

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras Year Four

Module 3: Two Great Mahayana Sutras – the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa and the Sūtra of Golden Light

This is an either/or module i.e. you study one or other of the Mahāyāna Sūtras alongside Sangharakshita's commentary on it. Which of them you choose is up to you and your group leader. Both are important Mahāyāna Sūtras covering significant spiritual themes.

In *The Eternal Legacy*, Sangharakshita writes:

“The Mahāyāna's elucidation of the true meaning of the term Sangha, or spiritual community, is contained principally in the Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa or 'Exposition of Vimalakīrti', probably the most important sūtra of its class... this is undoubtedly one of the oldest Mahāyāna scriptures, belonging to the same period, approximately, as the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka [White Lotus Sūtra] and the Aṣṭasāhasrikā [Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines].” (p. 157).

The lecture series he gave on the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa, entitled *The Inconceivable Emancipation – Themes from the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*, was Sangharakshita's last (from 1979) and is considered by many to be his best. It is a brilliant blend of conceptual exposition, imagery, humour, and insight – a fitting commentary to Thurman's translation of a marvellous text.

The Sūtra of Golden Light – or *Suvarṇabhāṣottamasūtra* – is an example of what is known as a *vaipulya* sūtra (as is the *White Lotus Sūtra*). Sangharakshita writes in *The Eternal Legacy*:

“...[the term vaipulya] is indicative of much more than the size of these texts... It mainly serves to point out that, in principle at least, each of them embodies, not merely this or that individual item of the Buddha's Teaching, but a comprehensive presentation of the total Dharma which, in respect of both theory and practice, is complete in itself without reference to any alternative formulation.” (p. 94).

It is one of the later Mahāyāna Sūtras and is particularly focused around the practice of confession. In his lectures on the sūtra, entitled *Transforming Self and World – Themes from the Sūtra of Golden Light*, Sangharakshita explores the transformation of self through the practice of confession and then the transformation of the world through the ordering of all worldly activities around the transcendental golden light. The sūtra also contains much rich symbolism and dream imagery as well as some early Tantric material.

Given that both the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* and the *Sūtra of Golden Light* are Mahāyāna texts, it would be good to have studied The Bodhisattva Ideal module from Year Two of the course. In that module, Sangharakshita covers much that is necessary background to the world of the Mahāyāna e.g. the development of the Bodhicitta and the Bodhisattva Vow, the practice of the six perfections and an exploration of the Bodhisattva hierarchy. If you have studied The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment (from Year Three), that will also help in entering the wonderful and magical world of the Mahāyāna with its cosmic perspective and rich archetypal imagery.

The Inconceivable Emancipation – the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa

Primary study material

The primary study material for this module is *The Inconceivable Emancipation: Themes from the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766888 Windhorse Publications).

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=336>

The original lectures can also be accessed from Free Buddhist Audio:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X19>

Note that the published version has been augmented by question and answer material and therefore represents an expansion of the original lectures.

1. The Magic of a Mahāyāna Sūtra.
2. Building The Buddhaland.
3. On Being All Things to All Men.
4. The Transcendental Critique of Religion.
5. History Versus Myth in Man's Quest for Meaning.
6. The Way of Non-duality.
7. The Mystery of Human Communication.
8. The Four Great Reliances: Criteria For The Spiritual Life.

Reading the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa

During the course of the next eight weeks, it would be great if you can find time to read the original text upon which the lectures are based. Whilst it is great to have a guide to the text as eloquent and insightful as Sangharakshita, it is also important as Buddhists that we read at least some of the original scriptures. Fortunately, with the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*, we have a very readable modern translation by Robert Thurman, published as *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (ISBN 0271012099 Pennsylvania State University and other editions).

<http://tinyurl.com/cvmrer>

It amounts to less than 100 pages so shouldn't be too taxing in terms of time or effort. Ideally, it would be great to read the text aloud in front of your shrine (a traditional Buddhist practice) but if this is not possible, just finding some quiet time each week to read a chapter or two of the text would be fine.

Study guide and suggested questions

The following questions are here to help you engage with the various topics covered in this module. They highlight some of the key themes in each chapter, and particularly focus on things that aren't raised elsewhere in the course. If you have time, you may wish to write some notes to one or more of the questions before attending your group or you may just wish to reflect on one or two of them through the week. If there is a topic that is not covered by the questions that you wish to discuss in the group then do of course raise that too.

Unit 1: The Magic of a Mahāyāna Sūtra

Sometimes Dharma study can be very down-to-earth and practical, giving us straightforward advice and precepts about how we can practice the Dharma in our everyday life. At other times, as in this module, it can be an antidote to the hum-drum daily round of our ordinary lives and lift us instead into a new vision of things. Connecting with this expanded vision of spiritual life can be both liberating and inspiring. This first lecture begins by introducing us to this magical, expanded vision of the world.

