

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras Year Four

Module 5: Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism

Introduction

As with his series on the Bodhisattva Ideal, Sangharakshita's aim here is not any kind of historical analysis of his subject but an attempt to bring alive its inner spiritual meaning and make it relevant to our own living of spiritual life in the modern world. Given that his approach is to explore the Tantra in terms of its creative symbols, it would be helpful to find as many ways as possible to engage directly with these symbols rather than just think about them or discuss them. So it may be helpful to see the next 8 weeks as a chance to enter into the rich world of Tantric symbolism through, e.g. the making of appropriate shrines; dwelling on full colour images of the various symbols; familiarising yourself with ritual objects; making offerings; chanting mantras and exploring the effects of different colours etc. So rather than just a study session, these next eight weeks can be an opportunity to create and dwell in a ritual space in which you can meet the various symbols that Sangharakshita introduces.

Primary study material

The primary study material for this module is the series of lectures by Sangharakshita published in book-form as '*Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism*' (ISBN: 1899579478 available from Windhorse Publications) comprising the following lectures:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=650>)

1. The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life.
2. The Tantric Symbolism of the Stūpa.
3. The Symbolism of the Sacred Thunderbolt or Diamond Sceptre of the Lamas.
4. The Symbolism of the Cosmic Refuge Tree and the Archetypal Guru.
5. The Symbolism of the Cremation Ground and the Celestial Maidens.
6. The Symbolism of Offerings and Self-sacrifice.
7. The Symbolism of Colours and Mantric Sound.
8. The Symbolism of the Five Buddhas, 'Male' and 'Female'.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X13>

Mp3 audio recordings of the original lectures are available from Free Buddhist Audio. If you have time, I would urge you to listen to the lectures. Although they were given in 1972, in a much earlier stage of the history of the FWBO/Triratna,

the inspiration and sense of occasion come across much better when you can hear Sangharakshita rather than just read the words from a printed page. Please be aware that the book has more material in it as excerpts from seminars have been edited into it.

Study guide and suggested questions

As with the other modules, the suggested questions are here to help you engage with the main points in the text. You may wish to read them before reading the text so that you can focus your reading and reflection. However, the questions are not likely to be definitive so if there are other issues or questions you have, feel free to raise them in your group.

Unit 1: The Symbolism of the Tibetan Wheel of Life

For this unit, you will need to read both the Introduction and *Chapter 1 – The Tibetan Wheel of Life*. The symbol of the Wheel of Life has already featured in Part 4, Week 3 of the Foundation Year but here Sangharakshita explores it in greater depth and in the context of Tantric symbolism.

1. What is a symbol? How does it differ from a sign or a concept? Give an example of an important symbol from your own life.
2. How can you develop receptivity to the symbols of the Tantric path that we will be exploring? Give one or two specific examples of things you could do over the next 8 weeks.
3. When you look into the mirror of the Wheel of Life, which of its many images strikes you most strongly? Why do you think this image speaks to you so strongly?
4. The six realms represent habitual ways of being that we all inhabit from time to time. Which of the realms do you feel most familiar with? Describe that realm from your own experience. You could also ask a friend which realm they think you dwell in most and see if your answers correspond! Are there any realms that you feel completely unfamiliar with?
5. What does the Buddha's offering in that realm tell you about how you can work with your mental states to free yourself from that realm? What would be a concrete example of the Buddha's advice for you? Try putting it into practice over the coming week, noticing what effect it has.
6. Do the Buddha's offerings in the realms give you any ideas as to how you might respond more helpfully to other people dwelling in those realms?
7. What conclusions can you draw from the teaching of the Buddha seeds and how these are distributed through the six realms?
8. Why is the image of the hare in the moon so important?

Unit 2: The Tantric Symbolism of the Stūpa

You will have encountered the symbol of the stūpa already if you studied ‘*The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment*’ in Year Three of the course. Unit 6 of that module – ‘*Five Element Symbolism and the Stūpa*’ – covers similar, but not identical, ground to this unit. Please read *Chapter Two – The Tantric Stūpa* before your group meeting.

1. Look for images of stūpas (on the web or in books) – what is your response to them? Which aspects of them, if any, have significance for you? Bring any images you do find to the group session to share with others.
2. What is rūpa? What do you understand by the term ‘objective content of the perceptual situation’?
3. What is the function of initiation? What place does it have within Triratna? Have you had an experience of your ‘dormant psycho-spiritual energies’ being activated in any way?
4. Try painting or making a simple stūpa and notice your response to the different elements of it.
5. Set aside some time during the week to notice the different elements, both in your own experience and in the world around you. If you have time, write something about each element.

