind more effectively than the mindfulness of breathing or mettā bhāvanā (of course this will only be the case if you are actually interested in your subject of contemplation and if it matters to you).

So it's worth practising contemplation even if you are unable to concentrate your mind sufficiently to enter concentration or the first dhyāna. Obviously you do need a degree of concentration – if your mind is all over the place then you're not going to be able to contemplate at all effectively. However, if you can keep your mind on a topic for a few minutes at a time then it's worth having a try. At the very least you'll be thinking about the Dharma, even if your concentration is too weak to be able to penetrate very far. It will also give you some experience of reflective meditation, so that when you do go on retreat and your mind is more concentrated you may be able to make more of your opportunity.

I've been using the word concentration but I think absorption is a better word to describe access concentration and dhyāna. The word concentration, to me at least, has connotations of a forcible fixation of the mind on a topic, such as you may have experienced when you had to try to learn something you were not particularly interested in. Absorption suggests to me the kind of state I experience when I am doing something that I really enjoy – such as reading a novel, watching a film, listening to music, communicating with a friend, or thinking – something I enjoy so much that I am completely taken up with it, so that there is nothing of me left over. It is a state in which I lose track of time, forget all my worries and even forget myself for a while – a state of blessed self-forgetfulness. By this I don't mean a loss of self-reflexive awareness, but a state in which I no longer think of myself conceptually. That is, when I become absorbed in the reading of a novel I don't think 'I am really enjoying this novel', which suggests a divided consciousness (myself and the novel). In the state of absorption the division between me and the novel disappears. You could say that in the state of absorption the division between self and other is temporarily attenuated. This is the reason why dhyāna is so important for contemplation of the Dharma – the temporary attenuation of the self-other dichotomy lends itself to the realization that in reality, there is no such separation.

Reflecting with the whole of your body (revisited)

In last week's essay I said that when you contemplate you should do so not only with your mind, but with the whole of your body too, and I now want to say a little more about this. As you contemplate the Dharma you will have certain emotional responses – sometimes you will feel inspiration, sometimes fear, sometimes sadness, sometimes joy, sometimes resistance – and these responses will be felt in your body. Here is an example of what I mean. Recently I was contemplating the first verse of the *Jarā Sutta* (the discourse on old age) from the *Sutta Nipāta*:

Truly this life is short; one dies even less than one hundred years old. Even if anyone lives beyond (one hundred years), then he dies because of old age. ⁶¹

As I contemplated this verse I began to have a sense of sadness or poignancy. It was a very delicate emotion, perhaps close to what Naomi Shihab-Nye calls 'tender gravity' in her poem *Kindness*. I felt it in my heart area and in my throat. I then asked myself why I felt sad, and I realized it was because I had wasted so much of my life in unaware states, allowing time to pass in a half-lived way. So I

then took my attention to this sadness, felt in my heart and throat, and I realized that there was something else too – the ‘tender gravity’ had with it a sense of possibility or potentiality. It was as if the emotion of sadness also somehow contained liberation, as if the sadness could liberate itself into joy. I then realized that as well as feeling sad about all the time I had wasted in unaware states, there was also a sense of poignant beauty in the shortness of life – how precious it is. The sadness then changed from a delicate pain, which had a kind of nucleus around my heart area, to a subtle opening, spreading itself out to the rest of my body as a warm pleasure, but still with a tinge of sadness.

You might also feel at times a resistance to the truth that you are contemplating. This resistance may be felt as a slight hardening of the heart or a tension in some part of your body – perhaps in your shoulders or back. This hardness and tension is you holding on to your ‘self’, which is being threatened by the Dharma. You can then take your attention to this hardening and tension and invite the hardness to soften, the tension to relax. You need to be patient with yourself because you can’t *will yourself* to let go. All you can do is attend to the hardness and tension with kindness, and see if the tension will relax in its own time. If the hardness does soften and the tension does relax, then you are letting the Dharma in a little more. Don’t worry or feel discouraged if you are unable to let go in the contemplation itself – if you keep contemplating the Dharma, little by little, you will let it in. You may also find that the effects of the contemplation occur later, at some time when you are doing something else. For instance you may find that you are a little less rigid in some of your views; or when talking to a friend you are a little more open to them; or when reading a Dharma text you understand it more deeply.