1. '*Every moment of our lives is unique.*' (p.5). How can you cultivate more of a sense of this in your day-to-day life?
2. '*So the Mahāyāna is that form of Buddhism which sets no limit whatever upon the spiritual potential of the individual.*' (p.6).

What is your response to this limitless spiritual potential?

3. What is meant by *vimokṣa* here?
4. What does it mean to say that spiritual emancipation is *acintya* (inconceivable)?
5. '*This statement is to be taken quite literally: we don't know anything about anything.*' (p.14).

What do you make of this statement!?

6. How do magical acts illustrate the nature of the Dharma?
7. What is your immediate response to the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* on first hearing the outline of its contents?

Unit 2: Building the Buddha Land

The myth (in the positive sense of the word) of ‘Building the Buddha Land’ has been an important part of the inspiration behind creating the FWBO. In the 1970’s, when these and many other of Sangharakshita’s key lectures were given, there was much talk of creating a ‘new society’ in the midst of the old, one supportive of spiritual practice and ideals. This lecture also uses the example of the arts as an analogy for a way of engaging creatively with the world. The role of the arts in beautifying and inspiring that new society has also been emphasised in Triratna. If you wish to explore further either of these areas, see the suggested reading below.

Also, try to make time to read chapter 1 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* during the week.

1. What is the relationship between our state of mind and the world we perceive and inhabit?
2. What does Sangharakshita mean by the term ‘cosmic bodhicitta’ (p. 30)?
3. Can you relate to the story of the woman and her fish basket? If so, give one or two examples.
4. Why can’t a bodhisattva keep people in the pure land? What does this mean in practical terms?
5. ‘*You cannot really help yourself without helping others, and you cannot really help others without helping yourself.*’ (p.36).

What does this mean and do you agree with it?

6. In what ways is our relationship with the world essentially creative?
7. How do you respond to the notion of co-operating to build a Buddha land?

Unit 3: On Being ‘All Things to All Men’

Here we actually meet the figure of Vimalakīrti, an extraordinary being living in Vaiśālī under the guise of a layman. This gives an opportunity to explore the Mahāyāna teaching of skilful means. Try to make time to read Chapter 2 of the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa during the week.

1. What is meant by skilful means in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism?
Does it have any relevance to your own life?
2. Reflect and comment on your practice of any one of the four Saṅgrahavastus.
3. In your own words, give an account of one of the four *Pratisamvids*.
4. Why might it be misleading to think of Vimalakīrti as a layman?
5. When have you had ‘a touch of magic’ in your spiritual life? How can you stay in touch with this more of the time?
6. Do you think it is realistic to think in terms of ‘being all things to all men’ (and women!)?

Unit 4: The Transcendental Critique of Religion

Here Sangharakshita explores a key idea in Buddhist history – that religion is only a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is based on chapters 3 and 4 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* so try to make time to read them during the week.

1. ‘Once our basic needs for food, clothing, shelter and leisure have been met, what do we need more than anything else in life?... Surely it is freedom.’ (p.66).

Do you agree with this answer? What other possible answers can you think of?

2. What are the consequences of religion becoming an end in itself?
3. What is the transcendental critique of religion?
4. ‘The rule of thumb is to upset people as little as possible, while still saying what you feel must be said.’ (p.71).

Do you agree with this? If not, how do you think criticism should be dealt with in the Sangha?

5. What might an encounter with *Vimalakīrti* represent in the context of your own spiritual life?
6. On p. 75, Sangharakshita outlines four things that can help us deal with our unskilful behaviour (alongside reviving our original inspiration):
 1. Try to understand what you have done.
 2. Cultivate a sense of regret.
 3. Resolve not to do that particular thing again.
 4. Take steps to ensure that in future you do what is right.

Can you make use of these in your own life?

7. Which is the greater danger in your own spiritual life – making Buddhism an end in itself or abandoning the raft (of the Dharma) too soon?

Unit 5: History Versus Myth in Humanity's Quest for Meaning

This lecture explores a key theme in Sangharakshita's teaching: the need for the Dharma to affect the whole of our being – not just the rational, linear aspects of our mind but also the poetic and 'undefined' aspects of us too. Exploring the meeting of Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī, Sangharakshita encourages us to bring about a marriage between the two, realizing that they are, in a sense, not different.

If you can, make time to read chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* during the week.

1. 'In fact, adhiṣṭhāna is flowing from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas all the time, just as light and heat are constantly radiating from the sun.' (p.85). Have you ever had an experience that relates to this adhiṣṭhāna?
2. On pp. 85-86, Sangharakshita discusses the nature of effort in the spiritual life – the effort needed to be receptive; the problem of wilfulness; the right kind of effort; and distributing your effort over a broad spectrum of interests. What relevance does any of this have for your own efforts to practice the spiritual life?
3. '*Opposition is true friendship.*' '*One's enemies are really one's friends.*'

What do you make of these quotes from Blake and Nietzsche on friendship?

