

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Three

Module 2: The Nature of Existence 2 – In Search of the Middle Way

Week 1: The Roots of the Mahāyāna

Introduction

In this module of the Dharma Training Course we will be exploring some important Mahāyāna approaches to the nature of reality, in particular:

- The Madhyamaka (or ‘Middle Way’) philosophy of Nāgārjuna and his successors.
- The Prajñā-Pāramitā literature which the Madhyamaka school tried to explain.
- The Yogācāra (‘Path of Practice’) or Cittamātra (‘Mind-Only’) vision of reality.
- The Tathāgatagarbha (‘Embryo of the Buddha’ or ‘Buddha-matrix’) doctrine, which gave rise to the idea of ‘Buddha-Nature’ that is so popular among some Western Buddhists.

Most of us get inspiration from reading books from a wide variety of Buddhist traditions, and some of us have direct contact with other schools. Every school of Buddhism we might come across in the world today, with the single exception of the Theravādin school of Southeast Asia, has been profoundly influenced by at least some of these doctrines – so it is important that we know about them. If we read a book on Tibetan Buddhism or Zen Buddhism or Tendai Buddhism or Pure Land Buddhism – as almost all of us do at one time or another – we need to have a critical appreciation of these teachings to make sense of what we are reading, to put it into its proper context, and to be able to benefit without falling into any of the pitfalls that these ideas can present.

But we will not be looking at these doctrines from merely scholarly interest – the aim is to explore how they can inspire us, and how they can feed into our practice of the Dharma. These ideas have the potential to transform the way we see the world, and therefore the way we live – but only if we approach them in the right spirit. Taken in the wrong way – approached in a literal-minded way, or seen dogmatically as the only truth - any of these ideas can have negative consequences for our practice. So as well as exploring these ways of looking at reality, we will also be exploring how Sangharakshita advises us to approach them, and how we can incorporate them into our view of the world.

The module is subtitled ‘In Search of the Middle Way’ – as you will see, finding a middle way between nihilism and eternalism in our approach to the Dharma is a recurring theme.

Roots in ‘original Buddhism’

The doctrines we will be exploring are usually regarded as specifically belonging to the later, Mahāyāna stage of Buddhism. But none of these ideas is really a new teaching, different from the teaching of the historical Buddha. All of these doctrines have their roots in what we might call original Buddhism, and to a greater or lesser extent we can find evidence of them in the Pāli Canon. In some cases the Mahāyāna Buddhists whose vision we will be exploring were reaffirming a way of looking at the world that seems to have been very much part of original Buddhism, but which had perhaps been lost sight of due to a dry, scholarly, literalistic approach to the Dharma. In some cases they explored and elaborated these ideas, based on their own spiritual experience and practice, far beyond any of the recorded words of the Buddha, but in a way that the Buddha would almost certainly have welcomed. (After all he was only one man, and there was a limit to what he could express and pass on. And he himself said that the teachings he had given were only a tiny subset of the Dharma in the widest sense – as he put it: just a handful of leaves compared to all the leaves in the forest.) In some cases these later Buddhists perhaps took an idea too far, or gave it more emphasis than is always useful – you will have your own opinions about this as we proceed.

But it is important to realise that all of the ideas we will be exploring have their roots in original Buddhism. So before we launch into any of these specifically Mahāyāna expositions of the nature of existence, we need to ground ourselves in early Buddhism – we need to look at their roots in the teaching of the historical Buddha, in order to understand how they grew and flowered in later Buddhist traditions. This is what we will be doing in this first session of the module.

Pratītya Samutpāda

We saw in The Nature of Existence One that the central concept that the historical Buddha used to try to convey his vision of reality was that of *pratītya samutpāda* (Skt), or *paṭicca samuppāda* (Pāli). Sangharakshita normally translates this as ‘conditioned co-production’, but it has also been translated as ‘dependent arising’, ‘mutual causality’ and ‘mutual co-arising’. The Pāli and Sanskrit terms literally mean something like ‘existing because of arising together’, so that ‘mutual co-arising’ is perhaps the most literal translation. It has been defined by the influential 5th Century writer Buddhaghosa as, “That according to which co-ordinate phenomena are produced mutually.”

Conditioned coproduction is often equated with the chain of Twelve Nidānas illustrated on the outer circle of the Wheel of Life, which shows how our past mental processes condition our present mental states and the world we experience now, and how these in turn condition our future being and the world we will experience. Sangharakshita has also emphasised the Twelve Positive Nidānas of the Spiral Path, as an example of the positive working of conditioned co-production, which shows how we can escape from this vicious circle. These two nidāna chains are discussed in the Nature of Existence One, and in the Foundation Year of the Dharma Training Course.

But important as these nidāna chains are, they are just two of the possible formulations of the detailed workings of pratītya samutpāda – and there are other, different nidāna chains in the Pāli Canon, which illustrate the concept in a different way. The Twelve Nidānas of the Wheel of Life, and the Twelve Nidānas of the Spiral Path, are applications of a much more general principle. The Buddha summarised this principle in the following well-known words:

“This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises; this not being, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases.”¹

This is a deceptively simple formula, which could be taken to mean something we all already know very well – that things come into existence when the causes for them are in place. Perhaps Ananda thought that this was all that the Buddha meant when he said, as the Pāli Canon records:

“Wonderful, lord, marvellous lord, is the depth of this causal law and how deep it appears. And yet I reckon it as ever so plain.”

To which the Buddha replied:

“Say not so, Ananda, say not so. Deep indeed is this causal law, and deep it appears.”²

Elsewhere the Buddha describes this insight as:

“...hard to perceive, hard to understand, calm, sublime, beyond logic, subtle, intelligible only to the wise.”³

Because conditioned co-production is beyond logic and intelligible only to the wise, we can safely assume that if we think we understand it completely, as Ananda did, we have got it wrong – or at least that we only see part of it. The idea that things come

¹ For example, *Majjhima Nikāya* 38

² *Mahānidāna Sutta Dīgha Nikāya* 15. Quoted in *Mutual Causality and General Systems Theory*, by Joanna Macy, p25

³ *Dīgha Nikāya* II 36

into existence because of causes and conditions, and the nidāna chains that show how this principle works to produce the law of karma, is certainly the most important practical implication of pratītya samutpāda for our spiritual lives. But the commonsense principles of causality and conditionality, as we usually understand them, cannot be the whole of the Buddha's vision, for the simple reason that they are not beyond logic, and we, unwise as we are, can understand them very well, at least when they relate to the events of the outer world. The Indians of the Buddha's time must also have understood them very well at this outer physical level, or they could not have survived, let alone flourished as they did. It is virtually impossible to survive without this understanding, as without it the human ability to plan and reason is worthless. Indian society contained farmers who knew that to produce a crop they needed to put the causes and conditions in place – they needed to sow good seed at the proper time, to prepare the soil in the right way, and to provide other conditions such as water, manure, and protection from pests. Their society contained rulers who knew that to continue ruling they must put certain conditions in place, such as a good flow of tax revenue, a loyal band of followers, an army to keep order and protect their borders, and good relationships with their neighbours. If they had relied on spells and omens to produce their crops and maintain their kingdoms, they would quickly have died out.

So we can safely assume that the Indians of the Buddha's day were aware of the principles of causation and conditionality as they applied to such commonsense matters as these. But the Buddha extended these principles to show how they also operated in the inner world, in the psychological and spiritual dimensions of existence. This may have been a new idea to the people of his day, and in some senses it is likely to be a new idea to us too. We are used to thinking in terms of the physical and biological dimensions of existence affecting our inner world, the world of our thoughts, feelings and mental states. We are likely to try to improve our mental states by looking to outer things to make us feel happier. We may explain how meditation works by thinking that it does so by changing the working of the physical brain – by inducing certain patterns of brainwaves, uniting the left and right hemispheres, or whatever. If we feel depressed we may ask a doctor for a pill to change the chemistry of our brain. We are used to thinking that the material world – as it were – comes *before* the world of consciousness, and in one way or another causes and influences our consciousness and our mental states. But we are much less used to thinking of things happening the other way around, and of the inner world of our thoughts and feelings conditioning the outer world. And in the Buddha's vision of conditioned co-production the inner world and the outer world are inseparably interrelated – they are two sides of the same coin.

The Pāli Canon makes it clear that in the world of conditioned co-production there is no question of the material world coming *before* the phenomena of consciousness and causing it – or indeed vice versa . The material world and consciousness arise together, they arise simultaneously, and they depend on each other. For example in a

sutta called the *Sheaves of Reeds*, Śāriputra, said to be the wisest of the Buddhas disciples, explains this to another monk in the following way:

“Very well then, Kothhita my friend, I will give you an analogy; for there are cases where it is through the use of an analogy that intelligent people can understand the meaning of what is being said. It is as if two sheaves of reeds were to stand leaning against one another. In the same way, from name-and-form as a requisite condition comes consciousness, from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form... If one were to pull away one of those sheaves of reeds, the other would fall; if one were to pull away the other, the first one would fall.”⁴

Name-and-form includes what we would call the physical body, and we are told that this does not precede and cause consciousness, and nor does consciousness precede and cause it – the two as it were lean on each other, like two sheaves of reeds. The two depend on each other – they mutually co-arise.

This is probably not at all easy for us to understand at first, because most of us have been strongly conditioned to think that matter gives rise to consciousness. We have also been strongly conditioned to think in terms of one thing preceding and causing another, rather than of things mutually conditioning each other and arising together. This illustrates the fact that the Buddha’s vision of *pratītya samutpāda* is not the same as our commonsense ideas about how things happen because of causes and conditions, which we regularly apply to manipulate outer things and situations in our daily lives. The Buddha’s vision of *pratītya samutpāda* obviously includes and validates these commonsense ideas, as well as extending them into the realm of mental and spiritual processes. But clearly it is not contained by them - there is more to it than that.

Without thinking we have plumbed the depths of *pratītya samutpāda*, we can say that it seems to point towards a much more complex and holistic version of conditionality than our commonsense understanding. It seems to point towards a vision of the world as a constantly changing flux of interrelated mental and physical processes, which interact with each other and mutually condition each other in a way that is too complex for the human intellect to fully comprehend. It points to a world where things, beings, and mental states are more like eddies in a stream, which constantly interact with each other and keep each other in existence – rather than being separate, independent objects or events.

This vision has two major implications, which are drawn out and explored in the *Madhyamaka* philosophy and the *Prajñā-Pāramitā* sutras we will be exploring over the coming weeks. These are:

- Anātman, or the absence of ‘self nature’ in anything.

⁴ *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 12.67

- The inability of language and concepts to describe reality.

These ideas form two essential links between the original Buddhism taught by the historical Buddha, and the Mahāyāna ways of looking at the world we will be exploring over the coming weeks.

Anātman

The Three Lakṣaṇas

One extension of the principle of praṭītya samutpāda is the teaching of the Three Lakṣaṇas, or ‘marks’ of conditioned things. These follow inevitably from the concept of praṭītya samutpāda, because any of the phenomena within the flux of conditioned coproduction – any ‘conditioned thing’ – must be as the lakṣaṇas describe. If reality consists of a flow of processes that depend on each other and mutually condition each other in an almost infinite number of ways, then the following must be true.

1. Any conditioned ‘thing’ must be impermanent, because conditioned coproduction is a constant process of change. Hence all ‘things’ within the flow of conditioned co-production must have the quality or ‘mark’ of impermanence – the lakṣaṇa of *anitya* (Skt.) or *anicca* (Pāli).
2. No conditioned ‘thing’ can be said to exist independently in its own right, because any phenomenon within the flux of conditioned coproduction is conditioned by a host of other phenomena, and depends on innumerable other phenomena and conditions for its existence. Hence all conditioned things have the lakṣaṇa of *anātman*, or non-self nature. So praṭītya samutpāda does not just tell us that ‘all things change’, but also that there are no ‘things’ – there *is* only change.
3. And because all the ‘things’ within conditioned coproduction are transient, and lack the inherent qualities we attribute to them, they cannot be relied upon to give us the sort of real permanent satisfaction that we often look for from them. Hence they all are marked by the lakṣaṇa of *dukkha*, or, to use an ugly but accurate translation, ‘unsatisfactoriness’.

Of these three lakṣaṇas the most difficult to grasp, but also potentially the most liberating – particularly if we apply it to ourselves – is the idea that within the entire process of conditioned co-production nothing exists in its own right, as a thing-in-itself.

The Śūnyatā Samādhi

If we could really know the fact of *anātman*, in our bones, and apply it to ourselves, we would be freed from the prison of our egocentricity, into an expansive world of interconnectedness. If we could penetrate to the depths of *anātman*, it would become a Dharma-door to liberation. The *samādhi*, or higher level of consciousness, which we are traditionally said to enter if we fully penetrate the *lakṣaṇa* of *anātman* is called the *śūnyatā samādhi*, which Sangharakshita describes as:

“...the state of full and complete realization of the nature of existence, which cannot be put into words.”⁵

Meditations on anātman

Because full Insight into *anātman* would be ‘full and complete realization of the nature of existence’, it is not surprising that the Pāli canon contains many reflections and meditations to help us move towards this vision. And because the most liberating aspect of *anātman* to realize would be that we ourselves do not exist as separate independent beings, these reflections and meditations focus on this. Many of these reflections and meditations involve analysing our experience in different ways into its component parts, and then reflecting that none of these parts can be called a self, and that what we usually call a self is nothing other than the collection of these parts.

1. The skandhas

One of the most common ways the Buddha analyses our experience in the Pāli Canon is in terms of the five *skandhas* (literally ‘heaps’), which are:

- Form (*rūpa*) – the ‘external’ apparently solid aspect of our experience, from which we deduce the idea of matter.
- Feeling (*vedanā*) – the sense of pleasure or discomfort/irritation that accompanies each of our experiences, which has been called their ‘hedonic tone’.
- Perception (*saṃjñā*) – our labelling and recognition of different aspects of our experience.
- Volitions (*saṃskāra*).
- Consciousness (*viññāna*).

These skandhas can be seen as completely summing up our experience of the world. In a number of suttas in the Pāli Canon the Buddha asks us to reflect on this fact, and to reflect that none of the skandhas is what we call our ‘self’, but that there could be no ‘self’ apart from the skandhas. Sometimes He asks us to reflect that each of the

⁵ *Vision and Transformation*, by Sangharakshita, p148

skandhas is constantly changing. Our form or rūpa appears to change least of all, but change it does. In fact modern biology tells us that our body is changing all the time, as old cells die and new ones are formed. But even at the gross level our form changes over time. We look quite different now from the way we looked as a child, and we will look very different again when we are older. If our form is the self, then has our old self gone away when our form changes, and a new one arisen? In which case how can we call it a lasting self? And if this is true of our form, how much more true is it of our mental processes, which the other four skandhas deal with, and which change almost from one moment to the next?

At other times the Buddha invites us to reflect that anything which can justly be called the self would be under our control, and would not cause us suffering against our will. He then asks us to think about each skandha, to reflect that it is not under our control, and that it does in fact cause us suffering against our will. With regard to the skandha of form for example, he points out that we do not have full power over ‘our’ body. We cannot make it larger or more handsome. We cannot stop it getting ill. We cannot stop it ageing. And because of this it causes us suffering against our will, in a way that nothing which we could rightly call ‘myself’ would do. In the same way he points out that we do not control our feelings, and that these also cause us suffering in a way that nothing worth the name of ‘self’ would do. And so on for the other skandhas.