Impermanence

Sangharakshita once said that we could boil down all of the Buddha’s teachings to just one word – impermanence – so by contemplating impermanence we’re looking into the heart of Buddhist teachings. Impermanence is one of the Three Marks or Characteristics (*lakkhana*) of Existence, which are: all compounded things are unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*); all compounded things are impermanent (*anicca*); and all things whatsoever are insubstantial (*anattā*). It’s important to notice that the first two (unsatisfactoriness and impermanence) are characteristic of *all compounded things* – i.e. of saṃsāra. The third one (insubstantiality) is characteristic of everything – saṃsāra and Nirvana. ⁶²

It’s best to be familiarise yourself with your choice of topic before you contemplate it in meditation – study it, discuss it, think about it, question it. If you are not familiar with or have not thought about it beforehand, when you come to contemplate it you may find that you are not yet fully convinced of its truth, and this will hinder your contemplation. For instance, when contemplating impermanence – *all compounded things are impermanent* – if you are not convinced that all compounded things are impermanent, there will be an inner voice saying, “Hmm, not sure about this.” or “Not all of them surely.” You need to have done your thinking and questioning beforehand, so that you are convinced

that all compounded things are, in fact, impermanent. This will allow you to reflect with a minimum of discursiveness and distraction.

It could be of course that you think you do agree with the proposition, but when you start to meditate on it, doubts enter your mind. This is natural, and you need to do some more studying and thinking before you return to your contemplation. This is obviously a very useful process because you will be finding out whether you really understand, or assent to, some fundamental Buddhist teachings.

You might ask, “But if I am already convinced of the truth that all compounded things are impermanent, why would I need to contemplate it?” The answer to this is that there are different levels of conviction and different levels of understanding. We may be convinced on a certain level of our being that all compounded things are impermanent, but the point of contemplation is to allow that understanding to penetrate and percolate through to the rest of our being – eventually so what we know it with the *whole* of our being.

I remember Sangharakshita once saying that the first two Marks of Existence (*duḥkha* and *anicca*) are not difficult, esoteric truths that we have to try hard to understand – they are blindingly obvious, you just have to look around you to see them. The trouble is that we spend a lot of our energy trying to ignore and evade them.⁶³ You could say that we’re all ‘in denial’! (In the lines I’ve quoted at the beginning of this essay Ryokan is making a joke about our denial when he says, “I’ll tell you a secret”). So when we contemplate impermanence, we aren’t trying to see something subtle or elusive or difficult; we are simply trying to stop denying what is right in front of our eyes. As such, contemplating impermanence is a coming-to-terms with the reality that is all around and within us, rather than a trying-to-understand something abstruse and difficult. So when we have a deeper insight into impermanence, it’s not so much that we have learned some new information, more that we have accepted the obvious truth more deeply than we were able to before.⁶⁴

I’ve just used the phrase ‘deeper insight’, and we need to be careful here. It is probably not very useful when contemplating to think in terms of gaining Insight (with a capital I). If we think in these terms we can be waiting for the Big Experience and dismiss some of the real learning – the subtle shifts of perspective – that can occur. I’ve found it more useful to think in terms of deepening my understanding. In traditional terms, this is the gradual, rather than the sudden approach to Enlightenment – we could say the ‘incremental’ approach, rather than the ‘road-to-Damascus’ approach.