4. '*The nature of our approach to myth is one of the basic questions that have to be faced nowadays.*' (p.93).

What does this mean and do you agree with it?

5. What are the main differences between the Pāli and Mahāyāna traditions as suggested by Sangharakshita in this lecture? Which of them appeals more to you at this point in time? Why do you think that is?
6. '*We can experience the archetypal realm only because we ourselves are, on another level, archetypal beings*' (p.98).

In what ways are we archetypal beings?

7. '*Meaning must be meaning for you, something that you personally experience. Our quest for meaning is therefore our quest for ourselves, our quest for the totality, the wholeness, of our own being.*' (p.98).

What do you make of this statement?

8. How might you go about 'marrying' history and myth – Vimalakīrti and Mañjuśrī – in your own life?

Unit 6: The Way of Non-Duality

I would suggest reading chapters 8 and 9 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* before reading chapter 6 of Sangharakshita's book so that you can have a go at understanding the Dharma doors to non-duality without any kind of commentary! I would also particularly recommend Ratnaguna's article (cited below) if you want to try and understand this teaching of non-duality.

1. Give one or two examples of Śāriputra's problem of the chairs from your own life.
2. In the context of spiritual life, what does becoming androgynous mean? What might you need to do to become more androgynous?
3. In what way is conceptual thought dualistic?
4. '*So in the case of distraction and attention, integration is the entry into non-duality.*' (p.109).

How might this apply to your own meditation practice?

5. '*Only transcendental individuality is strong enough to resist the pressure; to remain unaffected by the group's opinion.*' (p.111).

Reflect on this and identify some of its implications in your own life.

6. On p.113, Sangharakshita gives six examples of more down-to-earth doorways to non-duality. Comment on how any two of these might be relevant to your own situation. Also, can you think of any other down-to-earth doors to non-duality that might be relevant to you?
7. Vimalakīrti's 'thunderlike' silence is '*more powerful, more expressive, than any words*' (p.114).

In what sorts of situations might we be able to experience this type of silence?

Unit 7: The Mystery of Human Communication

Many of the themes of this chapter require a subtle pondering and reflection. See if you can make some time in the week to do this as well as to read chapters 10 and 11 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*.

1. ‘*A disciplined life gives strength.*’ (p.118). Comment on this.
2. ‘*Buddhism is a middle way between the extreme of authoritarianism and the extreme of individualistic thinking for oneself.*’ (p.119).

Which of these extremes do you tend most towards? How might you develop more of a middle way?

3. In the last paragraph of p.123, Sangharakshita suggests a number of questions for investigating the significance of the symbolism in this part of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*. What are your thoughts on at least one of these questions?
4. What is the significance of the world *Sarvagandhasugandhā* with its marvellous meals and communication through perfume?
5. Write something about your own experience of non-verbal communication.
6. What can we learn from the perfuming of the conditioned by Ultimate Reality?
7. ‘*It is important, therefore, that we acquire new senses and new means of communication... that we very much enlarge the total range of our being and consciousness*’ (p.131).

How could you put this into practice?

Unit 8: The Four Great Reliances: Criteria for the Spiritual Life

This chapter begins with the image of the stūpa which you may have already come across in the *Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment* and *Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism* modules. It goes on then to explore the notion of Dharma worship. Try to make time to read chapter 12 and the epilogue of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* during the week.

1. What might Dharma worship mean in the context of your own life?
2. How can you ‘*Determine the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma*’?
3. How is the Dharma to be applied according to the Dharma?
4. What is the difference between natural authority and artificial authority? Is there a danger of throwing the baby (of natural authority) out with the bathwater (of artificial authority)?
5. How can you practice reliance upon the meaning rather than the expression of the Dharma?
6. How would you go about determining what is a teaching of explicit and what a teaching of implicit meaning?
7. Reflect on and clarify the distinction between *jñāna* and *vijñāna*.
8. Which of the four great reliances is most relevant for you at this point in time?

Projects

As with all the modules of the Dharma Training Course, this module concludes with the opportunity to present a project to your group on a topic arising from the material you have been studying. You may wish to take one of the suggested questions and explore it in more detail than you have been able to in the weekly meetings, or you may want to take up a theme or question of your own. Whichever you choose, the purpose of the projects is to give you the opportunity to practise the second level of wisdom more fully, i.e. the level of reflection or *cintā-mayī-prajñā*. It is also a good way to share something of your experience with the group.

Taking it Further

If you have particularly enjoyed looking into the world of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* and want to explore it further, I would strongly recommend a talk given by Ratnaguna entitled ‘*Who is Vimalakīrti?*’ on a Men’s Event at Padmaloka in January 2009.