So the Buddha uses the concept of the skandhas as a way to help us to see through our idea that we have what we normally think of as a ‘self’. The list of the skandhas is essentially a tool to help us do this, not a technical description of what a human being is – it is an aid to reflection and meditation, and the Buddha also uses other classifications as tools for a similar purpose. For example he also asks us to divide up our experience in terms of the six senses - the five physical senses plus the mind - with their different sense organs, sense fields, and sense objects, and again he asks us to hunt for anything that we might rightly call a ‘self’ in the eighteen aspects that this gives rise to.

2. The dharma theory

After the Buddha’s Parinirvāṇa some even more elaborate ways of analysing our experience developed, in what is called the Abhidharma tradition – the name means something like ‘about the Dharma’. This tradition came to form an important part of the more conservative schools such as the Theravada, which the later Mahāyāna lumped together as the Hīnayāna. The Abhidharma analysis divided the world and our experience into a number of ‘dharmas’ (usually written with a lower-case ‘d’, to distinguish them from the Dharma itself.) These hundred-or-so dharmas (different schools had different numbers) were again intended to cover the whole range of our experience, and most of them referred to mental events. The dharmas were seen as

momentary phenomena that came into existence in dependence on what had gone before, and then vanished in an instant to be replaced by others.

It seems clear that the original aim of the analysis of experience into dharmas was similar to that of the skandhas – it provided a more comprehensive way of analysing our experience into changing, impersonal components, which could be used in meditation to change our vision of reality, and to deconstruct our idea of a ‘self’. We can imagine that if we trained ourselves through disciplined meditation to see ourselves and the world around us as a constantly changing combination of instantaneous dharmas, flashing into existence for a moment and then dissolving into others, our view of ourselves would change dramatically. We would see ourselves and everything around us as more like a flickering image than a solid entity – perhaps like the forms produced by a film projector, which have no real substance of their own, but are an illusion produced by a quick succession of changing images. We would see ourselves as a succession of impersonal elements, and have no need to invoke the idea of a solid self. This could be a terrifying prospect – if we had not already developed a strong basis of integration and positive emotion we can imagine that the result might be the disintegration of our personality, rather than a creative Insight. But, with the proper preparation, no doubt meditating in this way could have the effect of dissolving our idea of a self, and opening up the possibility of the *sūnyatā samadhi*, the liberating vision of *anātman*.

The inability of language and concepts to describe reality

Along with the idea of *anātman*, the second great implication of *pratītya samutpāda* that is explored in the *Madhyamaka* philosophy we will look at next week, is the fact that the world we live in cannot be grasped and pinned down by the concepts of the rational, discursive mind, or by language, which is its main tool.

We have seen that the principle of *pratītya samutpāda* tells us that reality does not consist of a collection of separate, independent things and beings, connected by simple chains of cause and effect - which is the way we normally see it. This normal way of seeing things is embedded in the structure of our language, which divides the world into separate nouns that do simple things to other nouns, as in the sentence, “Jack crashes the car.” Our language both reflects and conditions the way we think about the world, but because language does not reflect the reality of *pratītya samutpāda*, any ideas about the nature of things that we reach by reasoning with this language cannot be true in the absolute sense, because the very structure of the way we think when using language falsifies the nature of reality.

The Buddha does not talk about this inadequacy of language directly, but he refers to it in a number of ways. He tells us that his teaching is, “beyond the realm of words.” He indicates that some questions framed in words are simply unanswerable. And he tells us that the sort of word-based views and opinions about the nature of things that

religions and philosophies put forward cannot help us to see things as they are, and are in fact fetters.

Unanswerable questions

There are many instances in the Pāli Canon where the Buddha tries to indicate to his hearers that the questions they are asking do not make sense, apparently because the language of the question does not reflect the way things are. Over and over again someone puts a question to the Buddha which, from the Buddha's Enlightened point of view, makes no sense and cannot be answered. For example when someone asks him, "Does an Enlightened being continue to exist after death?" the Buddha replies that:

- They do not continue to exist,
- They do not cease to exist,
- They do not *both* continue to exist *and* cease to exist,
- They do not *neither* continue to exist *nor* cease to exist.

Other questions, such as whether the world is eternal or not, and whether the soul and the body are the same thing or not, all get the same treatment. What the Buddha seems to be doing here is saying that these questions cannot be answered, because from the Enlightened viewpoint they do not really make sense. He may also be implying that any answer framed in words which his hearers could understand would be false and misleading. The words that are used to frame the questions, or the words he could use to frame the answers, imply certain assumptions about the world that are not true. Perhaps it is a little like asking, "Where is the end of the rainbow?", or, "Would our house survive if the sky were to fall?" Both questions assume that because there is a word for something there is a real 'thing' that is designated by the word. But in fact 'rainbow' and 'sky' are not independent things, they are just convenient designations for phenomena that are produced by conditions, and depend on our perceptions for any reality they may have.

Views as fetters

There are several instances in the Pāli Canon where the Buddha says that the Enlightened being is beyond the sort of views that can be expressed in language. For example in the Sutta Nipāta he tells a householder called Magandiya:

*"There are no ties to him who is free from ideas, there are no delusions to him who is delivered by wisdom. Those who grasp ideas and views, wander about coming into conflict with the world."*⁶

⁶ Sutta Nipāta 847

In his discourse with a wanderer called Vacchagotta he talks about:

“...a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views... accompanied by suffering, distress, despair, & fever...”⁷

He then goes on to say that such views do not lead “To calm, direct knowledge, full Awakening, Unbinding.” The Buddha seems to be saying that our non-enlightened ideas about the world, based as they usually are on the faulty structure of language, do not explain reality, but stand between us and reality, veiling it from our eyes.

No views, or right views?

But at the same time as telling us that views are fetters, and that his own Insight is beyond words and logic, the Buddha placed Right View (which Sangharakshita translates as Perfect Vision) at the start of the Noble Eightfold Path, and on a number of occasions he stresses the importance of right view if we are going to get anywhere with the spiritual life. For example in the Majjhima Nikāya he says:

“And how is right view the forerunner? One discerns wrong view as wrong view, and right view as right view... One tries to abandon wrong view & to enter into right view: This is one's right effort. One is mindful to abandon wrong view & to enter & remain in right view: This is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three qualities — right view, right effort, and right mindfulness, run around and circle around right view.”⁸

And elsewhere, in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* he says:

“When a person has right view... whatever bodily deeds he undertakes in line with that view, whatever verbal deeds, whatever mental deeds he undertakes in line with that view, whatever intentions, whatever vows, whatever determinations, whatever fabrications, all lead to what is agreeable, pleasing, charming, profitable, & easeful. Why is that? Because the view is auspicious.”⁹

So the Buddha seems to be saying that all views are fetters, at the same time as stressing the need for right view. How can we make sense of this paradox? This is one of the areas we will be exploring next week, when we explore the Madhyamaka, or ‘Middle Way’ philosophy championed by Nāgārjuna – one of the truly great figures in the development of Buddhist thought, who is often described as the second Buddha.

⁷ *Majjhima Nikāya* 72

⁸ *Majjhima Nikāya* 117

⁹ *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 10.103

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you tend to think that physical matter (in the form of the brain and nervous system) gives rise to consciousness? Do you find it difficult to think in any other way? (Most of us do.) In what ways do the Twelve Nidānas not fit in with this idea? Find some links in the chain that seem to go the other way – i.e. where consciousness seems to condition the outer world of our experience – and discuss these with the group.
2. The Three Lakṣaṇas are usually seen as negative aspects of conditioned existence. Can you see any positive sides to impermanence and lack of self-nature?
3. Have you made the teaching of the skandhas your own? The Five Skandhas are a list that will crop up over and over again during this module, and you need to be thoroughly familiar with it. Be prepared to give a short presentation on the skandhas to the rest of the group if asked.
4. Do you think the skandhas completely cover the whole range of our experience? Try to think of some other ways of dividing up and analysing ourselves and our world, and tell the group about any you come up with.
5. Try reflecting on the skandhas this week as part of your meditation practice, in the way that the Buddha recommends. Reflect on each skandha in turn, seeing its changeable nature, the way it is beyond your control, and the way it causes you suffering. Tell the group about any effects this has.
6. Do you understand the idea of *anātman* at the intellectual level? Does it seem convincing to you?
7. Do you like or loathe the idea that you do not have a real self? Or is your response something in between? Tell the group how you feel about this teaching, and why.
8. In what ways could the idea of *anātman* be liberating? In what ways could it be dangerous?

Do you think it would be a spiritually useful idea for you at the moment, at your present stage on the spiritual path?

9. Can you think of ways in which the ideas or ‘views’ of Buddhism have affected the way you live since you started practicing? Have they had a positive or negative effect? Do you think you would benefit by abandoning such views as ‘fetters’?

Week 2: The Madhyamaka and the Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutras

Introduction

Some time after about 100 BCE – which is to say three or four centuries after the death of the Buddha, and at about the same time that the Pāli Canon began to be written down – a type of Mahāyāna texts began to appear, which were given the name of Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutras – discourses on the Perfection of Wisdom. Examples of such Prajñā-Pāramitā texts include the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñā-Pāramitā*, or *Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines*, the *Heart Sutra*, and the *Diamond Sutra*. In his book, *The Eternal Legacy*, Sangharakshita suggests that these sutras spring from an oral tradition dating back to the time of the Buddha.

The Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras are written from the point of view of someone who sees the world as the Buddha described it – a world in which no thing and nobody has genuine existence, and in which the words we use to describe our experience do not point to anything that is ultimately real. They shift back and forth from this transcendental perspective to our usual point of view, playing with language to create a series of baffling contradictions and paradoxes. They are almost impossible to understand without some explanation.

Hearing a Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutra such as the Heart Sutra that we recite in the pūjā may give us an intuitive sense that something deep and important is being said, but those of us who like to have some intellectual grasp of the meaning of what we are hearing will want some clarification. This clarification was provided by one of the most important figures in the history of Buddhist thought, the great Nāgārjuna, whom some people have spoken of as a second Buddha. Nāgārjuna and his followers established what is called the Madhyamaka school – the Middle Way, or literally just ‘Middling’.

The Madhyamaka used language and logic to show the limits of language and logic, with the intention of leading us – not to a state of sub-rational stupidity - but to a trans-rational state in which we can use language and logic, while seeing through it to the mysterious and miraculous reality that it usually hides.

Nāgārjuna, Madhyamaka philosophy, and the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras

Nāgārjuna seems to have lived in Southern India, and to have been active some time around 150 CE. We do not know many hard facts about him, but in Buddhist myth his name is closely linked to the Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutras. It is said that these were guarded by the Nāgas, serpent-like beings who lived in the depths of the ocean. The Nāgas had preserved these teachings from the days of the Buddha, having been told not to release them until humankind was ready for them. When the time was ripe the Nāgas gave the original Prajñā-Pāramitā text to Nāgārjuna, who is sometimes shown in art as sitting on a raft, being given a book by a Nāga maiden. In *The Eternal Legacy* Sangharakshita suggests that the so-called Nāgas may have been a group of

practitioners who had preserved an oral tradition from the time of the Buddha. Alternatively he says that perhaps the story is meant:

“...to be taken quite literally, and that the Prajñā-Pāramitā teachings actually were preserved on a plane that does not coincide with any geographical locale by a group of spiritually gifted non-human beings.”¹⁰

Whether or not either explanation is literally true; the idea that these teachings were hidden ‘in the depths’ until human beings were ready for them has a clear mythic significance in its own right. Having been given these teachings – by whatever means – Nāgārjuna then went on to make good use of them. As Sangharakshita says in his *Survey of Buddhism*:

“After studying this profound teaching and realising its truth for himself, Nāgārjuna decided that, in order to counteract... the growing literalism and scholasticism of the Hīnayāna, the time had come for them to be made public. He therefore propagated the Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutras and composed a number of original works on its teaching. For this service, by means of which the true interpretation of the Buddha’s Teaching was preserved for humanity, Nāgārjuna may well be regarded as the Second Founder of Buddhism.”¹¹

Nāgārjuna’s original works, which explore and elucidate the meaning of the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras, formed the basis for the Madhyamaka school, which came to have a profound influence on Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the *Survey* Sangharakshita says that, “The teaching of Nāgārjuna is in substance identical with that of the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras.” Because the Madhyamaka teachings give us a logical framework we can discuss – which the sutras generally do not - we will focus mainly on these this week. This will prepare us for an encounter with some actual extracts from the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras in weeks 3 and 4 of this module.

Śūnyatā

Śūnyatā , which means literally ‘emptiness’, is a key word in the Madhyamaka. It is used to point to the indefinable quality of things when they are seen as they are, as aspects of pratītya samutpāda. In Nāgārjuna’s words:

“It is dependent origination [pratītya-samutpāda] that we call emptiness [śūnyatā].”¹²

The Buddha uses the Pāli word *suññata* in just a few places in the Pāli Canon, but for Nāgārjuna and his fellow Madhyamikas the word took on a new importance. For them

¹⁰ *The Eternal Legacy*, by Sangharakshita, p135

¹¹ *A Survey of Buddhism*, by Sangharakshita, p341

¹² *Madhyamaka-kārikā* Ch24:18

śūnyatā combines both of the implications of the Buddha’s teaching of *pratītya samutpāda* that we looked at last week – *anātman*, or the lack of self-nature in phenomena, and the inadequacy of words and concepts to describe the nature of things. We will look at each of these two aspects of *śūnyatā* in turn, to explore how Nāgārjuna and his fellow Madhyamikas – as the followers of the Madhyamaka are called – developed and unfolded these original teachings of the Buddha.

Śūnyatā as lack of self- nature

For Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamikas one important reason that all things are said to be *śūnya*, or empty, is because they lack a self, and they did an important service for the Dharma by clarifying exactly what was meant by this. After all, a reasonable response to the statement that, “All things lack a self.” is to ask what, exactly, we mean by a ‘self’.

The Madhyamikas reasoned that to have what we can really call a self, a phenomenon or thing must have its own defining characteristics, its own innate quality. It should have ‘own-nature’, ‘own-being’ or *svabhāva* in Sanskrit. *Svabhāva* could perhaps be translated as ‘essence’. For something to have ‘own-being’, its qualities must be entirely its own, rather than resulting from other things. In other words they must be innate to the thing itself, and independent of the other things it is in relationship with. To take a trivial example as an illustration: if Fred is good natured with his friends, but angry and irritable with his parents, neither his good nature nor his irritability can be said to really belong intrinsically to Fred. Neither quality is inherent in Fred’s essence or ‘own-nature’, because Fred might be either at different times.

The Madhyamikas also argued that for a thing to have *svabhāva* or ‘own-being’, its characteristics must stay the same – really this is just another way of saying what we have already said. Fred is with his friends and his parents at different times, so sometimes he is angry, and later he is sweet. Again neither seems to be part of Fred’s own essential nature, which surely would not change - if he had one.

The Madhyamikas then went on to show that nothing in conditioned existence can possibly have *svabhāva*, or ‘own-nature’, so that nothing can have a self – at least of the sort they had defined. This of course follows inexorably from the Buddha’s teaching of *pratītya samutpāda* and the Three *Lakṣaṇas*. All things depend on a host of conditions for their existence, and – like Fred – their characteristics are influenced by the conditions they are in. Hence their qualities are not their own, and therefore they have no self as defined by Nāgārjuna. And of course all things are also impermanent, their qualities and attributes change over time, so that again these cannot be an inherent and essential part of the thing itself. Again their characteristics cannot be part of any *svabhāva*, or own-nature, so from this point of view also, things do not really have a self.