The benefits of contemplating impermanence

I haven’t been able to find any quotations about the benefits of practising the contemplation of impermanence as I did for the Buddhānussati practice. However, there are great benefits in understanding the truth of impermanence. In his book *What Makes You Not a Buddhist*, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse writes that, “Impermanence is good news”:

Buddha was not a pessimist or a doomsayer; he was a realist, while we tend to be escapists. When he stated that all assembled things are impermanent, he did not intend for that to be bad news; it is a simple, scientific fact. Depending on your perspective and on your understanding of this fact, it can become a gateway to inspiration and hope, glory and success... Recognizing the instability of causes and conditions leads us to understand our own power to transform obstacles and make the impossible possible... You can transform not only your physical world but your emotional world, for example, turning agitation into peace of mind by letting go of ambition or turning low self-respect into confidence by acting out of kindness and philanthropy. ⁶⁵

Animitta – a door to Liberation

Each of the three Marks of Existence leads to a particular *vimokṣa*, or ‘Liberation’. The contemplation of impermanence results in the *vimokṣa* called *animitta*. Sangharakshita explains this in his lecture *The Texture of Reality*:

Nimitta literally means a sign, but it can also mean a word or concept; so the animitta is the approach to the Unconditioned by bypassing all words and all thoughts. This is a very distinctive experience. When you have it, you realize that all words, all concepts, are totally inadequate. Not that they’re not very adequate, but that actually they don’t mean anything at all... The animitta is a state in which one prescind all concepts of reality. In other words, one doesn’t think about reality. I don’t mean that one ‘doesn’t think about it’ in the ordinary way in which one doesn’t think about reality. After all, we could say that most of us, most of the time, don’t give much thought to reality at all. But on the attainment of this vimokṣa one has, as it were, reached the level of reality but one doesn’t think about reality. One realizes that no words, no concepts, can possibly apply; indeed, one doesn’t even have the concept of non-applicability. This is the vimokṣa or samādhi of signlessness or imagelessness. ⁶⁶

Getting started on the ‘Contemplation of Impermanence’ practice

As with the Buddhānussati practice, there are a number of ways of contemplating impermanence. You can download the recorded guided meditation, led by Ratnaguna or Dayanandi, and listen to that:

<http://tinyurl.com/cgwwsd>

You can also use the script provided below (which is a transcription of the recorded meditation), having the script in front of you and contemplating each line in turn. You can also simply take a line or two from the script and spend the whole of the session contemplating that. You could even simply contemplate the word ‘Impermanence’! Alternatively, you could take a favourite text that deals with impermanence and contemplate that, for instance Kukai’s poem *Letter to a Nobleman*, or the first few lines of the *Jarā Sutta* from the fourth chapter of the *Sutta Nipāta*.

Before actually contemplating impermanence though, it is important that you do a session of *śamatha* practice – perhaps especially the *mettā bhāvanā*. This is important because in contemplating impermanence we are introducing reflections that inevitably include old age, death, loss etc. – and you will need to try to make sure that these reflections do not tip you into a depression or a pessimistic mood. If you know that you are susceptible to depression or low moods, or that you have a tendency to look always on the ‘dark side’ of life, it may be best to reflect mainly on the ‘positive’ aspects of impermanence, i.e. the fact that impermanence makes possible the spiritual path; that we can change for the better; that we can make spiritual progress etc. (in that case, you could contemplate the second half of the script provided below, from “I am changing from moment to moment... so why not direct those changes towards limitless freedom?”)

Conclusion

In this six-week course we’ve looked at a variety of different kinds and levels of reflection, from thinking about things right through to the experience of *animitta* – a state of no-thought. I have shown different ways in which you might approach reflection – from doing nothing, to writing, to meditating – and I’ve also tried to encourage you to reflect. Obviously this can only be an introduction to the subject – there is much more to be said – but that would only be yet more information, more *suta-maya-pañña*. With this in mind I’ve tried to keep each week’s essay relatively short, giving you more time to actually reflect each week rather than spending a lot of time reading *about* reflection.

In the end you just have to do it – you are the best teacher and you need to find your own way into it. As Kamalashila says in his book on meditation, reflection is not something that only intellectuals engage in. It’s a human activity, perhaps the most characteristic human activity. I hope that this course has encouraged and enabled you to explore reflection further – it’s a quiet, serene pleasure that will add to your happiness in living, as well as help to make you wise.