Unit 3: The Symbolism of the Sacred Thunderbolt or Diamond Sceptre of the Lamas

Here, Sangharakshita introduces us to the vajra or diamond thunderbolt, after which the Vajrayāna is itself named. Please read *Chapter Three – The Sacred Thunderbolt* before your group meeting.

1. What is your response to the symbol of the vajra?
2. In what ways is the vajra a symbol for reality?
3. How do you respond to the figure of wrathful Vajrapāṇi?
4. ‘*Any shattering experience has an element of reality in it. If an experience shatters, it is real – and if it doesn’t shatter us, its authenticity may be questioned.*’ (p 59).

Have you had any experience that you would call shattering? If so, what led up to it and what were its effects on you?

5. ‘*There is certainly room for a great deal more intensity in the spiritual practice of most Western Buddhists*’ (p. 60).

What could you do to intensify your own spiritual practice?

6. Why do you think the symbol of the vajra is so central to Tantric Buddhism?
7. Vajrasattva – ‘the being of the vajra’ – is strongly associated with purity – why should this be so? What are your own associations with purity? How do you respond to the figure of Vajrasattva?

Unit 4: The Symbolism of the Cosmic Refuge Tree and the Archetypal Guru

The module ‘*Wisdom Teachings from the Refuge Tree*’ in Year Four of the Dharma Training Course introduces and explores the symbol of the Triratna Refuge Tree. Here, we will be looking at the traditional Nyingmapa version of the Refuge Tree as this was the version of the practice that Sangharakshita was given by Khachu Rimpoche when he lived in Kalimpong. (See *Precious Teachers*, p.85).

The role of the guru is also explored in Sangharakshita’s lecture ‘*Is a Guru Necessary?*’

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=90>

This is studied in the Year Two module on ‘*What is the Sangha?*’ Please read chapter 14 of the book before your group meeting.

1. What is the difference between escape and escapism? Are there any elements of escapism in your own approach to the Dharma?
2. What might the esoteric refuges be in your own life? Talk about this with a good friend and see if they agree with you!
3. ‘...but within it (the Sangha) there may be just a few people whose company you find so stimulating that they can be the third esoteric refuge for you’ (p. 89).

Are there any people in your life like this?

4. Why don’t we have gurus in Triratna? Should we have them?
5. What is a spiritual lineage? What is transmitted within it? What might it mean in the context of Triratna? Do you feel part of a spiritual lineage yourself?
6. ‘...all life is participating in this great process, the cosmic Going for Refuge’ (p. 98).

What does this phrase ‘Cosmic Going for Refuge’ mean to you? How could you cultivate a stronger sense of it in your own life?

Unit 5: The Symbolism of the Cremation Ground and the Celestial Maidens

This is a very rich lecture looking at some of our deepest fears and how we can confront them. Through doing this, we can begin to transform our deepest and most powerful emotions, liberating the energy held in them for our spiritual practice. Please read *Chapter Five – The Cremation Ground and the Celestial Maidens* before your group meeting.

1. Have you had any close encounters with death? e.g. have you been close to death yourself?
Have you been with someone else when they have died?
Have you seen a corpse? If so, what has been your response to these situations?
What has been your experience of funerals? Have you been to a Buddhist funeral?

2. Keep a journal for each day this week in which you write down all the experiences of impermanence that you notice.

3. What situations give rise to fear within you? What attempts have you made to face your own fears?

4. *‘If you are going to teach the dākinīs, you have to find them first’* (p. 122).

Have you found that your spiritual life has begun to free up your energies? If so, how and in what way? Are there any other things you can do to free your energies?

5. *‘In fact, in all forms of Buddhism, great importance is attached to the heroic virtues: courage, self-confidence, self-reliance, energy, initiative.’* (p. 115).

How are these virtues relevant to your own practice of Buddhism?

6. Sangharakshita suggests *‘The symbolism of the dākinī thus offers a way of integrating one’s unconscious contents by personalizing them and conducting a dialogue with that personalized form’* (p. 124).

Have you ever attempted such a dialogue? What has been the outcome if you have?

7. *‘She (the dākinī) represents that spiritual ideal of self-abandonment to the Three Jewels’* (p. 126).