It could be argued that what Nāgārjuna and the Madhyamikas did here was simply to define a self in a way that guaranteed that nothing could be said to have one. This may be true, but at least we now know what we mean when we say that all things lack a self. We mean very precisely that nothing has an innate, independent self, which is not influenced by the things and events around it. And we mean that nothing has a fixed, unchanging self, which stays the same forever. Things and people may still have a self that is brought into being, supported and modified by conditions; and they may still have a self that changes over time. But they do not have an independent, unchanging self.

As well as defining what we mean by lack of self, Nāgārjuna and his fellow Madhyamikas also produced some powerful logical arguments to help us to see that our usual idea of a self is a mere fiction. One such argument uses the technique of analysing things into their separate parts, and then asking us to find the self among these parts – which we saw that the Buddha also used. An example of how the Madhyamikas developed this technique can be found in Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Śāntideva was a follower of the Madhyamaka philosophy, and in the condensed version of his great work used in the Dharma training Course, the argument that we human beings lack a self runs as follows. First he deals with the body:

“The teeth, hair or nails are not ‘I’, nor are the bones, blood, mucus, pus or lymph. Marrow is not ‘I’, not are the sweat, fat, entrails, excrement or urine. The flesh is not ‘I’, nor the sinews, nor any of the changing elements that make up in the body. Even these constituents can be analysed down to atoms, and then these atoms too can be broken down, until we are just left with empty space. The body is not in its parts, nor does it exist separately from its parts. Who, analysing the body like this, would take delight in a form that is like a dream?”¹³

Then he deals with the mind:

“The past mind and the future mind can't be ‘I’, because they don't exist. But if the present mind is ‘I’, then the so-called ‘self’ vanishes as soon as the present moment of consciousness has passed. In fact the sense of a continuous ‘self’ is an illusion caused by memory – what happened earlier in time is remembered by what arose later, but this does not mean that the earlier and later ‘selves’ are the same.”¹⁴

Apparently neither the body nor the mind can be a self. So where is it? It cannot exist! Śāntideva illustrates his argument by the analogy of the trunk of a banana tree. What we think of as the trunk of a banana tree is in fact just a collection of leaf-sheaths

¹³ From the condensed text used in week 8 of the Dharma Training Course module on the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*

¹⁴ *Ibid*

wrapped around each other. If you hunt for the heartwood of the trunk by breaking off the leaves, you are left with empty space.

Śūnyatā as the inconceivability of things

The other important aspect of the Madhyamaka idea of *śūnyatā*, which is closely related to absence of self-nature, is that the phenomena of the world, and the nature of reality itself, cannot be described in words or captured and explained by our concepts. The nature of things cannot be conceived by the mind - that is, we cannot form a concept of them that captures their reality – so they are literally inconceivable. Not only are all things empty of self-nature, but all our ideas about them are empty of absolute truth.

We saw last week that the inadequacy of language to describe reality seems to be implied by the Buddha's vision of *pratītya samutpāda*. The structure of language takes for granted that the world consists of a collection of separate things we can name, which have certain qualities, and which act on each other in fairly simple ways. This simplification of the world is very useful for practical purposes, but it ignores some important facts about reality – namely *pratītya samutpāda* and the *lakṣaṇas*. Because the structure of language does not reflect reality, language cannot fully convey the nature of things, and the ideas about the world that we express in language are all, to some degree, false and misleading. So we saw that the Buddha refused to answer certain questions, because any answer he could give would be out of tune with reality. We also saw that he described the sort of views and opinions that can be expressed in words as 'fetters.'

Nāgārjuna took this idea and explored it to the full. He claimed that any viewpoint about the world expressed in language could be refuted using logical arguments that are acceptable to the person who holds it, and he applied his method to many of the philosophical views that were around at his time. In doing this he used types of formal logic that may not always seem obvious to us, and we do not have the space here to explore his technique. But within the rules of logic accepted by himself and his opponents, he showed that any view about the world can be reduced to absurdity.

We do not have to know about Nāgārjuna's logical techniques to see the point of what he is saying, and to see that it makes sense. Using words to show the absurdity of reasoning with words, he shows that words like cause and effect, mind and body, self and other, existence and non-existence, all point to ideas in our minds - mere mental constructions - and not to anything that has absolute reality. His analysis therefore solves the puzzle of why the Buddha refused to say whether the mind and body were the same or different, and why he would not say whether he would exist or not exist after death. And if cause and effect are just mental constructions we impose on reality, then we can see why Śāriputra used the analogy of two sheaves of reeds leaning on each other to illustrate the relationship between the links in the *nidāna*

chain: neither one of any pair of links is really the cause or the effect – they arise together.

Nāgārjuna claimed to have no view of his own – his purpose was purely to show that all the views that anybody else could come up with were riddled with inconsistencies. For Nāgārjuna all our views about the world are based on *vikalpa* and *prapañca*, or ‘false discrimination’ and ‘mental proliferation’. *Vikalpa* leads us to divide the process of *pratītya samutpāda* up into arbitrary parts, which we give names – which some Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras call ‘mere play-words.’ We then assume that these play-words point to something real, with their own inherent qualities that are either desirable or undesirable. And we then reason on this basis – *prapañca* – building completely false conceptual constructions, mere castles in the air, based on our arbitrary entities and their imaginary qualities. And then, to cap it all, we get lost in this world of verbal fictions and mental constructs, experiencing craving for the imagined qualities of this or that car, computer, shirt, or person, or getting anxious and upset about such imaginary things as success, fashionability, reputation, approval, security, wealth, fairness, our rights, and other people’s wrongs. And meanwhile, while we are living in this world of mental proliferation in our heads, we forget to experience the miraculous, beautiful reality that is there in front of our noses. Nāgārjuna’s deconstruction of our imaginary world of concepts can be like the sword of wisdom, cutting away the layers of *prapañca* to allow us to get back to what is real. We can use it to get back to experiencing the world as it is – in the words of the Buddha to the ascetic Bahiya, we can use it to experience:

*“In the seen, only the seen. In the heard, only the heard. In the imagined, only the imagined.”*¹⁵

We could liken our ideas about the world to maps that we use to find our way around. They are useful for practical purposes, but they can never really convey the reality they represent. If we walk round Paris, say, focussing our attention on our map of the city rather than the reality, we will miss everything that makes our visit worthwhile – the actual sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the city. In the same way, if we go through life with our attention focussed on our maps of reality – our ideas about it – rather than on reality itself, we can never see things as they are.

Even the Dharma is empty!

Nāgārjuna applied his technique for deconstructing all views to our commonsense view of the world, and to the main philosophical and religious views of his time. But he did not stop there. He even applied his technique to the concepts that Buddhism uses to communicate the Dharma, deconstructing ideas like the Four Noble Truths, the Five Skandhas, the *kleśas*, Nirvana, and even *pratītya samutpāda* itself. To take one example, the skandhas such as form and feeling do not exist in their own right, as

¹⁵ *Udāna 1.10*

things-in-themselves, separate from other things, any more than any other element of the world. They are also arbitrary categorisations based on *vikalpa*, mere play-words. We could easily think of other ways of dividing up our experience, and indeed both the Buddha and later Buddhists did this. So the skandhas are just labels that do not point to anything with absolute existence. And consequently any theories or reflections based on the skandhas are just further examples of imaginary conceptual constructions – they are just more castles-in-the-air. Nāgārjuna also pointed out that words like wisdom, faith, or purity, which are part of the way we think about the spiritual path, do not point to qualities that exist in their own right, because any meaning that they have is completely relative, and depends on comparison with their opposite. To quote Nāgārjuna on purity and impurity, as just one example:

*“Impurity cannot exist without being mutually dependent on purity and,... in turn purity exists only as related to impurity. Therefore purity as such is not possible.”*¹⁶

Nāgārjuna’s most devastating attack against literalism in Buddhism was reserved for the dharma theory we discussed last week. We saw that the Buddha used the idea of the skandhas as a reflection to help people deconstruct their idea of having a fixed self. We also saw that later Buddhists refined this idea, dividing our experience into many ‘dharmas’, or constituents of existence. Reflecting on our ‘self’ as being a temporary, changing conglomeration of such momentary impersonal dharmas, which flash into existence and then vanish immediately, could be a powerful way of changing the way we see ourselves, doing away with the idea of a self. But over time, as Buddhism lost touch with its original inspiration and became more and more bogged down in literalism and scholarship, the dharma theory stopped being a tool to help us experience a glimpse of anātman, and become an end in itself. The arbitrary lists of dharmas took on their own importance. It was argued that the dharmas were a real description of the way things are, and that each of the dharmas had its own essential quality or *svabhāva*. Even if the things and beings that make up our commonsense map of the world did not have *svabhāva*, the dharmas did have such ‘own nature’.

For Nāgārjuna this idea that the dharmas had *svabhāva* and provided a real picture of reality was a nonsense. The division of our experience into dharmas was just another example of *vikalpa* – useful if we see through it to the reality beyond, but poisonous otherwise. Clearly the lists of dharmas are arbitrary – after all, different schools had different numbers of dharmas, and divided up experience in slightly different ways. And most of the dharmas are just relative qualities that depend on their opposites for existence, so they have no absolute existence of their own, as we saw is the case for purity and impurity. Although the dharma theory may help us to see the truth of anātman as it relates to ourselves, it does not go the whole way. If we live in a world as seen through the lens of the skandhas or the dharma theory we will still be living in

¹⁶ Quoted in *The Great Way*, by Eric Cheetham, p.178

a conceptually constructed world. We will be seeing an idea about reality, rather than reality itself. To see the world as it is, we need to see not only that we ourselves lack self-nature, but also that the dharmas lack self-nature – there is no self-nature to be found anywhere. Mahāyāna Buddhists adopted this idea of *dharmā-nairātmya* – the absence of self in dharmas – as a feature of their movement that distinguished them from the more literalistic followers of the so-called Hīnayāna, who accepted only the more limited *pudgala-nairātmya*, or absence of self in persons.

Nāgārjuna even turned his attention to *pratītya samutpāda* itself - or at least to the naive and literalistic interpretation of it as mere cause-and-effect. Nāgārjuna argued that our usual ideas of one thing causing or producing another do not reflect anything real. His argument runs something like this:

Take the case in which we usually think that A gives rise to B. There are two possibilities about the relationship between A and B, as follows:

1. A and B are not really separate.
2. A and B are separate and independent.

In the first case we cannot really say that A gives rise to B, because they are both just different aspects of the same thing. In the second case, if A and B are separate things they each have a distinct ‘own-being’ or *svabhāva*. However if B is caused by A it is not independent – its existence depends on A – therefore it cannot have *svabhāva*. As we saw earlier, for something to exist as a thing-in-itself, its existence and its qualities must be innate, and not dependent on something else. So the idea that one independent thing could give rise to another is absurd. Nāgārjuna summed this argument up as follows:

“Certainly a oneness of cause and product is not possible at all. Nor is a difference of cause and product possible at all.”

In other words, if the cause and the effect are interdependent aspects of the same phenomenon – ‘a oneness’ – then there is no real cause and effect; while if the effect is independent of the cause – ‘a difference’ – the idea that it is caused by something else contradicts the very idea of its independence.

As Sangharakshita says in *his Survey of Buddhism*:

*“Nāgārjuna does not shrink from the conclusion that if causation is unreal the *pratītya samutpāda* is also unreal... The Hīnayānists had interpreted the Buddha’s Conditioned Co-production as the temporal sequence... of ultimately real entities between which real causal relations obtained. In the interests of the correct interpretation of the Dharma Nāgārjuna showed that the *pratītya samutpāda* taught not a real causal relation between entities but their mutual*

dependence, hence their lack of independent selfhood, and that it consisted... not of realities, as the Hīnayānists thought, but only of appearances. Consisting as it did entirely of appearances the pratītya samutpāda was itself merely an appearance... it could not be said to exist, or not exist, or both, or neither. Consequently it was to be equated with śūnyatā. In this way did the dialectic of Nāgārjuna, by exposing the contradictions inherent in the Buddhist doctrines themselves when taken literally, serve as a reminder of the supremely important fact that these doctrines... possessed not absolute but only relative reality, and were not ends in themselves, but only means to an end... By shattering the hard shell of literalism in which Buddhism was then imprisoned Nāgārjuna not only saved it from suffocation and probable death, but also gave it room for future development.”¹⁷

The vision of śūnyatā...

Emptiness is a very bad word for *śūnyatā* – it carries too many negative connotations to do justice to the idea. We might do better to translate *śūnyatā* as ‘The Mystery’, because it should remind us that we do not really understand existence, and point us towards the wonder of the world we live in, which our small commonsense ideas usually hide. To say, ‘all things are The Mystery’ probably gets us closer to the intended effect than the apparently nihilistic ‘all things are Emptiness.’ The vision of *śūnyatā* is one of connectedness, openness, and infinite potential – so that perhaps even ‘fullness’ would be a better translation than emptiness. The historical Buddha himself – who was not averse to a joke – seems to make this point in his *Lesser Sutra on Emptiness*, when he tells Ananda that “..through dwelling on emptiness I now experience abundance.”

The Madhyamaka vision, that sees that all things are *śūnyatā* because they lack a fixed nature and cannot be grasped by our intellect, could liberate us from our mind-made prisons into a world of wonder, mystery, and infinite potential. A correct vision of *śūnyatā* could free us into the world of reality-as-it-is, the world that cannot be described, so that the Prajñā Pāramitā sutras had to invent a nonsense word to point to the inconceivable, magical quality of everything within it – ‘Suchness’, or just the way things are. In the words of S Beyer:

“The metaphysics of the Prajñā-Pāramitā is in fact the metaphysics of the vision and the dream: a universe of glittering and quicksilver change is precisely one that can only be described as empty. The vision and the dream become the tools we use to dismantle the hard categories that we impose on reality, to reveal the eternal flowing possibility in which the Bodhisattva lives.”¹⁸

¹⁷ *A Survey of Buddhism*, by Sangharakshita, p.347

¹⁸ Quoted in *Mahayana Buddhism*, by Paul Williams, p.52

...and the dangers

But although the intention of the Madhyamaka philosophy is to free us from what William Blake calls our ‘mind-forged manacles’ into such a universe of ‘eternal flowing possibility’, it could have exactly the opposite effect. Nāgārjuna himself recognised that his teachings could be very dangerous to the spiritually immature; in his words:

“A wrongly conceived śūnyatā can ruin a slow-witted person... It is like a badly seized snake, or a wrongly executed spell.”¹⁹

The two main dangers of what Nāgārjuna calls a “slow-witted” understanding of the Madhyamaka philosophy are:

- The danger of nihilism – if we use Nāgārjuna’s logic to deconstruct the ethical and spiritual values that give life meaning, so that we end up in a meaningless, nihilistic universe.
- The danger of jumping off the raft of the Dharma before we have reached the further shore – if Nāgārjuna’s critique of a literalistic approach to the teachings of Buddhism undermines our commitment to Buddhist practices and ‘right views’, such as the precepts, the Eightfold Path and so on.