This talk assumes knowledge of Sangharakshita’s lecture series and goes on to explore the dramatic structure of the text. As well as suggesting some answers to the title of his talk – e.g. that Vimalakīrti is a spiritual community and that he is a personification of the never-ending nature of spiritual life – Ratnaguna also explores the significance of various of the other characters, e.g. Mahākāśyapa, the Goddess, Śāriputra and the Buddha. It may well stimulate you to a new reading of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*. He also mentions several sources on the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* that he has found helpful which, if you are interested, you could follow up. The talk is available from Free Buddhist Audio:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC84>

Also, Padmavajra gave a talk on the same event entitled ‘*The Great Love and the Goddess*’ exploring the teachings on *mahā-maitrī* in chapter 7 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*. This is also available from Free Buddhist Audio:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC85>

Suggested further reading for the whole series:

The Eternal Legacy by Sangharakshita, (ISBN 1899579583 Windhorse Publications). Chapters 8 and 11 are good on the background to the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*.

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

A Concise History of Buddhism by Andrew Skilton, (ISBN 0904766667 Windhorse Publications). Chapters 11-13 give historical background to the Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna scriptures.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=330>

Text as Father by Alan Cole. *Chapter 6 – Vimalakīrti, or Why Bad Boys Finish First*. Ratnaguna cites this in his above-mentioned talk. It is a post-modern reading of the text that needs to be read critically but it does open new doors into the text itself.

<http://tinyurl.com/cc3bla>

Unit 1

The Glory of the Literary World in The Priceless Jewel by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766586 Windhorse Publications). See above. This essay explores more fully Sangharakshita's idea of reading Sūtras as literature and literature as Sūtras.

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

Unit 2

Mahāyāna Buddhism by Paul Williams (ISBN 0415025370 Routledge). pp. 224-228 have more background on Buddha-fields.

<http://www.routledge.com/books/Mahayana-Buddhism-isbn9780415356534>

Buddhism for Today and Tomorrow by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766837 Windhorse Publications). Contains the lectures, given in 1976, entitled *The Nucleus of a New Society* and *A Blueprint for a New World*. These lectures explore the role of Triratna in creating a 'new society' or Buddha Land by another name.

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

Audio & transcripts: *Nucleus of a New Society* –

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=133>

A Blueprint for a New World –

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=134>

The Religion of Art by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766314 Windhorse Publications). Contains Sangharakshita's key writings on the nature and role of the arts in spiritual life.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=349>

Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition by Subhuti (ISBN 0904766683 Windhorse Publications). Chapter 9 on 'The New Society' gives a full exploration of the development of Sangharakshita's thinking on the 'New Society'.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=377>

Unit 3

The Skill in Means Sūtra, trans. Mark Tatz, Motilal Banarsidass 1994.

<http://www.mlbd.com/BookDecription.aspx?id=895>

Mahāyāna Buddhism by Paul Williams (ISBN 0415025370 Routledge). Pp. 143 – 150 deal with the doctrine of skilful means in the *White Lotus Sūtra*. See above.

Skilful Means by Michael Pye. This explores the teaching of skilful means in both the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa* and the *White Lotus Sutra*.

<http://tinyurl.com/deqdu5>

Unit 4

Alagaddūpama Sutta (Majjhima Nikāya Sutta 22). Contains both the parable of the raft and the parable of the snake. Available from Access to Insight.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.022.nypo.html>

The Doctrine of Non-Duality in the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa by Ratnaguna (Western Buddhist Review, No 3). Explores the dangers of abandoning the raft of the Dharma too soon (amongst other things – see Unit 6 too).

<http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol3/nonduality.html>

Unit 5

Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition by Subhuti (ISBN 0904766683 Windhorse Publications). The section on ‘*A Psychology of Spiritual Life*’ pp. 273 – 284 give an excellent account of Sangharakshita’s views on myth, archetype, gestalt and the Imagination. See Above.

The Mythic Context by Subhuti, available from Padmaloka Books. A transcript of three talks exploring the importance of leading our spiritual lives within a mythic context.

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

Unit 6

The Doctrine of Non-Duality in the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa by Ratnaguna (Western Buddhist Review, No 3). Shows how Vimalakīrti’s teaching of non-duality is a restatement of the Middle Way taught by the Buddha. See above.

Unit 7

The Word of the Buddha in The Guide to the Buddhist Path by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766357 Windhorse Publications). This explores the four different levels through which the Enlightened Mind tries to communicate with the unenlightened.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=321>

The Awakening of Faith attributed to Aśvaghōṣa (Columbia University Press).
Contains the reference to Reality perfuming the conditioned and vice versa.

<http://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-13156-8/the-awakening-of-faith>

Unit 8

The Meaning of Orthodoxy in Buddhism by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications).