What might it be like to really give yourself to the Three Jewels in this way?

8. How can you distinguish between a growth promoting cremation ground and a situation that you simply can’t handle?

Unit 6: The Symbolism of Offerings and Self-sacrifice

This is a great exploration of the whole area of offerings in the Buddhist tradition. Given this theme, you may want to make a practice this week of making fresh offerings each day to your shrine at home. Please read chapter six before your group meeting.

1. If you had an honoured guest coming to stay with you, what would you do to make them feel welcome?
2. If you were to make your own (non-traditional) offerings to the Buddha, what would they be?
3. How can the making of offerings function as an effective spiritual practice? When you have made offerings, what effect has that had on you?
4. Gratitude (*kataññutā* in Pāli) has been defined as ‘knowing and recognizing what has been done to one for one’s benefit’. Does reflecting on the benefits you have received from others help you to connect with a desire to make offerings?
5. What do you make of the symbolism of the Mandala that is offered to the Buddha? What might it look like to make such an offering in terms of modern Western cosmology?
6. ‘*Egoism is not an entity, but an attitude.*’ (p. 150). To what extent does the making of offerings help you to overcome such egoism?
7. How would you offer your self to the Buddhas?
8. Spend some time quietly on your own in nature, relax and try to open up to its aliveness. What do you notice when you do this?

Unit 7: The Symbolism of Colours and Mantric Sound

With this week's theme, perhaps you could recite 108 mantras of one of the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas that you feel a connection with at some point during each day. Or you could choose a colour to which you are drawn, noticing how that colour manifests in the world as well as the effects that colour has on you.

1. Is colour symbolism universal or culturally specific? Explore this using some specific examples.
2. What is your favourite colour? What associations does that colour have for you?
3. Spend time really looking at colours in nature – e.g. flowers, the blue sky, the green of a forest. What are your emotional responses in each case? Are there any resonances with your favourite Buddha or Bodhisattva?
4. What application do the four Tantric rites have, if any, to your spiritual life?
5. What role does beauty play in your spiritual life? What are the advantages and dangers of being led by beauty?
6. Are you inspired by the arts? By beautiful paintings? By music? How could these things be an aid to spiritual practice for you?
7. How is a mantra a 'sound symbol'?
8. What is your experience of the spiritual value of mantras?

Unit 8: The Symbolism of the Five Buddhas, 'Male' and 'Female'

To conclude the series, Sangharakshita here looks at one of the richest and most important symbols of Tantric Buddhism.

1. Which appeals more to you - the figure of the historical Buddha or one of the archetypal Buddha forms? Why do you think that is?
2. If you have time, draw two different mandalas – one a mandala of your life and the other the ideal mandala of the Five Buddhas (this last doesn't have to be figurative but could just have the colours and/or symbols arranged in a mandala pattern with the three walls of the mandala etc.).
3. Which of the five Buddhas – male or female – appeals to you most and why?
4. Why do you think the five female Buddhas represent the Wisdom aspect of Enlightenment and the five male Buddhas the compassion aspect?
5. Write down your thoughts and associations with each of the Five Wisdoms (p. 185).
6. How do you respond to the yab-yum and wrathful figures of the Mandala of the Five Buddhas?

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 one of the symbols we have been exploring over the last 8 weeks and go into it in more depth. Whatever you choose, the purpose of the projects is to give you the opportunity to engage with the material more fully. It is also a good way to share something of your experience with the group. If you are unsure what to do for your project, talk to your group leader.

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 module

Tibetan Buddhism – An Introduction by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766861 Windhorse Publications). Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the Four Foundation Yogas and Tantric initiation.

Book: <http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=369>

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X08>

A Survey of Buddhism, Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766934 Windhorse Publications). Chapter 3 places the Tantra in the context of the development of the various Mahayana schools.

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

Buddhist Thought by Anthony Tribe, Paul Williams and Anthony Wynne (ISBN 0415207010 Routledge). Chapter 7 on the Tantra gives an up-to-date academic overview of the Tantra. Anthony Tribe also has the Order name of Anandajyoti.

<http://www.routledge.com/books/Buddhist-Thought-isbn9780415207010>

Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism, Lama Anagarika Govinda (various editions). Explores various Tibetan teachings and practices through the mantra *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Govinda was a good friend of Sangharakshita's.