The danger of nihilism

Both the Madhyamaka philosophy and the Dharma itself are often referred to as the ‘Middle Way’, and one important aspect of this is that they offer a middle way between eternalism and nihilism. Eternalism is the belief in eternal unchanging entities, especially God and an eternal soul. Eternalists believe in some form of continued existence after death, and accept that there are higher truths and values which are always valid. The *Longman Dictionary* defines nihilism as: ‘a view that rejects all values and beliefs as meaningless and unfounded’, and: ‘a doctrine that rejects any basis for truth and moral values.’ Nihilists do not believe in an eternal God or soul, and hold that the consciousness ceases at death.

It is easy to see why Nāgārjuna was accused of nihilism in his own day, and why he himself recognised that his philosophy carried the danger of nihilism for those who grasped it wrongly. His argument that any philosophical viewpoint can logically be shown to be contradictory would seem to reject any basis for truth or moral values, and force us to reject ‘all values and beliefs as meaningless and unfounded’. If Nāgārjuna had been writing in the context of the Western academic tradition, that is what his teachings would have meant. In the Western academic tradition, the truth is supposed to be arrived at by reasoning and logic, and a teaching that tells us that

¹⁹ Quoted in *The Great Way*, by Eric Cheetham, p.198

reasoning and logic cannot arrive at the truth would indeed mean that there is no truth we can arrive at, and that any values we adopted were therefore purely arbitrary. But Nāgārjuna was not writing in the Western tradition, he was writing in the Buddhist tradition, and in Buddhism intellectual reasoning and logical argument are not seen as the way we arrive at ultimate truth. According to the Dharma the way we arrive at the ultimate truth is by a direct meditative experience of the nature of things – by Transcendental Insight, and by the echo of Transcendental Insight that we call *śraddhā*. As we saw last week, the Buddha himself said that his Insight was ‘beyond logic’, and what Nāgārjuna is doing is reminding us of this fact, in case we are tempted to think that we can understand what Enlightenment means by mere reason, without having the direct spiritual experience that it emerges from. According to Buddhism our views about the world can never be seen as being absolutely true, so the important question is whether or not they are helpful for the spiritual life – whether they will help us to become the sort of being who can eventually experience the truth directly.

Nāgārjuna was not rejecting all values – as we shall see he strongly upheld the ordinary teachings of Buddhism. And we can get an idea of how his ideas were used in practice from the writing of a distinguished Madhyamaka such as Śāntideva – with his highly devotional attitude and his uncompromising commitment to the Bodhisattva Ideal, it is difficult to imagine a less nihilistic approach to life!

Madhyamaka and materialism

Many of Nāgārjuna’s contemporaries would have been strongly influenced by the eternalism of Hinduism, and needed to be reminded of the other side of the coin to get back to the Middle Way. But today most educated people in the West have been strongly influenced by materialism, which is a fundamentally nihilistic worldview, so we need to undermine our nihilism rather than our eternalism. For us the danger of interpreting Nāgārjuna in a nihilistic way is especially strong.

In the philosophical sense, materialism is the belief that matter is what is primary in the universe, and that matter, when arranged to form a brain, gives rise to consciousness as a sort of accidental by-product. Materialism goes along with a fundamentally nihilistic worldview, because in a random world of dead matter, higher spiritual or ethical values can have no real basis. According to the materialist view the consciousness must end forever with the death of the body. Most of us have been strongly conditioned to see the world through the lens of materialism, because it dominates our educational systems. We may not be consciously aware of our materialistic views, and if we are practicing the Dharma we will also have some spiritual or ethical values that are incompatible with materialism, but which we hold anyway, probably without reflecting on the contradiction.

Those of us who are self-declared materialists, rather than just being unconsciously conditioned to see things in a materialistic way, are often strongly attracted to the Madhyamaka philosophy, because it deconstructs the ethical and spiritual values which a materialist will see no basis for. However the real value of Nāgārjuna's approach is that it allows us to see through our own worldview, not that of others. And if we are materialists it is important that we apply the Madhyamaka critique to our own way of seeing things, because the nihilism that goes along with materialism is destructive to the spiritual life. Nāgārjuna himself has said that it is better to have an eternalist viewpoint 'as large as Mount Meru' than to be a nihilist who does not believe in spiritual values. As Sangharakshita says in his *Survey*:

*"Much less can we agree that one who refuses to accept the existence of a transcendental Principle, whether in the Buddhist sense or any other, can ever hope to understand a doctrine whose sole concern is with the realization of such a principle."*²⁰

He goes on to say that someone who believes in God might have a better chance of understanding the Dharma than a sceptical nihilist!

So we must beware of combining Madhyamaka with materialism, or we will get the worst of both worlds. For many of us the most useful thing we can do with Nāgārjuna's ideas is to apply them to the basically materialist worldview that we have been conditioned to accept. And it is easy to show that materialism is as absurd as any other view. The very word 'matter' is after all just an abstraction, another example of vikalpa, our tendency to divide experience up into arbitrary categories, which we then start to believe have some absolute existence. We might ask ourselves whether we have ever experienced this 'matter' as something separate from our awareness – which of course we have not. And what meaning does it have to abstract one aspect of experience from all the others, and pretend that it can exist on its own, like one side of a coin without the other? Clearly the 'matter' which the view of materialism sees as fundamental to the universe is just another play-word. And if, as Nāgārjuna claims to show, our idea of cause and effect is just another example of an imaginary mental construction, what meaning can it have to say that matter, in the form of a brain, somehow 'causes' consciousness? We might just as well say that consciousness causes the brain, or better, that the two 'lean on each other' like sheaves of reeds, as we are told that consciousness and name-and-form do in the *nidāna* chain.

Madhyamaka and the Dharma – the 'Two Truths'

We have seen that Nāgārjuna's deconstruction of all views even extended to the basic ideas of the Dharma. His intention in doing this was to combat the literalism that had infected Buddhism, and to get back to the Buddha's original meaning. The Buddha did not see the verbal teachings of the Dharma as the absolute truth – he described

²⁰ *A Survey of Buddhism*, by Sangharakshita, p.36

them as a raft to get us to the other shore, and told us we should leave the raft behind when we got there. In Nāgārjuna's time there seem to have been many people struggling to carry the raft up the muddy slopes of the further bank when they should be leaving it behind. Or worse, there seem to have been many people making a career of furnishing and decorating the raft while it was still firmly tied to the hither shore, with no intention of ever casting off. Nāgārjuna's teachings about the emptiness of the Dharma were intended for these people, to help them see the raft for what it is, and to remind them of its purpose. But if we take his teaching to mean that the raft is worthless, and jump off in midstream, we will be showing ourselves to be, as Nāgārjuna puts it, one of the 'slow-witted' people whom a wrong understanding of śūnyatā can ruin.

Nāgārjuna seems to have been well aware of this danger. To counter it he distinguished two levels of truth, the absolute truth, and the relative or conventional truth. The absolute truth is the indescribable Way-Things-Are, which cannot be described in words or concepts, and cannot be arrived at by reasoning. The relative truth is the map of the world provided by the words and concepts we use to describe and explain it. The teachings of Buddhism are a particularly positive example of relative truth. They give us an unusually accurate and helpful description of reality, which we need as a guide in the same way that we need a trustworthy map to find our way around a strange city. In Nāgārjuna's words:

*"The teaching of the Dharma by the various Buddhas is based on the Two Truths: the relative truth and the absolute truth. Those who do not know the distinction between these two truths cannot understand the profound nature of the Buddha's teaching. Without relying on everyday common practices [relative truths] the absolute truth cannot be expressed."*²¹

This teaching makes sense of the apparent paradox mentioned last week – that the Buddha both stressed the need for Right View, and also said that a Buddha abandons all views. To return to the metaphor of views as maps, we need an accurate map to find the Arc de Triomphe, say, but when we get there we should look at the monument, and not at the map.

So at our stage of the path we must not abandon the relative truth of the teachings of Buddhism. Relative truth is also true – in a way! In the words of Lex Hixon in his book *The Mother of the Buddhas*:

"This paradox means that we must uphold, protect and even exalt... relative structures, beings and events, no matter how insubstantial they are from the standpoint of absolute truth. Our own reincarnational careers as continuous mind streams, and the moral imperative of universal compassion... are founded not on some form of illusory existence. In fact, because it is the

²¹ Quoted in *The Great Way*, by Eric Cheetham, p.192

proper sphere of compassionate action, the relative becomes more prominent, more spiritually charged, than the absolute.”²²

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. What do you experience when you chant the Heart Sutra – one of the Prajñā Pāramitā sutras - in a pūjā? Do you understand what it is saying? If not, do you think it can still communicate something worthwhile to you?
2. What, in your own words, is the connection between pratītya samutpāda and śūnyatā?
3. Do you think you have a self? What sort of a self might you have, and what sort don't you have?
4. Which of the following do you think has the greatest claim to being a ‘thing-in-itself’:
 - A cell in your body.
 - The organ it is part of and depends on – say your liver.
 - Your whole body which your liver is part of and depends on.
 - The mind-body complex that your body is part of and depends on.
 - The society and ecosystem that your mind-body is part of and depends on?
5. Why, in your own words, do the *skandhas* belong to the realm of relative, and not absolute truth? Can you explain why some other Buddhist teaching of your own choice is also relative truth?
6. Do you think you are more in danger of taking the teachings of Buddhism too literally, or of practicing them too half-heartedly?
7. Do you tend more towards nihilism or eternalism? What could you do to counteract this, and to regain the middle way?

²² *Mother of the Buddhas – Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra, by Lex Hilton, p.10*

Week 3: The Prajñā-Pāramitā Sūtras

Introduction

Over the next two weeks we will look at some excerpts from the Prajñā-Pāramitā sūtras. Prajñā-Pāramitā is usually translated as ‘The Perfection of Wisdom’. Prajñā means wisdom. *Pārama* means ‘supreme’, and because of this Pāramitā is often translated as perfect, or perfection. But pāramitā is sometimes also explained as ‘pāram’ + ‘itā’, ‘gone to the beyond’, indicating its transcendental nature. So Prajñā-Pāramitā could also be translated as ‘the wisdom that has gone beyond’.

This wisdom that has gone beyond, or transcendental wisdom, is what the Prajñā-Pāramitā sūtras are all about. It is the wisdom that goes beyond words and concepts, beyond the rational mind, beyond our usual way of seeing the world, beyond limits. The Perfection of Wisdom texts are designed to cut through our concepts, to cut through any sense we have of knowing what the world is about, and therefore to cut through the limits we place on ourselves and the world. It is sometimes said that they are aimed at people of a predominantly intellectual type, whose approach to the spiritual life is through thinking, and who may fall into the trap of mistaking their concepts about reality for reality itself. However we all have plenty of concepts about reality that stop us seeing clearly, whether we know it or not, and whether we think of ourselves as ‘intellectual’ or not. The Prajñā-Pāramitā sūtras certainly ask us to think, but they are not particularly intellectual – in fact they are highly devotional, and use images and metaphors to get their point across perhaps more than they use logical argument.

The Prajñā-Pāramitā literature is designed to help the rational mind to go beyond the limits of the rational mind, and to convince it that reality is greater and more mysterious than its concepts. Its aim is not to make us abandon logic and reason, but to guide us towards a vision of reality that includes reason, but goes beyond it. We can shut down our thinking faculty by taking a drug, drinking many pints of beer, or incurring brain damage - but this does not make us Enlightened. We need to use our intellect to the fullest to see that our thinking is based on unconscious concepts we have been conditioned to accept. This means becoming more critical and discerning in the way we think, not descending into mindlessness.

The Prajñā-Pāramitā texts do not always make easy reading. Without some explanation they can seem impenetrable. So you need to have read, reflected on, and understood last week’s text on the Madhyamaka philosophy before you tackle this material. (A module called ‘The Nature of Existence 2’ is inevitably going to ask you to do some reflection!) But even if you have read and understood what has been said in the last two sessions, the material we will be looking at may at times seem baffling and irritating – although it may also communicate something deep but not easily definable. These texts are *meant* to baffle the intellect, and, as Edward Conze has pointed out, if they do not irritate us they are not doing their job. Try to remember

that Mahāyāna Buddhism sees patience in the face of the sometimes baffling nature of the Dharma as an essential quality.

We will look at extracts from the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras chosen to give a glimpse of some of the main topics that these explore, under the following headings:

1. The place of faith and devotion.
2. Śūnyatā.
3. Similes and analogies.
4. Absolute and relative truth.
5. Spiritual attainments.
6. ‘Suchness’ and the nature of the Buddha.

We will explore the first three of these topics this week, and the remaining three next week.

Topic 1 – the role of śraddhā and devotion

Extract 1: from the Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā²³

*“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!”*

Thus begins what, according to Sangharakshita, might be the oldest and original Prajñā-Pāramitā text.

- *Question:* Why might the whole Prajñā-Pāramitā tradition begin by asking us to call forth love, respect and faith? What difference might this make to the effect the teachings have on us?

Extract 2: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines²⁴

“The Buddha: ‘It is through the might of the Buddhas, of the Tathāgatas, that the Bodhisattvas study the Perfection of Wisdom, and that they make progress in training in Suchness. For it is in the nature of things that the Buddhas, who stand, hold and maintain themselves in immeasurable and incalculable world-

²³ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr. E Conze, p.9

²⁴ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr. E Conze, pp.158-159

systems, should bring to mind and uphold everyone who teaches and studies this perfection of wisdom. The Buddhas will bring them to mind and assist them. And it is quite impossible to cause an obstacle to someone who has been brought to mind and upheld by the Buddhas.'

Śāriputra: 'It is through the Buddhas' might, sustaining power and grace that Bodhisattvas study this deep perfection of wisdom, and progressively train in Suchness?'

The Buddha: 'So it is Śāriputra. They are... sustained and seen by the Tathāgata, and the Tathāgata beholds them with his Buddha-eye.'

- *Question:* Do you think that anyone who saw the Perfection of Wisdom in this way would be more in danger of falling into the extremes of nihilism, or of eternalism?
- *Question:* Do you find this an inspiring idea, or an example of Buddhism sliding into irrational religiosity? Can you relate your response to your tendency to either eternalism or nihilism?

Topic 2 – Śūnyatā

Extract 3: from the Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā²⁵

*“Both I and Mine as dharmas are unreal and empty.
By his own self has the fool become entangled in space.
As someone who suspects he has been poisoned
May well be struck down, although no poison has got into his stomach,
Just so the fool who has admitted into himself [the notions of] I and Mine
Is forced by that unreal notion to undergo birth and death again and again.
Those who have these notions are defiled.
Those who have no thought of I and Mine are purified.
But there is no-one who is defiled, and no-one who is cleansed.”*

The last line is the sort of paradox that can be created by switching between the absolute and relative levels of truth – which the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras delight in.

- *Question:* Which of the two aspects of śūnyatā mentioned last week does this extract relate to?
- *Question:* How do you respond to the analogies used here: the idea that we get tangled up in space (or the sky – the Sanskrit word is the same), and the idea

²⁵ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary, tr. E Conze, p.51-51*

that our situation is like that of someone who gets ill because they just *think* they have taken poison? Do these help you to get a feel for what is being said?

Extract 4: from the Heart Sutra²⁶

The Holy Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was coursing in the deep wisdom that has gone beyond. He looked down from on high and saw only the five skandhas, and that they were empty of own-nature.