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

Who is the Buddha? by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766241 Windhorse Publications). Chapter 5 – *From Hero-Worship to the Worshipping Buddha* – explores the notion of reverence and devotion in the life of the Buddha.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=322>

Transforming Self and World – the Sūtra of Golden Light

Primary study material

Like the *White Lotus Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa*, the main focus for our exploration of the Sūtra will be a series of lectures by Sangharakshita, this one given in 1976. Sangharakshita chose to explore this sūtra under the general heading of *Transforming Self and World* and the eight individual lectures are as follows:

1. The Growth of a Mahāyāna Sūtra (background reading).
2. The Bodhisattva's Dream (Unit 1).
3. The Spiritual Significance of Confession (Units 2 and 3).
4. The Protectors of the Dharma (Unit 4).
5. Buddhism and Culture (Unit 5).
6. Nature, Man and Enlightenment (Unit 6).
7. Buddhist Economics (Unit 7).
8. The Moral Order and its Upholders (Unit 8).

All of these are available from Free Buddhist Audio:

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

However, the following study guide and references are prepared with the published version of the lectures in mind: *Transforming Self and World, Themes from the Sutra of Golden Light*.

Please Note Windhorse published a new version of *Transforming Self and World* in 2008. Much of it is the same but the chapter on *Confession* has been substantially edited. All page references and quotes are from this new version and I would strongly recommend working from this new edition. The new edition has the following ISBN number 9781 899579 95 2.

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

Whilst we won't be studying the introduction directly (*The Growth of a Mahāyāna Sūtra*), I do hope you will find time to read it. It gives a brief introduction to the Mahāyāna and the Bodhisattva Ideal as well as making connections between Buddhism and Gnosticism and giving an overview of the sūtra as a whole.

Reading the Sūtra of Golden Light

Alongside reading Sangharakshita's commentary on the text, an important aspect of this module is reading the sūtra itself. Part of the purpose and impact of the Mahāyāna sūtras is that they take us out of our normal world or frame of reference

and, as good as Sangharakshita's commentary may be, it is not a substitute for reading the sūtra itself. Hopefully by this point in the course, reading such a text will not be too unfamiliar and you will be able to find your own way in to the particular world of the sūtra. The best way to read the text is to read it aloud in front of a shrine. Fortunately, the sūtra itself is relatively short (at least compared to the *White Lotus Sūtra*) and it may well be possible for you to read the whole text in front of your shrine during the next eight weeks. If you can't find the time to read it aloud, then just finding some quiet time to read a chapter or two each week would be fine.

The text which Sangharakshita used when he gave the lectures is that translated from the Sanskrit by R. E. Emmerick and published as *The Sūtra of Golden Light by the Pāli Text Society* (ISBN 0860134164). It is currently available in a paperback version.

<http://tinyurl.com/cm3e7b>

However, there is also a new translation from the Tibetan available on the web which you may wish to download and print. It is made available by the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahāyāna Tradition (FPMT). Please be aware that Emmerick's translation has 19 chapters and the Tibetan translation has 21.

<http://www.fpmt.org/teachers/zopa/advice/goldenlight.asp>

Study guide and suggested questions

The following questions are here to help you engage with the various topics covered in this module. They highlight some of the key themes in each chapter, and particularly focus on things that aren't raised elsewhere in the course. If you have time, you may wish to write some notes to one or more of the questions before attending your group or you may just wish to reflect on one or two of them through the week. If there is a topic that is not covered by the questions that you wish to discuss in the group then do of course raise that too.

Unit 1: The Bodhisattva's Dream

As mentioned above, we won't be studying the introduction in the group session. So for this week we will plunge straight into the sūtra and its magical dream world. Please read chapter 1 of *Transforming Self and World*, entitled *The Bodhisattva's Dream*, and also, if you can, chapters 1 and 2 of the sūtra.

1. What is your own experience of the 'dream state'? Does it make you aware of different states of consciousness than the waking state? Have you had any experience of higher states of consciousness through dreams? What effect (if any) have these experiences had on your life?
2. What is the difference between a difficulty and a problem as Sangharakshita describes them (on p. 39)? Give an example of each from your own life.
3. On page 40, Sangharakshita says that, for koan practice to work, you have to have great faith in the master, otherwise you won't accept their responses to your solution. What might the implications of this be for you?
4. Write down some of your associations with the following images from the Sūtra:
 - Ruciraketu's expanding house.
 - The appearance of the four-Buddha Mandala.
 - Ruciraketu falling asleep and going into the dream state.
 - The golden drum.
 - The brahmin.
 - The Golden Light.

Unit 2: The Spiritual Significance of Confession, Part 1

As we have seen, the chapter on *Confession* forms the heart of the sutra and over the next two units, we will look in some detail at the practice of confession in a Buddhist context. As the sutra itself is comprehensive on this theme, so Sangharakshita's commentary is also substantial with much seminar material on the subject of confession having been added to the original lecture. He covers all aspects of the topic, often in some detail, and it is his major treatment of this important theme. It is therefore well worth giving considerable time to exploring it.