<http://tinyurl.com/cln8kh>

The Way of the White Clouds, Lama Anagarika Govinda (various editions). A passionate and inspired narrative of his pilgrimage in Tibet where he describes eloquently his great joy at the beautiful colours and dramatic landscapes there.

<http://tinyurl.com/chpprr>

Meeting the Buddhas by Vessantara (Windhorse Publications various editions). Part 4 explores the Tantra and Tantric deities.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=335>

Unit 1

'Journey to Il Convento' and 'St Jerome Revisited' in *The Priceless Jewel* by Sangharakshita (ISBN 0904766586 Windhorse Publications). These two short

essays explore Sangharakshita's response to Christian religious art and his exploration of the faculty of the Imagination.

Book (free download): http://www.sangharakshita.org/online_books.html

Audio: *Journey to Il Convento* –

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

St. Jerome Revisited: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=164>

The Wheel of Life by Kulananda (ISBN 1899579303 Windhorse Publications). A short but clear overview of the Wheel of Life.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=470>

The Wheel of Birth and Death by Bhikkhu Khantipalo, The Wheel Publication Nos. 147/148/149, available from Access to Insight website. This gives a fuller historical background to the Wheel in the Pāli tradition.

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/khantipalo/wheel147.html>

The Buddhist Vision by Subhuti (ISBN 1899579362 Windhorse Publications). This is an excellent exploration of the whole Buddhist Path using the symbols of the Wheel of Life, the Spiral Path and the Five Buddha Mandala. He is particularly good on the mental states that create each realm.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=491>

Unit 2

Psycho-cosmic Symbolism of the Stūpa by Lama Anagarika Govinda (ISBN 0913546364 Dharma Publishing). Explores the proportions and symbolism of various kinds of Buddhist stūpa.

<http://www.wisdom-books.com/ProductDetail.asp?PID=1063>

Buddhist Saints in India by Reginald Ray (ISBN 0195134834 Oxford). Chapter 10 explores what Ray calls the 'cult of the stūpa' in Buddhist history and practice.

<http://www.oup.com/uk/catalogue/?ci=9780195134834>

<http://tinyurl.com/dhsmky> (U.S. version)

Unit 3

The Vajra and the Bell by Vessantara (ISBN 1899579419 Windhorse Publications). A concise exploration of the symbolism of vajra and bell written in an approachable and direct style.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=501>

Unit 4

The Refuge Tree by Aloka (Padmaloka Books). A detailed exploration of the Nyingmapa Refuge Tree based on talks given by Aloka at Padmaloka.

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

The Refuge Tree as Mythic Context by Aloka (Padmaloka Books). A more practical guide to engaging with the various images and symbols that make up the Refuge Tree.

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

Teachers of Enlightenment by Kulananda (ISBN 1899579257 Windhorse Publications). An introduction to the Going for Refuge and Prostration practice used within the Triratna Buddhist Order and to the figures of the Triratna Refuge Tree.

Unit 5

Meeting the Buddhas by Vessantara (Windhorse Publications, various editions). Chapter 23 explores the more well-known ḍākinī figures.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=335>

Unit 6

What is the Sangha? by Sangharakshita (ISBN 1899579311 Windhorse Publications). Chapter 19 is an excellent exploration of gratitude.

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

Ritual and Devotion in Buddhism by Sangharakshita (ISBN 090476687X Windhorse Publications). Chapters 5 and 6 explore Worship and Offerings in the context of the Sevenfold Pūjā.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=351>

Unit 7

Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism, Lama Anagarika Govinda (various editions). Chapter 1 is particularly good on mantra and mantric sound.

<http://tinyurl.com/cgojff>

The Way of the White Clouds, Lama Anagarika Govinda (various editions). Part 2 Chapter 2 explores colour as ‘the living language of light’.

<http://tinyurl.com/chpprr>

Unit 8

The Mandala of the Five Buddhas by Vessantara (ISBN 1899579168 Windhorse Publications). Taken from *Meeting the Buddhas*, this is a short but imaginative introduction to the Mandala.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=464>

Female Deities in Buddhism by Vessantara (ISBN 1899579532 Windhorse Publications). Vessantara here explores the Five Female Buddhas (along with other female deities).

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=652>

Indeed, over the last 6 or 7 years, he has begun to develop significant material on these little explored figures in the Buddhist tradition. If you want to explore this material, this is the best place to start. You can also access his pujas and other written material on the five female Buddhas via his website:

<http://vessantara.net/>

Mantras of the Five Consorts (Audio):

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM678>