Here, Śāriputra, form is emptiness

And that emptiness is form.

Form does not differ from emptiness,

Emptiness does not differ from form.

These are some of the most famous lines in all Buddhist literature. They deserve some reflection.

- *Question:* What does the fact that Avalokiteśvara saw *only* the five skandhas mean?
- *Question:* Why is the fact that the skandhas are empty of own-nature important?
- *Question:* Why is it significant that these words are addressed to Śāriputra?
- *Question:* What does ‘form’ stand for in the phrase ‘form is emptiness’?
- *Question:* Why is it important, not only that ‘form is emptiness’, but also that ‘emptiness is form’, and does not differ from it? (Or, as the version we chant in the pūjā has it, that emptiness is *only* form?).

Extract 5: from The Inconceivable State of Buddhahood, in the Ratnakūṭa collection²⁷

“Mañjuśrī said, ‘The five skandhas constitute what we call the mundane world... The basic nature of the five skandhas is emptiness. If that nature is emptiness, there is neither ‘I’ nor “mine’. If there is neither ‘I’ nor ‘mine’ there is no duality, there is neither grasping nor abandoning. If there is neither grasping nor abandoning, there is no attachment. Thus, free from attachment, he transcends the mundane world.’ ”

²⁶ *Buddhist Wisdom*, by E Conze, pp.82-86 (slightly rephrased)

²⁷ *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras*, tr Garma C. C. Chang, p.32

This extract tells us one of the reasons that it is important to see mundane things as empty – because then we will free ourselves from attachment to them. In fact, in this extract, this seems to be given more importance than seeing anātman or non-duality!

- *Question:* Do the Prajñā-Pāramitā extracts we have been looking at give you a sense of the possibility or liberation from our normal worldly concerns – or not?

Extract 6: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines²⁸

“[Enlightened beings do not view the world through the framework of the skandhas.] But just this non-viewing of the skandhas is the viewing of the world. That is the way in which the world is seen by the Tathāgata.

And how does perfect wisdom show up the world for what it is? She shows that the world is empty, unthinkable, calmly quiet, and pure in itself.”

This extract tells us why it is important, at the highest levels of the Path, to see the unreality of the skandhas. If we see the world through the lens of the skandhas, or of any other any system, such as the dharma theory of the Abhidharma, we do not see the world as it is, we see our ideas about it – hence, “just this non-viewing of the skandhas is the viewing of the world.”

However we need to see this statement in its context: it is addressed to experienced practitioners who have already used the meditation on the skandhas to deconstruct their idea of a world consisting of fixed ‘selves’ and ‘things’, and now need to take the final step of leaving behind the raft that got them to where they are. To see the world as consisting of the five skandhas could be a considerable step forward from seeing it in our usual commonsense way as consisting of ‘selves’ and ‘things’.

The extract hints at the fact that when we drop our ideas about the world and see things as they are, we do not see a cold or meaningless universe, but a mysterious and beautiful one: “...unthinkable, calmly quiet, and pure in itself.” This point is taken further in the next extract.

- *Question:* Can you identify any of the conceptual frameworks through which you tend to view the world? Possible candidates might be political (e.g. socialism), social (e.g. egalitarianism), biological (e.g. Darwinism), psychological, or physical (e.g. materialism.) Can you accept that your preferred concepts, while useful in some areas, are merely relative truth, and in some ways distort reality?

²⁸ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr E Conze, p.179

Extract 7: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines²⁹

“The Buddha: ‘ “Deep”, Subhuti, that is a synonym for Emptiness, for the Signless, the Wishless...for Nirvana.’

Subhuti: ‘Is it a synonym only of these, or of all dharmas?’

The Buddha: ‘It is a synonym for all dharmas. For form and the other skandhas are deep. How is form deep? As deep as Suchness, so deep is form...’

Subhuti: ‘Of what is “immeasurable” a synonym?’

The Buddha: ‘Of Emptiness, of the Signless, the Wishless.’

Subhuti: ‘Only of these and not of the other dharmas?’

The Buddha: ‘Have I not described all dharmas as “empty”? And that which is emptiness, that is also immeasurableness. Therefore no difference can be apprehended between these dharmas. As mere words have they been described by the Tathāgata.’

Subhuti: ‘It is wonderful how the Tathāgata has shown the true nature of these dharmas, and yet one cannot properly talk about the nature of these dharmas.’

The Buddha: ‘So it is, for one cannot properly express the emptiness of dharmas in words.’

The word ‘*dharmas*’ is sometimes used in these sutras in a technical sense, to mean the supposedly fundamental elements of existence as described by the *Abhidharma*. But often it is used to mean something more like ‘things’ or ‘phenomena’, which are summed up by the skandhas. Although it is not precisely accurate, for the sake of understanding we could translate ‘all dharmas’ to ourselves as ‘all things’. So the sutra is saying in effect that all things are deep and immeasurable, profound and infinite, mysterious and beyond our comprehension.

This extract illustrates the fact that seeing the truth of *sūnyatā* leads to an experience of the indescribable mystery and wonder of all things, and not to a nihilistic, meaningless universe. Emptiness, the sutra tells us, far from being a negative quality, is a synonym for deep and immeasurable. This vision of all things as mysterious, wonderful and full of potential is something that opens up most fully in meditation, and neither the *Prajñā Pāramitā* literature nor the ideas of the *Madhyamaka* can have the desired spiritual effect unless they are combined with meditation and devotional practice.

²⁹ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr. E. Conze, pp.209-211

The mysterious, deep and immeasurable nature of things is inexpressible, so the sutra uses a nonsense word to describe it – ‘suchness’ (*tathāta*) or ‘the way things are’. Things are just ‘such’ – the way they are! We will come across the idea of suchness again later in this selection.

- *Question:* Have you ever had an inkling that the world is inexpressibly mysterious and ‘deep’? If so, in what circumstances did this occur? How could you create the conditions to experience this again, and to deepen this vision?
- *Question:* What are ‘Emptiness, the Signless, and the Wishless’? How are they related to *śūnyatā* and the lack of own-nature in things?
- *Question:* “No difference can be apprehended between these dharmas. As mere words have they been described by the Tathāgata.” Can you describe what this means in your own words?

Topic 3: Analogies and similes

*Extract 8: from the Diamond Sutra*³⁰

*“As stars, a fault of vision, as a lamp
A mock show, dew drops, or a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, or cloud
So should one view what is conditioned.”*

A ‘mock-show’ refers to a magical illusion, as when a magician makes his audience see something that does not exist. A more poetic but less literal translation of this famous verse is the following.

*“So you should view all of the fleeting worlds:
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud;
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.”*³¹

- *Questions:* In what ways are conditioned things like:
 - A star?
 - A lamp?
 - A magical illusion?
 - Dewdrops?

³⁰ *Buddhist Wisdom*, by E. Conze, p.69

³¹ *The Diamond Sutra*, tr. by Mu Soeng, p155, after A F Price

- A bubble?
- A lightning flash?
- A cloud?

Extract 9: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 18,000 Lines³²

“Form is like a mass of foam, it has no solidity, it is full of cracks and holes, and it has no substantial inner core. Feeling is like a bubble, which swiftly rises and swiftly disappears, and it has no durable subsistence. Perception is like a mirage. As in a mirage of water absolutely no water at all can be found (so there is nothing substantial in that which is perceived). Impulses are like the trunk of a plantain tree: when you strip off one leaf sheath after another, nothing remains, and you cannot lay hand on a core within. Consciousness is like a magical illusion, as when magically created soldiers, conjured up by a magician, are seen marching through the streets.”

This extract repeats many of the analogies used in the last one, but makes them more specific by relating them to particular skandhas. It also introduces some other similes that are very common – foam, a mirage, and the trunk of a banana tree.

- *Question:* Which of the analogies used in the last two extracts seem most evocative or meaningful to you?
- *Question:* Can you think of any other analogies that convey something of the lack of self-nature in things?
- *Question and exercise:* Do you think that this is a new, Mahāyāna way of seeing things, or can anything similar be found in the Pāli Canon? Try to find some similar teachings in the earlier texts. (Hint: a good place to start might be by searching for the word ‘foam’ – *pheṇa* in Pāli).

Extract 10: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines³³

“If a Bodhisattva even in his dreams sees that all dharmas are like a dream, then that should be known as the irreversible mark of an irreversible Bodhisattva... And immediately after he has woken up from his dream, he reflects, ‘Like a dream is all this that belongs to the triple world. And in that sense shall I teach about dharmas.’”

³² *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom*, E. Conze, p.96

³³ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr. Edward Conze, pp.227-228

This extract takes one particular analogy further – that our experience of the world is like a dream. This analogy is often invoked in Mahāyāna Buddhism, and seems particularly apt in view of the fact that the name Buddha means ‘one who is awake’ – and therefore one who sees dreams for what they are. We probably have all had the experience of waking up from a dream into another level of reality and being profoundly relieved that what we had been experiencing was not real. The dream analogy implies that we could awaken from our current experience to a higher level of reality in a similar way – and maybe with an even greater sense of release and liberation.

- *Question:* What similarities do you see between dream experience and the world as described by the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras?
- *Question:* Have you ever had the experience of lucid dreaming – knowing that you were dreaming while still in the dream state? If so, how did this feel? Can you imagine what it might be like to have a similar experience in waking life? Do you think this might be a bit like the experience of Insight?

Week 4: The Prajñā-Pāramitā Sūtras, Part 2

Topic 4 - Absolute and relative truth

*Extract 11: from the Diamond Sutra*³⁴

“The Buddha said to Subhuti, ‘All the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas, who undertake the practice of meditation, should cherish one thought only: “When I attain perfect wisdom, I will liberate all sentient beings in every realm of the universe...”

And yet although immeasurable, innumerable and unlimited beings have been liberated, truly no being has been liberated. Why? Because no Bodhisattva who is a true Bodhisattva entertains such concepts as a self, a person, a being, or a living soul. Thus there are no beings to be liberated, and no self to attain perfect wisdom.’ ”

As we have already pointed out, the Prajñā-Pāramitā sutras delight in creating paradoxes by switching between the absolute and relative levels of truth. The paradox created in this extract is one that crops up again and again, epitomising the apparent conflict between the merely relative truth of the Dharma – in this case expressed as the Bodhisattva Path - and the absolute truth of śūnyatā . The practitioner must somehow transcend this paradox, wholeheartedly working to save all beings, while at the same time seeing that no beings can really be said to exist. The implication of this for us is that to practice effectively we need to have what we might call ‘stereo vision’ – we need to keep both relative and absolute truth in view at the same time. We must not abandon the raft of the Dharma before we reach the other shore, but at the same time we must remember not to take it completely literally.

- *Question:* Why does a Bodhisattva entertain no such concept as a being?

*Extract 12: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines*³⁵

“Śāriputra: Is there then no attainment, is there no Nirvana?”

Subhuti: There is attainment, there is Nirvana, but not in the ultimate sense. It is by means of worldly conventional expressions that one conceives of attainment and Nirvana, of stream-entrants, and of all the other grades of achievement up to the Buddha – and not in the ultimate sense...

³⁴ *The Diamond Sutra*, by Mu Soeng, p.80

³⁵ *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom*, E. Conze, p.87

Śāriputra: And in the same way, also, do we differentiate the five realms of rebirth only by worldly conventional expression, and in the ultimate sense they do not exist?

Subhuti: So it is Śāriputra. Because in the ultimate sense there is neither karma nor karma-vipāka... neither defilement nor purification.”

This extract is even more explicit than the last – the teachings, practices, and grades of attainment talked about by the Buddhist tradition belong to the realm of conventional truth only, and have no reality in the ultimate, absolute sense.

- *Question:* Can you express in your own words what the sutra means by saying that the teachings of Buddhism are relative truth? Does this mean that they are not true?
- *Question:* Which do you think is more important for us to focus on – the relative truth of the teachings of Buddhism, or the absolute truth of *śūnyatā*?

Extracts 13³⁶ and 14³⁷: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8000 Lines

“Subhuti: ‘How should a Bodhisattva who is only just beginning stand in perfect wisdom, how train himself?’

The Buddha: ‘He should tend, love and honour the good friends [kalyana mitras, or spiritual friends]. His good friends are those who will instruct and admonish him in perfect wisdom, and will expound to him its meaning. They will expound it as follows: “Come here, son of good family, make endeavours in the six perfections.”’

Subhuti: ‘How should a Bodhisattva train, if he wants to go forth to full and perfect Enlightenment?’

The Buddha: ‘The Bodhisattva should adopt an even attitude towards all beings, with a mind that is friendly, well disposed, free from aversion, avoiding harm or hurt. He should treat others as if they were his own mother, father, son or daughter... He should abstain from all evil, give gifts, guard his morality, perfect himself in patience, exert vigour, enter into the dhyānas, achieve mastery over wisdom, survey conditioned co-production... and encourage others to do the same. In the same way he should stand in everything from meditation on the [four noble] truths to the stage when he realises that it is as a Bodhisattva that he will be saved. When he longs

³⁶ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr E. Conze, p.188

³⁷ *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr E. Conze, p.199, slightly rephrased.

eagerly for all that, and trains himself in it, then everything will be uncovered for him.’”

These extracts make it clear that, although the teachings of the Dharma have no more absolute reality than anything else that can be expressed in words, we still need to train ourselves wholeheartedly in the teachings and practices of Buddhism if we want to get anywhere. It is through these very practices – relative as they are - that the ultimate Perfect Wisdom will be ‘uncovered’ for us. Hence we are told to remember the importance of spiritual friendship – and told that our real spiritual friends will remind us to practice *all* the Six Perfections, not just wisdom. Then we are told to cultivate mettā, and again reminded to practice all of the Six Perfections – ethics, generosity, patience, effort, and meditation – and not just wisdom. Elsewhere in the same sutra the Buddha also recommends, among other things, the practice of the Brahma Vihāras, training in the Ten Precepts taken by Order Members, and teaching the Dharma to others as part of a practice of dāna. It is only when we have practised these things to the utmost that we will genuinely have the vision to see through them. Until then our understanding that the Dharma is only relative truth is just intellectual – just more play words and conceptual castles-in-the-air. The Buddha’s parable of the raft from the Pāli Canon makes the issue clear – until we reach the further shore we desperately need the raft, and should hang on to it tightly!

- *Question:* If the Perfection of Wisdom teachings do not make any practical difference to the way we practise, why do we bother with them?

Extract 15: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 25,000 Lines³⁸

“Śāriputra: ‘What is the worldly, and what is the supramundane perfection of generosity?’

Subhuti: ‘The worldly perfection of giving consists in this: The Bodhisattva gives liberally to all those who ask, while thinking in terms of real things. He thinks: “I give. That one receives. This is the gift. I renounce all my possessions without stint. I act as the Buddha commands. I practise the perfection of giving.” Tied by three things he gives a gift. Which three? A perception of self, a perception of others, a perception of the gift. The supramundane perfection of giving, on the other hand, consists of the threefold purity. What is the threefold purity? Here a Bodhisattva gives a gift, and he does not apprehend a self, a recipient, or a gift. Neither does he apprehend a reward of his giving. He surrenders that gift to all beings, but he apprehends neither beings nor self... That is called the supramundane perfection of giving.’