Please read the following sections from chapter 2 of *Transforming Self and World* – the *Introduction, Aspiration* and *First Confession* (pp.53-86) – before your group this week. If you have time, it would be great to read the whole of chapter 3 from the sutra itself during the next two weeks.

1. What are your own associations with confession? Have you had any positive experience of the practice of confession? What has been the effect?
2. What is the point of Sangharakshita's distinction between the psychological, the spiritual and the transcendental? (pp. 54-55).
3. *'To say that confession has a spiritual significance is therefore to say that it has significance for the attainment of higher levels of consciousness.'* (p.55).

Why does confession have significance for higher levels of consciousness?

4. On page 62, Sangharakshita mentions the fear of death, the fear of going mad and the fear of humiliation as three basic fears. Are there other kinds of fear that you have experienced?
5. *'You really have to wallow in it before you know it's muck.'* (p.67). Has this been your experience with your own areas of unskillfulness?
6. *'You must begin to enjoy being a Buddhist before you give up too much ... This should not, of course, be used as a rationalization for not giving up anything at all.'* (p.67).

How can you tread the path between giving up too much and not giving up anything at all?

7. *'If you are on bad terms with your parents, you can't make much spiritual progress. Your relationship with your parents goes so deep that if it isn't positive, there's a lot in you that isn't positive.'* (p.78).

What do you make of this statement?

8. *'...I don't believe that we all have the potential for the worst kind of evil in the same way that we all have the potential for Buddhahood.'* (p.86).

Do you agree with Sangharakshita on this?

Unit 3: The Spiritual Significance of Confession, Part 2

Continuing our exploration of confession, please read the sections from chapter 2 of *Transforming Self and World* entitled *The Second Confession*, *The Third Confession* and *The Effects of Confession* (pp. 87-116).

1. On pp. 87 -88, Sangharakshita suggests the following three factors make up the complex phenomenon of guilt:
 - i. The consciousness of having done wrong, or at least of having done something which someone else didn't want you to do.
 - ii. Fear of being punished when you are found out.
 - iii. The painful consciousness of having done something which will lose us the love of someone on whom we are emotionally dependent.

Does this match with your own experience of guilt (assuming you have experienced it!)? Are there any other factors in your experience? If so, what are they?

2. *'It is not just a question of confessing what you have done. You have to make a firm resolution to turn over a new leaf, not to commit those unskilful actions any more.'* (p.93).

What has been your experience of making such resolutions?

3. *'First, we need to confess to people with whom we can be really open; and second, our confession needs to be heard by people who understand its significance for us.'* (p.94).

Have you had any experience of trying to confess to the wrong kind of person? If so, what effect did it have on you (and them)?

4. What 'oppressions' do you feel operate in your own life?
5. *'It is better to get out than to go under. We shouldn't be ashamed to admit that our resources are limited.'* (p.104). Have there been any times when you have had to acknowledge the limits of your ability to act skilfully in certain situations? If so, how have you dealt with this?
6. *'We should be able to rejoice in the merits of others regardless of whether or not we have any merits at all.'* (p.109).

Do you find it possible to rejoice in other people when this is the case?

7. *'This is the ultimate spiritual significance of confession: to clear away all darkness and evil so that we can experience the freedom and joy of a pure heart and mind.'* (p.116).

Do you have a sense of this purifying effect of the practice of confession?

Unit 4: The Protectors of the Dharma

Having looked at the practice of confession in some depth, we now move from the transformation of self to the transformation of the world. Whilst, in keeping with the sūtra, Sangharakshita gives some background to Indian mythology (in this and the following chapters), it is important not to let what may seem a very alien mythology get in the way of the underlying points that the sūtra is making. So try to make your own connections with the various gods and goddesses that we will be meeting over the next few weeks. Please read *Chapter 3 – The Protectors of the Dharma*, before your group meeting, and if you have time, chapter 6 of the sūtra.

1. *‘The two pictures [the Indian and Western view of the universe] are useful for different purposes’.* (p.121).

Do you agree with this? If so, what might those purposes be?

2. What do you make of the notion of intellectual dragons who don’t practice the precepts? (pp. 128-129).
3. A mandala: *‘A harmonious arrangement of psychological, spiritual, and transcendental energies around a common central principle: the principle of Enlightenment.’* (p.129).

The mandala is protected both by the four great kings and the gaurīs. What might be the function of both of these in your own personal mandala?

4. The four kings *‘...represent the forces of balance and harmony in the cosmos ... between the psychological and the spiritual.’* (p.130).

Why is this important?

5. *‘On the level of the individual human life it means that there is no such thing as purely psychological positivity in the sense of a positivity whose support comes only from a psychological source.’* (p.131).

Can you see the limits of such purely psychological positivity in your own life? What is your experience of ‘positivity’ from psychological sources?