Notes:

57. The last two lines of a poem, translated by John Stevens in *One Robe One Bowl, The Zen Poetry of Ryokan*. Weatherhill. Page 28.

58. *A Buddhist Bible*, page 466.

59. *Reflection and Mystery*, chapter VII. ‘Being in a Situation’.

60. ‘Better than a thousand meaningless verses collected together (in the Vedic oral tradition) is one (meaningful) line of verse on hearing which one becomes tranquil’. The *Dhammapada*, verse 101, Sangharakshita’s translation.

61. From chapter 4, the *Atthakavagga*, sutta 6. K.R.Norman’s translation.

62. These are very similar to the Four Insignia of the Dharma, the Marks of Existence being the first three of the Four Insignia, the fourth Insignia being ‘*Nirvana alone is peace*’.

63. I thought he said this in a seminar – either on the Udāna or the Itivutaka – but I’ve been unable to find the actual quote.

64. A friend recently pointed out to me that Pema Chödrön has suggested that the third root poison (‘delusion’ or ‘ignorance’) could be translated as ‘denial’. In fact the word ignorance also has that implication – ignore-ance.

65. Pages 30-31.

66. *What is the Dharma?*, pages 66-67.

Suggested Further Reading:

What Makes you Not a Buddhist, ‘Chapter 1 – Fabrication and Impermanence’. Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse, Shambala.

What is the Dharma?, pages 63-4. Sangharakshita, Windhorse.

The Three Jewels, pages 76-8. Sangharakshita, Windhorse.

Meditation – the Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight, ‘Chapter 9 – Reflection’, Kamalasila. Windhorse.

The Art of Reflection, Ratnaguna, Windhorse 2011: <http://tinyurl.com/4e7wcuY>

Questions:

If you have time you can reflect on these questions, but your main task this week is to practice the Contemplation of Impermanence meditation, so if you have limited time and have to choose, do the latter.

1. I have written that absorption is, “...a state in which I lose track of time, forget all my worries and even forget myself for a while – a state of blessed self-forgetfulness. By this I don’t mean a loss of self-reflexive awareness, but a state in which I no longer think of myself conceptually.” Do you recognize this state, and if so, what are the main ways you enter into it?
2. Writing of the importance of thinking about a topic before meditating on it, I say, “You need to have done your thinking and questioning beforehand, so that you are convinced that all compounded things are, in fact, impermanent.” Are you convinced, or do you think there are or may be exceptions to this? Write them down and think about them.
3. Which aspects of impermanence have you experienced directly in your life?

4. Which aspects of impermanence are you most unwilling to face up to? What might help you to face them?
5. Sangharakshita writes “...*the animitta is the approach to the Unconditioned by bypassing all words and all thoughts. This is a very distinctive experience. When you have it, you realize that all words, all concepts, are totally inadequate. Not that they’re not very adequate, but that actually they don’t mean anything at all.*” Have you ever had this experience? If so, how did you respond to it?
6. Thinking back over the whole of this module on reflection, write down the most significant things that you have learned.
7. Are there any aspects of what you have learned that you would like to incorporate into your life? If so, how will you do that?

Contemplation of Impermanence

All compounded things are impermanent – subject to change (subject to alteration)

The universe, with its myriad suns and planets – is impermanent

Our own sun is impermanent

This earth is impermanent

The land masses – the continents and islands – are impermanent

The great mountain ranges are impermanent

The oceans are impermanent

The great forests are impermanent

All living beings are impermanent

All human beings are impermanent

Millions upon millions of human beings have been born, have lived for a short while, and have died

I am no exception – I too am impermanent

I was born... I was once a child... a youth... an adult... I am growing old... one day I will die

Knowing this, I practice the Dharma – now

I am changing from moment to moment... so why not direct those changes towards limitless freedom?

I can become more aware, wiser, kinder,

I can become a Stream Entrant, a Bodhisattva, I can become fully Awake

Others have done it before me, so why not me?

All compounded things are impermanent

Knowing this, I go for refuge to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, for as long as life lasts