³⁸ *Selected Sayings from the Perfection of Wisdom, E Conze, pp.66-67*

All the other perfections are said to be based on the Perfection of Wisdom. They need to be performed with at least a hint of the open, spacious attitude of wisdom if they are to be truly Pāramitās, in the sense of ways to transcend the self. This extract illustrates the difference that the wisdom perspective makes to just one Pāramitā – that of dāna, or generosity.

- *Question:* Can you imagine the difference that practising dāna with the ‘supramundane’ perspective would make, compared to doing so with the worldly perspective?
- *Question:* Can you guess what the difference might be between the worldly and the supramundane practice of any of the other Perfections?

Topic 5 – Spiritual attainments

*Extract 16: from the Diamond Sutra*³⁹

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does a srotāpanna (stream-entrant) think, ‘I have entered the stream?’”

Subhuti said, “No, World-Honoured One, he does not. Why? Because while srotāpanna means ‘entering the stream’, there is no entering here.”...

“Subhuti, what do you think? Does an arhat think, ‘I have obtained arhatship?’”

Subhuti said, “No, World-Honoured One, he does not. Why? Because there is no dharma that can be called an arhat. If an arhat thinks, ‘I have obtained arhatship’, this means that he has the idea of an ego-self, a person, a living being, or a soul.

Although the Buddha has said that I am the foremost of those who have obtained the Samadhi of Detachment, that I am the foremost of those arhats who are liberated from unwholesome desires, I cherish no thought that I have obtained arhatship. If I did he would not have said of me, ‘Subhuti, who is the foremost of those who dwell in peaceful abiding, does not dwell anywhere, that is why he is called a dweller in peace.’”

Here is another of those paradoxes that the Perfection of Wisdom sutras love so much: if anyone thinks of themselves as a stream entrant or an arahant, they cannot be so. This may be difficult for us to understand, but we are told that it follows from the fact that those with real Insight no longer think of themselves as separate beings – he

³⁹ *The Diamond Sutra, Mu Soeng, p.101*

or she no longer thinks of him- or her ‘self’ at all. It also follows from the ideas in the last section about the merely relative truth of the Dharma. Reality cannot be cut up into parts or described in words, and this applies to the spiritual path as much as to anything else – so the stages of the path are as arbitrary as any other divisions of reality. Elsewhere in the Prajñā Pāramitā texts the Buddha says that someone with Insight does not see any dharma that could attain stream entry, and does not see any real dharma called stream entry that could be attained.

- *Question:* Can you imagine – even very vaguely – what it might be like to not see the world in terms of self-and-other? Can you think of any analogies or metaphors that might communicate a glimpse of what this might be like?
- *Question:* What do you think the Buddha meant when he said that Subhuti was the foremost of those who dwell in peace because he ‘does not dwell anywhere’?

Extract 17: from the Heart Sutra⁴⁰

“Therefore, Śāriputra, because of his non-attainment, having relied on Perfect Wisdom, a Bodhisattva lives without mental hindrances. Without mental hindrances he is fearless and imperturbable, he is beyond upside-down views, and he attains Nirvana.”

- *Question:* Can you spot the paradox in this extract? Which aspect of the paradox represents relative truth, and which represents absolute truth?
- *Question:* Does the merely relative truth of the stages of the path help to resolve the apparent discrepancy in the way these are described by different traditions – for example, how does it help us overcome the problems in correlating stream entry with the arising of the Bodhicitta?

Question: At the very highest level of the spiritual path, how might aiming for attainment prevent it happening?

Extract 18: from The Inconceivable State of Buddhahood, in the Ratnakūṭa collection⁴¹

“Then Subhuti asked these monks, ‘Elders, according to your understanding, have you ever achieved or realised anything?’

⁴⁰ *Buddhist Wisdom*, E Conze, pp.101-102, slightly rephrased.

⁴¹ *A Treasury of Mahayana Sutras*, ed. CC Chang, p.33

The monks replied, ‘Only presumptuous persons will claim that they have achieved and realised something. To a humble religious devotee, nothing is achieved or realised. How then, would such a person think of saying to himself, “This I have achieved; this I have realised?” If such an idea occurs to him, then it is a demon’s deed... Only the Buddha, the World-Honoured One, and Mañjuśrī, know our achievement and realisation.’ ”

- *Question:* How should we relate to goals like stream entry, in view of what is said about them here?
- *Question:* If the very people who claim spiritual attainments are precisely those who we can be certain do not have them, how *do* we know who to respect and listen to?

Topic 6 – ‘Suchness’ and the nature of the Buddha

Extract 19: from the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines⁴²

“From the very beginning Subhuti the Elder has been born after the image of the Tathāgata’s Suchness (tathāta). Because the Suchness of the Tathāgata and the Suchness of all dharmas are the same, and they are both the Suchness of Subhuti the Elder...

Subhuti’s Suchness is immutable and unchangeable, undiscriminated and undifferentiated, just as the Suchness of the Tathāgata. For the Suchness of the Tathāgata, and the Suchness of all dharmas, they are both one single Suchness, not two, not divided...

And for that reason, although we seem to have a duality when Subhuti has been conjured up from the Suchness of the Tathāgata, nevertheless nothing real has been lopped of that Suchness, which remains unbroken...

The Suchness of Subhuti is therefore just the same as the Suchness of all dharmas. Subhuti the Elder has undergone the experience of that Suchness by imitating in himself the unaltered Suchness, but in actual fact no-one anywhere has undergone a process of imitation...

And that is the Suchness through which a Bodhisattva, when he has definitely won full Enlightenment, comes to be called a Tathāgata. [Such-gone, or Such-come.]”

⁴² *The Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines and its Verse Summary*, tr E. Conze, pp.193-194

Suchness is a sort of nonsense word used to point to the mysterious, inexpressible quality of all things, which is elsewhere described as deep and infinite. Things and beings lack the sort of fixed, independent qualities that we ascribe to them, but they all share one quality, which we could call ‘the nature of things’. We can only know this by direct experience, for example in meditation. And we cannot sensibly say much about it, so these sutras invent a word that points to it, but does not falsify it by seeming to describe it. An analogy might be the colour blue. We know the colour by direct experience, and nothing we say about it, such as that it is cool (like water) or warm (like a summer sky) will be any help in letting someone who is colour-blind experience it. So we might just call its quality ‘blueness’, which only means something if we have experienced it. In the same way the quality of reality is called Suchness (tathāta). The Buddha is often referred to as the Tathāgata, which can be translated as ‘The One Who Comes From, or Goes To, Suchness’. The Prajñā-Pāramitā texts seem to interpret this to mean that the Buddha shares the quality of reality, and so he *is* reality.

- *Question:* Does the extract mean that ‘all is one’? If not, what does it mean, if anything?
- *Question:* Can you see any other meanings in this extract?

Week 5: The Yogācāra

Introduction

Around the Fourth Century CE a new movement emerged within Mahāyāna Buddhism, called the Yogācāra, or ‘Way of Practice’, sometimes also called the ‘Vijñānavāda’, or ‘Way of Consciousness.’ The Yogācāra joined the Madhyamaka to become one of the two important, defining, and mutually balancing movements in Mahāyāna Buddhism. As its name implies the Yogācāra based itself on the experiences of deep meditation, as compared to the Madhyamaka, which drew its conclusions more from abstract thought. And whereas the Madhyamaka approach runs the risk of leading the unwary into nihilism, aspects of the Yogācāra carry the opposite danger, and may lead us into eternalism if we approach them in the wrong way. The Yogācāra may have developed partly as a reaction to what was seen as nihilism in the Madhyamaka approach, or in response to a need to express the Dharma and the Goal in a more positive way, rather than relying on the negations of the Madhyamaka.

Western scholars have often seen the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra as being in direct conflict with one another, like two competing schools of philosophy in the West, and certainly there was a great deal of debate between their proponents. But scholars tend to misunderstand the purpose of such movements within Buddhism, which was not so much to make an absolute statement about the metaphysical nature of reality – while rubbishing anyone who saw things from another perspective - as to help practitioners to move towards Awakening. Any Buddhist philosopher worth his salt knows that all views are at best relative truth, and in the realm of relative truth two apparently contradictory viewpoints can both be pointing to different aspects of the nature of things. Accordingly many Buddhists did not see themselves as exclusively Madhyamikas *or* Yogācārins, but used both ways of thinking for the purpose for which they were intended, trying to get the best of both worlds. For example the famous Chinese traveller and translator Hsuang Tsang, who is usually identified with the Yogācāra, wrote a long treatise *called The Non-difference of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka*.

Asaṅga and Vasubandhu

The first great figures in the Yogācāra tradition are Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, who lived in the fourth century CE. Tradition has it that Asaṅga received the Yogācāra teachings from the future Buddha Maitreya, who currently abides in a higher dimension of reality, teaching the Dharma. Western scholars cannot accept this tradition – it represents mythic truth, rather than the historical truth which is their province. They have therefore proposed that the real source of Asaṅga’s inspiration was a human teacher called Maitreyaṅga. But at the mythic level the traditional story may well be true. As its name implies, the Yogācāra teachings stem from the experience of deep meditation, and Asaṅga may well have been in contact with a

source of profound wisdom during meditation, an experience that was equivalent to penetrating to another dimension of existence, in which he received teachings from the Buddha Maitreya.

Vasubandhu was Asaṅga's half-brother, and a monk in the Sarvāstivādin tradition, one of the so-called 'Hīnayāna' schools that no longer survives. He became disillusioned by the over-intellectual dogmatism of some of his teachers, but at first was very sceptical about his brother's Yogācāra ideas, and particularly about his claim that he had received them from Maitreya in meditation. He is said to have thought: "Poor Asaṅga. For twelve years he meditated in a cave, but all that came of it were enough fantastic teachings to overload an elephant!" However Asaṅga convinced him that his teachings were not a mere fantasy he had made up from nowhere, and Vasubandhu became very distressed that he had been so publicly disparaging of the Mahāyāna – he is said to have tried to cut out his tongue for the offence, but to have been prevented from doing so by two of Asaṅga's disciples!

Asaṅga, Vasubandhu and the other Yogācārins produced many works on many aspects of the Buddhist path, and we would need a book to discuss them all. We will focus on just a few of the big ideas of the Yogācāra – the teachings that may make a difference to the way we practice and see the world. The big ideas we will explore are:

- The doctrine of 'mind only' (*Cittamātra*), and the Yogācāra interpretation of *śūnyata*.
- The doctrine of the 'storehouse consciousness' (*ālaya vijñāna*), a deep level of the mind that underlies our usual experience.
- The Yogācāra amplification of the concept of relative and absolute truth – the doctrine of the Three Natures.

(The Yogācāra produced at least one other big idea that it is well worth knowing about, the *Trikāya* Doctrine on the three 'bodies' of the Buddha, but this does not fit in with the subject matter of this module).

'Mind Only' or *Cittamātra*

The Yogācāra is sometimes also called the *Vijñānavāda*, or 'Way of Consciousness', and the term *Cittamātra* or 'mind only' is sometimes used as though it were synonymous with Yogācāra. Many Yogācāra texts are peppered with phrases such as the following, all from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*:

'The world is nothing but mind.'

'Nothing is seen outside the mind.'

'The triple world is mind itself.'

'All is mind.'

According to Sangharakshita in his *Survey of Buddhism*, Vasubandhu's "...best known work, the *Triṃśikā-vijñaptimātratā*, is mainly an attempt to show that there is no such thing as a material substance... and that only ideas exist."⁴³ The Yogācārin held that what is real is mind or consciousness, and that the so-called material world we see around us is brought into existence by mind, rather than vice versa. We are so used to thinking the opposite way round, that matter gives rise to consciousness, when it is organised into bodies and brains, that we may find it difficult to get our head round this idea at first.

Two analogies

Perhaps some analogies might help. The commonest analogy in Buddhist texts is that of the dream. In a dream everything we experience is brought into being by our mind. We may see what look like material things in our dreams, and to us they seem perfectly solid and real. The reality we experience is completely convincing, but when we wake up, we realise that what we experienced existed in our mind. Another analogy that the Buddhists of past ages could not have thought of is that of the virtual reality, such as the one that formed the basis for the film, *The Matrix*. In the film the people trapped in the matrix experience a perfectly convincing world, where the things around them seem solid and real, but the whole environment is in fact a mental construction, and the apparently real external things they experience have no existence of their own. The analogy of the virtual reality has some advantages over the dream metaphor, because the reality experienced in a world such as *The Matrix* is shared by many people, who all have the same perception of reality, and who interact with each other, whereas a dream is a purely private reality. If we took the dream analogy literally and decided that the other people we experience did not exist, this would obviously have disastrous consequences for our practice of the Dharma!

Isn't 'mind only' an absurd idea?

This idea that the world we live in is created by the mind is what Western philosophers call 'Idealism'. It may seem strange to us, but if we are willing to put aside our commonsense notions for a while we will see that it is far from absurd. After all, the only thing that we experience directly is consciousness. From the sense impressions that register on our consciousness we deduce the existence of external things, and then by a process of thought we form the abstract concept of matter. We then move on to explain the only thing we really know to exist – our awareness – in terms of this abstract concept. If we stand back from it, this seems a rather dubious process. It might be argued that to think that the one thing we know to exist – our

⁴³*A Survey of Buddhism*, by Sangharakshita, p.400

awareness - is somehow less real than an abstract concept formed by that awareness is quite contrary.

In the words of the eminent Twentieth Century philosopher Bertrand Russell: says in his book, *The Problems of Philosophy*:

“Those who are unaccustomed to philosophical speculation may be inclined to dismiss such a doctrine as obviously absurd. There is no doubt that common sense regards tables and chairs and the sun and the moon and material objects generally as something radically different from minds and the contents of minds, and as having an existence which might continue if minds ceased. We think of matter as having existed long before there were any minds... But whether true or false, idealism is not to be dismissed as obviously absurd.”⁴⁴

It must be admitted that we can never prove the existence of things other than... our experiences... In dreams a very complicated world may seem to be present, and yet on waking we find... that the sense data in the dream do not appear to have corresponded with... physical objects.⁴⁵

Very many philosophers – perhaps the majority – have held that there is nothing real except minds and their ideas.”⁴⁶

Apparently the mind-only idea is reasonable enough that even an eminent Astrophysicist such as Sir Arthur Eddington can say:

“To put the conclusion crudely – the stuff of the world is mind-stuff... The mind-stuff of the world is something more general than our individual conscious minds; but we may think of its nature as not altogether foreign to feelings in our consciousness... Having granted this, the mental activity of the part of world constituting ourselves occasions no great surprise; it is known to us by direct self-knowledge, and we do not explain it away as something other than we know it to be — or rather, it knows itself to be.”⁴⁷

Roots in early Buddhism

There is a great deal in the Pāli Canon and the Buddhist tradition which would seem to support the Yogācāra when it tells us that mind is primary, and that our external experiences are created by the mind. The very first words of the Dhammapada tell us that:

⁴⁴ *The Problems of Philosophy*, by Bertrand Russell, p.19

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p10

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p5

⁴⁷ *The Nature of the Physical World*, by Sir Arthur Eddington, Ch13

“Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind.”

The word translated as ‘experiences’ here is *dharmas*. As we have seen, this sometimes refers to the fundamental elements of existence, and is sometimes used to mean just phenomena, or ‘things’ – so one possible translation of this line is that “mind gives rise to all things.”

Then again, the Twelve Nidānas tell us that:

“Conditioned by consciousness is name-and-form.”