6. *‘...the earthly energies submit to the heavenly energies, and the heavenly energies submit to the transcendental energies. Thus is the profound principle of spiritual hierarchy introduced.’* (p.134).

Do you think it is possible to have a world that is transformed along such principles? How might this look?

Unit 5: Buddhism and Culture

Here we encounter the first of three goddesses that come to pay homage and offer themselves in the service of the sūtra – Sarasvatī, the goddess of culture. Please read *Chapter 4 – Buddhism and Culture* before your group meeting and if you can, chapter 7 of the sūtra.

1. *‘She [Sarasvatī] represents human nature in its more developed state, human activities in their more polished and refined forms. We could even say that she represents the cultivated person, the cultivated mind.’* (p.144).

How important do you think it is to become more refined and cultivated?

2. *‘The principle, or the rationale, behind the incorporation of culture into the Dharma is still valid. It is to engage the emotions fully so that one can live the spiritual life wholeheartedly.’* (pp.147-148).

In terms of your own practice, can you see how putting culture at the service of the Dharma can help you live the spiritual life more wholeheartedly? Give some examples of how this has helped you.

3. What is the difference, in your own experience, between a crude emotion and a refined one?
4. *‘Involvement with culture in the best sense helps to refine the emotions, and the refinement of emotions is important, even essential, for one’s spiritual development as an individual.’* (p.152).

Why is it essential?

5. What is the difference between Sarasvatī and Mañjughoṣa? How do you respond to the symbolism of Mañjughoṣa?

Unit 6: Nature, Man, and Enlightenment

Dṛḍhā, whom we meet in this chapter, is the earth goddess who bears witness to the Buddha when Mara comes to sow doubt in his mind on the night of his Enlightenment. Here she comes with promises to protect the sūtra. Please read chapter 5 of *Transforming Self and World* and if you can, chapter 10 of the sūtra.

1. *‘Those human energies which are part of nature can be placed at the service of the golden light – they can be transformed. But nature herself cannot be transformed.’* (pp. 162-163).

What do you think Sangharakshita means by this?

2. What are the implications of *‘The right use of nature’* being part of the spiritual life? (p.163).
3. Does the aesthetic and contemplative appreciation of nature form a part of your own spiritual life? If so, what are the benefits of such a practice for you?
4. What does *‘Seeing nature as she really is’* mean and how can you cultivate a sense of it? (p.164).
5. *‘You cannot be totally committed unless you are free from all mundane ties and responsibilities.’* (p. 167).

What does Sangharakshita mean by this? Do you agree?

6. Sangharakshita here gives a very positive impression of the monk’s life:

‘The monastic life is the best and happiest of all lives’ and ‘The monk is one who leads an angelic life, who is happy’. (pp.168-169)

What is your own response to the monastic life? How does the happiness of the monastic life compare with your own happiness?

7. *‘...man is a being in conflict, in conflict with himself, in conflict within himself... There is a great battle taking place in every human being, the forces of nature fighting with the forces of Enlightenment, Dṛḍhā the earth goddess with the golden light.’* (p.169).

Can you relate to this conflict within yourself?

Unit 7: Buddhist Economics

In the module on the *Buddha's Eightfold Path* in Year Two, we encountered the Buddha's teaching on Right Livelihood and began to explore some of the implications of this particular aspect of the Buddha's teaching. Here we return to the topic via the symbolism of Śrī, the goddess of wealth, and look at it in a broader context. Please read the chapter on *Buddhist Economics* from *Transforming Self and World* and chapter 8 of the sūtra.

1. What is your basic attitude towards earning and spending money? Which of the following do you associate money with?:

freedom, security, prestige, extravagance, corruption, materialism, generosity, greed, thriftiness, status-anxiety, enjoyment.

2. What do you think about giving money for Dharma work? Is it something you do?
3. Do you agree with Sangharakshita's exploration of the psychological differences between giving and paying (pp. 178-179)?
4. 'One should only refuse pain-killers if their use has implications that are worse than the pain itself.' (p.182).

Do you agree with this?

5. 'Some other way must be found to provide for the material needs of the full-timer' (p.184).

Do you agree with this idea? If so, how do you think we in Triratna can provide support for those who wish to lead a full-time Dharma life?

6. What do you make of ethical investment? Do you invest your own money ethically?
7. What relevance do any of the three aims of a Buddhist team-based Right Livelihood project have for your own work situation? In what way can your work support your spiritual practice? (p.188).

Unit 8: The Moral Order and its Upholders

This concluding unit looks at the whole issue of morality within society as a whole through the ‘*Chapter on Instruction concerning Divine Kings*’. Please read this chapter of the sūtra (no 12) and then the concluding chapter of *Transforming Self and World*.