Whilst the teaching of the various realms of the Wheel of Life seems to tell us that the external world we experience is a reflection of our mental states, so that if we are hellish beings our mental states manifest as a hellish environment, while if we are godlike we experience a sort of heaven. In a similar way, the various planes of being described in Theravada Buddhism, the *kāmaloka*, *rūpaloka* and *arūpaloka*, clearly refer to states of *being* – in other words their basis is the consciousness of those who experience them – but they are also *places*, which beings inhabit. They are all types of *loka* – locations, or apparently external environments. Once again it would seem that according to Buddhism the apparently external world that beings experience is determined by the nature of their mind.

So in some ways the Yogācāra idea that mind is primary seems to be well within the mainstream of the Buddhist tradition. The Yogācārins were also in the mainstream of Buddhism in that they derived their vision of reality from direct meditative experience, rather than from abstract thought. To quote Sangharakshita:

“What they saw in these higher states of consciousness, in their meditation, was that nothing existed but mind: that all things were, in reality, mind, and that mind was all things. This is what they saw... not something they thought about – the thinking came later.”⁴⁸

Deep meditation can give us an experience of the apparently infinite, timeless nature of mind. In meditation we may also have visions and other experiences that are far more significant and ‘real’ than anything we experience with our physical senses – and yet have nothing to do with any material object. Were Asaṅga’s sandals and cooking pot more real than his experience of Maitreya? The Yogācārins thought not.

‘Mind Only’ and śūnyatā

The Yogācāra did not abandon the concept of śūnyatā, but they gave it a different emphasis. Whereas, in the Madhyamaka, *śūnyatā* is used mainly to refer to the lack of self-nature and inconceivable nature of phenomena, the Yogācāra, without denying

⁴⁸ *The Depth Psychology of the Yogācāra*, Sangharakshita, transcribed lecture.

these aspects, adds another. In keeping with their ‘mind-only’ emphasis, for them *śūnyatā* also points to the absence of duality between the perceiving subject and the object perceived. This non-duality implies that when we see a tree, for example, our idea that there is a ‘me’ doing the seeing, and a separate tree being seen, is an illusion. There is simply the perceptual situation, me-seeing-the-tree, which requires both the see-er and the seen to take place. Seeing the world in this way clearly requires a degree of genuine Insight that we can only get from deep meditative experience, but if we can go even a small way towards breaking down our hard sense of separateness from what we see around us, we can begin to open up to a sense of connectedness with the world, and to a deeper experience of the significance and beauty of things.

Is the ‘Mind Only’ doctrine ‘true’ – and in what way?

In his *Survey of Buddhism* Sangharakshita distinguishes between those aspects of Buddhism that are ‘doctrine’ and those that are ‘method’. ‘Doctrine’ refers to teachings that point to the truth about reality. ‘Method’ refers to teachings which, while they may not be true in the absolute sense, are nevertheless true enough to be useful, in that they help us to progress towards Enlightenment. This idea of doctrine and method is clearly related to Nāgārjuna’s idea of absolute and relative truth. (However Nāgārjuna would probably say that *all* Buddhist teachings are ‘method’, because the absolute truth cannot be expressed in words or concepts).

Despite what we have said about how reasonable the mind-only doctrine is, and despite the fact that there is a lot of support for it in early Buddhism, it is difficult to argue that it is in any sense absolute truth – so it would seem to come into the category of method rather than doctrine. A Madhyamika would have no trouble in deconstructing the mind-only doctrine, pointing out that the word ‘mind’ is just another product of false discrimination, another division of our indivisible experience into arbitrary parts that have no more reality than one side of a coin has without the other. “Where is this famous mind”, he might ask. “Can you show it to me? Can you point out its characteristics? Can you show me somewhere that it exists independently of the things that it is aware of? Mind is just as much an abstract concept as matter. They are both mere play-words. And anyway the great Nāgārjuna has shown that our idea that one thing gives rise to another by cause-and-effect is absurd, so how can we say that mind is primary, and gives rise to matter?”

And perhaps the mind-only doctrine would get a similar treatment from some of the Buddha’s senior disciples in the Pāli Canon. Referring back to the *Discourse on the Sheaves of Reeds*, which we touched on in the first week of the module, we can be fairly sure that Ananda, reflecting the Buddha’s own teaching, would also tell us that mind does not cause matter, and matter does not cause mind – the two lean on each other like two sheaves of reeds. The two mutually co-arise, and are indivisible. If pushed to the limit, even a Yogācārin will admit that the idea of mind giving rise to

matter is not absolutely true, a fact implicitly recognised by the Yogācāra idea of *śūnyatā*. If the perceiving subject and the object they perceive are non-dual, then it is nonsense to say that the mind of the observer gives rise to the thing he observes. The two are just different sides of a single perceptual situation.

So the ‘mind only’ teaching cannot be taken as absolute truth. But we need to remember what this means. A map is not the city it represents, but it may still be an excellent way of finding our way around. The ‘mind only’ doctrine may not be absolute truth, but it may still be a useful map of reality for us, which helps us move towards Awakening - as long as we are not too naively literalistic about how we interpret it. This makes it more ‘true’ than most other views about the world, most of which are not even relative truth. Buddhism would tell us that most of our commonsense views are simply false. ‘Mind-only’ is likely to be a much more accurate and dependable map of reality than ‘matter-only’, for example.

Could the ‘Mind Only’ doctrine be useful in our practice?

Because ‘Mind Only’ is likely to be a much better basis for the spiritual life than ‘Matter Only’, it is a doctrine that could be very helpful to us, especially if we have been conditioned to think in materialistic terms. Consciously using our imagination to see the world through the lens of the mind-only doctrine could help us to ‘bend the straw the other way’, and to be less dominated by a view that causes us to see the world around us as a dead machine. Sangharakshita has pointed out that this is mainly how we contemporary Westerners see the universe around us – as something dead and lifeless. He has described this worldview as ‘pathological’, and compared it unfavourably with the way that more supposedly ‘primitive’ people see the world, which is as a living thing, full of magic and meaning. For many of us it would be a very useful practice to get out into nature, to put aside our critical thinking faculty for a while, and to allow ourselves to experience the world in a more ‘primitive’ way, as a place of wonder, where things and places have a beauty and significance that cannot be explained by a materialistic model. It would be very helpful to us to see the world as a manifestation of mind, as much as of matter.

For many of us it would also be a useful practice to put our critical thinking on hold in order to relate in a more wholehearted way to devotional practices and archetypal figures – if we are materialistic in outlook, the danger of falling into eternalism by doing this hardly exists for us. As an example of how we might do this, Sangharakshita has said that if we feel the desire to pray to a Buddha or Bodhisattva we should simply pray, and sort out the theology later – in other words, we should put our critical thinking, which is almost certainly dominated by scepticism and materialism, on hold. Subhuti has taken this advice even further, and suggested that we should simply pray - and forget about the theology altogether!

Allowing ourselves to see the world as a place of living mind rather than dead matter could have a number of benefits for us, such as:

- We would be more open to a sense of awe, wonder, beauty.
- We would stop looking for happiness from material things, which we would see as illusory.
- It would be clearer to us that that any happiness or fulfilment must be sought by changing our mind, so we would be more wholehearted in our practice.
- Many of the Dharmic ideas we perhaps find it difficult to accept because of our materialism would become plausible to us, including rebirth.
- The idea of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we cannot see, but who exist on a mental plane and can have an effect on us, would be seen as perfectly possible.
- We would be more open to meditative experiences, and to a sense of endless potential in our meditation and our practice in general.

On the other hand if our worldview is basically eternalistic, then some of the practices described above might not be such a good idea. In that case we should perhaps focus more on the potentially nihilistic teachings of the Madhyamaka, in order to deconstruct any literalism or eternalistic religiosity in our approach to the Dharma.

Combining Madhyamaka and Yogācāra

However for most of us the best path is probably to combine the two ways of thinking – an approach that has a long and honourable tradition. A set of three meditations attributed to Asaṅga give us an example of how we might do this. In the first meditation we contemplate the idea that all things are mind-produced, so that we see the dreamlike quality of our experience. Then in the second meditation we contemplate the fact that mind, too, is *śūnyatā* – it has no absolute existence of its own, cannot be pinned down, and is constantly changing. This step is sometimes referred to as ‘liberating the antidote’: the mind-only doctrine is an antidote to deadening materialism and scepticism, but when it has done its job we need to liberate ourselves from this idea as well, lest we stay trapped in a literalistic approach to our own concepts. Sangharakshita points out that this process can work both ways – in the following quote he uses the phrase ‘One Mind’ as a translation of *Cittamātra*, which we translate as ‘mind-only’:

“If one takes the expression One Mind too literally then one needs the concept of śūnyatā to dissolve that literalness. If you start taking śūnyatā literally there is no hope for one at all, according to Nāgārjuna!”

Perhaps under certain circumstances the concept of Śūnyatā is an antidote for an over-literal understanding of the One Mind, but under certain circumstances also the concept of the One Mind is an antidote for an over-literal understanding of śūnyatā .”⁴⁹

As Sangharakshita points out, Nāgārjuna was of course aware that *śūnyatā* could itself become an imprisoning idea, so that the Madhyamikas frequently made the point that *śūnyatā* is itself empty – it is just another concept, and as unreal as any other.

Sangharakshita neatly sums up his advice on how we should relate to the two approaches by saying that in our doctrine we should be Madhyamikas, and that in our practice we should be Yogācārins. However this requires us to hold two ways of seeing the world in our minds at the same time – we perhaps need to adopt some Yogācāra ideas, and at the same time to use the Madhyamaka approach to remind ourselves not to take them literally.

The Ālaya Vijñāna – the ‘Storehouse Consciousness’

The second big idea of the Yogācāra that we will look at in this session is the concept of the *ālaya vijñāna*, a deep layer of the mind that underlies and gives rise to the surface consciousness, and so provides a measure of continuity. Ālaya vijñāna is usually translated as ‘storehouse consciousness’, although *ālaya* in fact means ‘home’ or ‘abode’.

The doctrine of the *ālaya vijñāna* is sometimes explained as an attempt to solve the problems that arise from trying to analyse the human experience into the skandhas or dharmas. These early Buddhist ways of dividing up our experience would lead us to see ourselves as a complex of ever-changing factors, which are constantly coming into existence and vanishing in a moment. If taken literally, rather than seen as a useful tool to help us experience a glimpse of anātman, this would imply that there is nothing in our being that lasts from one moment to the next. It would make it very difficult to see how the law of karma could operate, because it provides no basis for an action to produce a karmic effect many years after it was committed. The idea of the *ālaya vijñāna* may have arisen partly to explain this apparent contradiction. In the words of Edward Conze:

“As soon as the advice to ignore the self had hardened into the proposition that ‘there is no self’, such concessions to common sense became quite inevitable.”⁵⁰

The concept of the *ālaya vijñāna* may have been partly a theoretical “concession to common sense”, but like many Yogācāra ideas it probably also reflected a direct

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development*, by E Conze, p.143

experience of the nature of the mind achieved during meditation.

Vasubandhu wrote of the storehouse consciousness as a sort of enduring stream or river of consciousness underlying all the others, which gives rise to all our experiences, and which he described as, “Flowing like a torrent”, constantly changing but at the same time keeping a certain identity of its own, rather like a river. His half-brother Asaṅga produced a more detailed analysis of the mind, which he divided into eight types of consciousness operating on three levels. According to this analysis the three layers of mind, in order of increasing depth, are as follows:

1. The awareness associated with each of the six senses: vision, hearing, smell, taste, touch, as well as the mind seen as a sense organ for perceiving mental objects.
2. The *kliṣṭamanovijñāna*, or *manas*: this provides the basis for our thinking and our sense of self; in terms of modern psychology it is equivalent to the ego, the centre of our conscious personality; *kliṣṭa* implies defilement, *manas* comes from a root meaning to think.
3. The *ālaya vijñāna*, or storehouse consciousness, the deepest layer, which gives rise to all the other levels of consciousness.

Our actions of body speech and mind influence the *ālaya vijñāna*, which acts as ‘storehouse’, providing a way in which they can manifest as karmic consequences at a later time. A number of analogies are used to illustrate this. Sometimes actions are said to plant ‘seeds’ in the *ālaya vijñāna*, where they can grow to maturity and manifest later. Sometimes our actions are said to ‘perfume’ the *ālaya vijñāna*, changing its quality, and therefore giving rise to later effects. An analogy that seems in keeping with the ‘stream-like’ nature of the *ālaya vijñāna*, and which may appeal to us present-day westerners, with our growing environmental awareness, is of the *ālaya vijñāna* as like a river, which negative actions and mental states can pollute, just as pouring poisonous chemicals into a river would pollute it, damaging its ecology and producing all sorts of undesirable knock-on effects as time goes by. Conversely skilful actions might be seen as pouring pure spring water into the river, or adding some form of purifying agent which neutralises other pollutants - or perhaps as re-stocking with plants and fish.

How the idea developed

The concept of the *ālaya vijñāna* developed over time, particularly in Far Eastern Buddhism. Vasubandhu and Asaṅga seem to think of the *ālaya vijñāna* purely in terms of the psychology of the individual, so that we each have our own personal *ālaya* which provides some continuity to our mental and emotional processes, and explains

how actions can produce later karmic effects. Later Yogācāra texts seem to imply that the ālaya vijñāna also has a deeper, transpersonal level, so that there is a level of mind that we all in a sense share, that we all influence, and that we are all affected by. According to this model the individual stream of the ālaya could be likened to the personal unconscious, which is such an important idea in modern psychology, while the deeper transpersonal aspect could be likened to the ‘collective unconscious’ described by the psychologist CG Jung. Jung saw this collective unconscious as a deep layer of mind that we all tap in to, and from which the archetypes which manifest in the dreams, myths, stories, art and meditations of human beings arise.

In view of the ‘mind-only’ view of the Yogācāra, this idea of a deeper transpersonal level of the ālaya vijñāna that we all share and tap in to seems to be an almost necessary development. If, as the Yogācāra says, the ālaya gives rise to the outer world we experience, then if we each have our own private ālaya, which is not connected in any way to anyone else’s, this leaves us all living in our own completely private world. The other people in our experience are then just figments of our own private mind, and we are justified in exploiting them in any way we like for our own benefit. This not a model of the world that will make for a successful spiritual life. If mind gives rise to our experience, and other people are as real as we are, then we must assume that other people apart from ourselves take part in this process of producing our joint experience, and therefore that there is some connection between the different mind-streams of different people, so that they can act together to jointly give rise to the world of experience they inhabit. However when we are engaged in this sort of speculation we should remember that Asaṅga and Vasubandhu were not trying to devise a complete metaphysical philosophy – which the Dharma tells us is impossible using words and concepts – they were simply trying to formulate some ideas that expressed their experience, and would be useful to other practitioners.

The concept of the ālaya developed further still, especially in Far Eastern Buddhism, so that it came to be seen as having what we could think of as an even deeper layer, which is completely pure, unstained, luminous and tranquil. This ‘undefiled ālaya’ is then sometimes distinguished from the ‘defiled ālaya’, which is produced from it when it is defiled by impurities. So for example in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* the ālaya is described as ‘completely pure’ and ‘luminous’, but ‘defiled by external defilements.’ This idea of the undefiled ālaya, which came to be seen as a sort of pure essence underlying all our minds, is closely related to the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, which we will discuss next week.