1. What is your response to the notion of an ordered society as portrayed here? What is your own assessment of the society you live in, i.e. is it based on a moral order? Does it support ethical action and the development of the individual?
2. Can the innocent suffer? Is there such a thing as tragedy? (pp. 196-198). If so, what is it?
3. Can you think of any examples of righteous kings (or rulers or leaders) from history or the present day? If so, what characterises their leadership?
4. ‘...*the social order should mirror the law of karma*’. (p.200). What are the implications of this for the society you live in?
5. ‘*Parents are divine kings on a small scale*’. (p.202). Do you agree with this and with Sangharakshita’s subsequent reflections on parenting and the moral order?
6. ‘...*psychologically speaking at least, almost any order is probably better than no order at all*’. (p.203).

Why might this be the case? Can you see how this might relate to your own psychology?

7. ‘*I would suggest that one can operate in the power mode in the world so long as that power mode is based on and controlled by the love mode...*’ (p.207).

Can you think of specific examples where you might have to operate in this way?

Projects

As with all the modules of the Dharma Training Course, this module concludes with the opportunity to present a project to your group on a topic arising from the material you have been studying. As this is such a wide-ranging series, there are no doubt plenty of leads you could follow up.

Taking it Further

If you have felt inspired or moved to explore any of the themes in this series further, you may find the following resources helpful. They may also be helpful for your project:

Suggested further reading for the whole series

The Eternal Legacy by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications ISBN 1899579583). Chapter 15 has more background on the context of the *Sūtra of Golden Light*.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=712>

A Concise History of Buddhism by Andrew Skilton (Windhorse Publications ISBN 0904766926), Chapters 11 and 12 have details on the origin of the Mahayana and on the rise of Mahayana scriptures.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=330>

Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition by Subhuti (Windhorse Publications ISBN 0904766683). Chapters 9 and 10 explore Sangharakshita's thinking on the creation of a 'New Society' and of a new Buddhist culture.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=377>

A Survey of Buddhism by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications). The opening section of *Chapter One – The Approach to Buddhism*, presents a slightly different take on what a traditional society, orientated around the Transcendental, might look like.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=331>

Unit 1

Shamanism by Mircea Eliade. Chapter 5 (on the drum) and chapter 2 (on dreams).

<http://tinyurl.com/cc8r64>

Units 2 and 3

Bhaddali Sutta from *Majjhima Nikaya* (MN 65). Bhaddali makes a transgression of one of the training precepts but his confession is heard and forgiven by the Buddha.

<http://www.mahindarama.com/e-tipitaka/Majjhima-Nikaya/mn-65.htm>

Know Your Mind by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications ISBN 0904766799). pp.125-9 explore *hrī* and *apatrāpya* ('shame' and 'respect for wise opinion'), the two guardians of the world.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=452>

Remorse and Confession in the Spiritual Community by Subhuti (a Madhyamaloka booklet). This is an excellent exploration of how we can develop an ethical conscience and use confession as a spiritual practice.

Unit 4

Buddhist Cosmology by Randy Kloetzli (Motilal Barnasidass). This gives an account of the traditional Buddhist cosmology as well as relating it to traditional Western cosmology.

<http://www.mlbld.com/BookDecription.aspx?id=660>

Unit 5

The Religion of Art by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications). An indispensable source for Sangharakshita's views on the importance of art in spiritual life.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=349>

Buddhism and the West by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications). Explores in principle what the integration of Buddhism into Western society and culture might look like.

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

Unit 6

Forty-Three Years Ago and *Was the Buddha a Bhikkhu?* both by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications). Both of these books explore Sangharakshita's own experience of being a Theravādin monk and his encounters with monastic formalism.

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

Unit 7

The Buddha's Eightfold Path by Sangharakshita (Windhorse Publications). Chapter 5 on right livelihood has some discussion of the principles of Buddhist economics.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=722>

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X07>

Small is Beautiful by E.F. Schumacher. The chapter on Buddhist Economics is referred to in the text.

<http://tinyurl.com/cwrzdvd>

Buddhism and Business Relationships (chapter 17 of *What is the Sangha?* By Sangharakshita) takes a different look at economic relations in the light of the Buddha's teaching in the *Sigālaka Sutta*.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=494>

Buddhist Economics by Venerable P.A. Payutto (Buddhadharma Foundation).

Read online: <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/9280/econ.htm>

Unit 8

'*Going forth and Citizenship*' by Subhuti, in *Western Buddhist Review*, No.1. Explores the responsibilities that we have as citizens as well as the use of the power mode in political matters.

<http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol1/citizenship.html>

Being a Buddhist Parent (chapter 13 of *What is the Sangha?* by Sangharakshita) has a lot more to say about the role of parenting in Buddhist life. *See above*.

Buddhist Parenting by Karunagita. An audio talk (with transcript) from the 'Dharma Warriors' series given at the Buddhafield Festival in 2006.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM780>