The Three Natures (*Trisvabhāva*)

We have seen over the last few weeks that the distinction between absolute and relative truth is an important one in the Prajñā Pāramitā sutras. We have also seen that because the Madhyamaka tells us that the teachings of Buddhism are ‘merely’ relative truth, there is a danger that some people might be tempted to abandon them in a

premature attempt to reach the wordless Absolute, which will be disastrous for their spiritual life. If the teachings of Buddhism are not in fact absolutely true, how can we really commit ourselves to them? In keeping with its practical emphasis the Yogācāra attempted to clarify this potential problem, through its teaching of the Three Natures (trīsvabhāva). The trīsvabhāva doctrine identifies three levels of truth, or lack of it, which are:

Parikalpita. This literally means ‘fully conceptualised’. If we see things in the parikalpita way we interpret them on the basis of our arbitrary division of one aspect of reality from another (vikalpa), our ‘mere play words’, and the conceptual constructions we build on this basis (prapañca). This is our ordinary worldly way of looking at the world, and is sometime translated as ‘Imaginary Nature’, because it is completely false and erroneous, with no basis in truth.

Paratantra. This literally means ‘other dependent’, and is often translated as the ‘dependent nature’ or ‘interdependent nature’. This is the world seen through the lens of pratītya samutpāda, and therefore of an understanding of the mutually dependent nature of things. This way of seeing things may still depend on concepts, but the concepts it depends on are an accurate reflection of the way things are, because they are in accord with pratītya samutpāda.

Pariniṣpanna. This literally means ‘fully accomplished’ or ‘fully perfected’, and is usually translated as ‘absolute nature’. This is the Insight which sees things as they are, unmediated by words or concepts of any sort. It is the absolute truth.⁵¹

This teaching makes it clear that there is a level of truth that is not the absolute truth of Insight, and may still be meditated by concepts, but which is definitely not just false and ‘imaginary’, as is our normal vision of a world of independent selves and things. It opens up a space in which we can use words and concepts to approach the truth. This is an absolute necessity for us, because if we simply wait for the spontaneous arising of wordless Insight without this preparation, we may wait a very long time. For the time being our main working ground will be at the paratantra level, using the conceptual ideas of Buddhism to train ourselves to see the world more as it is. We can train ourselves to see the transient nature of things, the interdependence of things, and the way we and all things change according to conditions. We can use practices that lead us along a path of growth, without worrying about the fact that at the absolute level there is no path, and nothing that grows. And in this way we can prepare the ground for the absolute truth to arise. In the words of Eric Cheetham:

*“Parikalpita is the unreal worldly truth and Pariniṣpanna is reality itself.
Paratantra is the link between the two and the means of access from the lower*

⁵¹ This interpretation of the Three Levels of Truth follows that of Sangharakshita in *A Survey of Buddhism*, and many others. There is another interpretation, in which paratantra is a neutral reality that is either mis-perceived (parikalpita) or correctly perceived (Pariniṣpanna). According to this interpretation the doctrine shines no further light on the issue of relative and absolute truth, and seems to be stating the obvious. As such it would not be worth discussing as one of the ‘big ideas’ of the Yogācāra.

to the higher. For the Yogācāra... attention is therefore focused on the means of access to Reality. This is the Paratantra sphere.”⁵²

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you think the mind-only idea is absurd? Why, or why not?
2. In the text we suggest two analogies that could illustrate how things could be ‘mind-only’— our dream experience, and virtual reality. Can you think of any others?
3. Does the mind-only idea appeal to you at the emotional level? Why, or why not?
4. In your own words, what might be some advantages of seeing things as mind-only? What might be some dangers?
5. Do you think you would benefit from training yourself to see the world more as mind, and less as matter? If so, how could you go about doing this? Are there any practices you would like to take on, perhaps for a limited period, to experiment with this approach?
6. How do you pollute the river of the ālaya vijñāna? How could you make it purer and more alive?
7. Is the ālaya vijñāna the same as an eternal soul? How is it similar, and how is it different?
8. How are teachings such as anitya, anātman, and the law of karma *paratantra*?

Can you think of any other teachings that seem to you definitely to be *paratantra*, rather than merely *parikalpita*?

9. Why might the following statement reflect a *parikalpita* rather than *paratantra* way of seeing the world? “*We should accept ourselves for what we are, rather than trying to change ourselves.*”

⁵² *The Great Way*, by Eric Cheetham, p.210

Week 6: The Tathāgatagarbha (Buddha-Essence) Doctrine and the Role of Mythic Truth

Introduction

Tathāgata is an epithet for the Buddha, meaning ‘Such-come’ or Such-gone’. In Mahāyāna Buddhism it is often interpreted as meaning one who has gone to, or come from, *Tathāta*, or Suchness – the nature of reality. *Garbha* has a range of meanings including, womb, embryo, root, essence, and matrix. So the word Tathāgatagarbha literally means something like Buddha-embryo, Buddha-root, or Buddha-essence. It refers to the idea that all beings somehow have within them the nature of the Buddha – an element that is pristine, luminous, naturally ethical, compassionate, and wise. When Western Buddhists speak of Buddha-Nature, Tathāgatagarbha is probably the traditional Sanskrit term that most closely matches what they mean.

The Tathāgatagarbha doctrine seems to have emerged within the Yogācāra tradition, and it is sometimes equated with the idea of the ‘undefiled ālaya’, so that it is seen as a basic, transpersonal level of awareness that somehow underlies all our different individual, defiled awarenesses. In other texts the Tathāgatagarbha is equated with Suchness: the nature of everything is called the Tathāgatagarbha when it is in a defiled state, and called the Dharmakāya when it is pure and liberated. Ideas about the precise nature of the Tathāgatagarbha differ widely between texts and traditions - as we shall see. And ideas very like that of the Tathāgatagarbha – as opposed to the word itself – can be found in texts that predate Aśaṅga and Vasubandhu. Some support for it can even be found in the Pāli Canon.

Buddha-Nature in the Pāli Canon?

In the *Chapter of the Ones* in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha says:

“This mind, O monks, is luminous, but it is defiled by adventitious defilements. The uninstructed worldling does not understand this as it really is; therefore for him there is no mental development.

This mind, O monks, is luminous, and it is freed from adventitious defilements. The instructed noble disciple understands this as it really is; therefore for him there is mental development.”

The Buddha here seems to be pointing to something very like the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine: our mind is essentially pure, but it is defiled by ‘adventitious’ defilements – that is, by defilements that come from outside, and do not really belong to it. What we need to do is therefore to remove these defilements and allow the real nature of our mind to shine forth, not to construct something that is not already there.

Although the Buddha very seldom refers directly to this basic purity of the mind in the Pāli Canon, it seems to underlie his approach and his advice to his disciples. For example in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and elsewhere, the Buddha teaches that if we practice the precepts and live in such a way as to let go of the hindrances, we will quite naturally experience the dhyānas – we only need a very simple meditation practice such as the mindfulness of breathing to do so, and for this reason the Buddha does not need to teach any complex or clever techniques of meditation.

So what the Buddha may be pointing at in the extract from the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* is that the first dhyāna is the natural state of the healthy human mind, and emerges effortlessly when we remove the defilement of the hindrances. However he implies that we still need to use this ‘luminous mind’ in a process of ‘mental development’ – note that these are the words he uses – in order to get to Enlightenment. This is a different idea from some interpretations of the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine, in which the ‘luminous mind’ is seen as being identical with Enlightenment itself, rather than with the dhyānas. And it is a very different idea from the most extreme interpretations of the Buddha-Nature idea, in which all we have to do is to realise that we are already Enlightened, and no process of ‘mental development’ is needed.

Different interpretations

In the Tathāgatagarbha Sutra the Buddha says the following:

*“Good sons, when I regard all beings with my buddha eye, I see that hidden within the kleśas of greed, desire, anger, and stupidity there is seated augustly and unmovingly the tathāgata's wisdom, the tathāgata's vision, and the tathāgata's body. Good sons, all beings, though they find themselves with all sorts of kleśas, have a Tathāgatagarbha that is eternally unsullied, and that is replete with virtues no different from my own. Moreover, good sons, it is just like a person with supernatural vision who can see the bodies of tathāgatas seated in the lotus position inside the flowers, even though the petals are not yet unfurled; whereas after the wilted petals have been removed, those tathāgatas are manifested for all to see. In similar fashion, the Buddha can really see the Tathāgatagarbhas of sentient beings. And because he wants to disclose the Tathāgatagarbha to them, he expounds the sutras and the Dharma, in order to destroy kleśas and reveal the buddha nature. Good sons, such is the Dharma of all the buddhas. Whether or not buddhas appear in the world, the Tathāgatagarbhas of all beings are eternal and unchanging. It is just that they are covered by sentient beings' kleśas. When the Tathāgata appears in the world, he expounds the Dharma far and wide to remove their ignorance and tribulation and to purify their universal wisdom.”*⁵³

⁵³ *The Tathāgatagarbha Sutra*, tr WH Grosnick, in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez, p.96

The sutra goes on to give a number of analogies. The Tathāgatagarbha is like a treasure buried under the house of a poor man – if only he knew it was there! It is like a Buddha-rūpa wrapped in dirty rags – those with normal eyes cannot see it, but the Buddha can. It is like gold that has been lost in a dung-pit – it is covered with filth, but its nature is never corrupted.

The Buddha’s words here could be seen as a poetic illustration of the fact that all beings have the potential for Enlightenment, which is never lost no matter what their current state - this is what the Buddha sees when he looks at them with his Buddha-Eye. This interpretation is strongly supported by another of the analogies used: the Tathāgatagarbha is like the stone of a mango – it does not look like much, but if it is buried in the ground it grows into the tree of Buddhahood. It is not a mango tree already!

However some texts go much further than this idea of the Tathāgatagarbha as the universal potential for Enlightenment. The *Mahā-parinirvāṇa Sūtra* (not the same as the Pāli *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*) even goes so far as to say that the Tathāgatagarbha is the True Self. It tells us that the Buddha teaches no-self in certain contexts, but also a Self – the True Self – in others. It reports the Buddha as saying, “I always teach that beings have the nature (svabhāva) of the Buddha. Is not this very Buddha-Nature a Self?” Elsewhere the Buddha does qualify this a little, saying that the Buddha-Nature is only a Self in a manner of speaking, but the fact remains that for this sutra the Tathāgatagarbha seems to be much more than just the potential for Buddhahood, and starts to sound rather like the Hindu idea of the unchanging, unstained Atman.

These differences between texts in the interpretation of the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine are reflected in the way it is interpreted by different schools of practice. These can perhaps be summed up in two ways: ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ versions of the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine.

‘Hard’ and ‘soft’ Tathāgatagarbha

These two different attitudes to the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine are illustrated by two contrasting parables in the White Lotus Sutra – although this very early Mahāyāna sutra never uses the word Tathāgatagarbha, the concept, if not the word, was obviously around at the time it was written down.

In one parable the son of a very rich father gets separated from his family at an early age, is forced to make his living in the most demeaning ways, and to live among the lowest strata of society. He picks up a number of coarse habits and ways of behaving which become second nature to him, he is dirty and unhealthy, and his self-image becomes poor. One day his father spots him, and tries to as it were to adopt him, although the son cannot accept that he is any relation to such a grand person, and is terrified of him. The father has to use all sorts of tricks and ruses to gradually

befriend and retrain his son, starting by getting him to spend several years shifting the dirt from the outhouses. Gradually the son progresses to managing his father's treasures and property, so that over many years he gradually leaves behind his coarse behaviour and his low self-image, and can eventually take over the aristocratic role of his father. According to Sangharakshita the father represents what we might call the 'higher self' of the son – what we might call his Buddha-Nature - from which he has become alienated. The son's task is to re-unite with this higher self, but in order to do this he has to do a lot of work to train and develop himself, and to overcome the effects of many years of negative habits and conditioning.

In the contrasting parable in the same sutra, a poor man gets drunk with a rich friend, and while they are drunk the friend gives him a valuable jewel, so that he never has to be poor again. Fearing that his friend may lose the jewel while he is drunk, the rich friend sews it into his robe. But the next day, when he is sober and his friend has gone away, the poor man has no memory of the gift, and no idea he has a precious jewel sewn into his robe, so he goes about his life as before. Years later the two men meet again, and the rich friend is shocked to find that his friend still looks poor and downtrodden. He says, "What happened to the jewel I gave you?" and his friend replies, "What jewel?" The rich man then unstitches the poor man's robe, and shows him that the jewel was there all the time; all his sufferings over the years had been unnecessary. The jewel here is obviously our 'Buddha-Nature', and the poor man is all of us. The parable seems to imply that all we need to do is to know that our Buddha-Nature is there, and all our spiritual problems will be over – we do not have to do a lot of work and practice to make it manifest, as did the rich man's son in the first parable.

The first of these parables illustrates what we might call the 'soft' approach to the Tathāgatarbha doctrine, while the second illustrates the 'hard' approach. The 'soft' interpretation holds that we all have this 'essence of the Buddha', whether conceived of as the potential for Enlightenment or in some other way, but that we need to do a lot of work to make it a reality – we need to practice the Dharma. This is the point of view taken in the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, for example, a very important text for those schools of Far Eastern Buddhism that adopt the Buddha-Nature doctrine, which Sangharakshita describes as, "One of the best and most attractive expositions of Buddhist Idealism available." The *Awakening of Faith* describes our Buddha Nature as like a precious jewel buried in gross rock. It is definitely there, it is what gives value to the rock, but it only becomes useful if we do a lot of work to mine it, to crush the rock, and to separate, cut, and polish the jewel.

"It may be asked whether there is ever any need for one to discipline oneself in all good deeds and to try to save mankind, since... as can logically be inferred, [one has] nothing to do but to calmly contemplate suchness. In reply we say, 'yes.' Because the mind may be likened unto a precious jewel which is pure and bright in its essence but buried in gross veinstone. Now there is no

reason to suppose that one can make it clean and pure only by contemplating it, and without applying any means [of purification] or a degree of workmanship.”⁵⁴

The means of purification that the *Awakening of Faith* recommends are very much the same as those recommended by most mainstream schools of Buddhism, formulated as the Six Perfections: we should practice ‘all good deeds’, ‘try to save mankind’, cultivate *kṣānti* and *vīrya*, practice *śamatha* meditation, balance this with study and vipasyana meditation, and revere and meditate on the Buddha – in this case Amitābha.

This is typical of the ‘soft’ approach to Tathāgatagarbha: the idea may inspire us and give us energy and enthusiasm for practice, but it does not change the way we practice, and it certainly does not mean that we practice any less intensely.

What we might call the ‘hard’ form of the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine is very different. This interpretation sees our Buddha-Nature as a present reality – we already *are* a Buddha, and practicing to become more like a Buddha is therefore just a useless distraction. All we need to do is to believe and accept that we have Buddha-Nature - then we have found the jewel in our robe, and all our problems are over. We do not have to do anything else. All we need to do is to just sit and experience our Buddha Nature – or to just walk, just talk, just go to the pub.

Dangers of the ‘hard’ approach

If it is taken literally, the hard form of the Buddha-nature doctrine would indeed change the way we practice, and, it might mean that we do not feel the need to practice at all. Most of the practices of mainstream Buddhism rely on using the law of karma to help us change in a positive direction – a direction that moves us towards the Awakened Being we have the potential to become. But if we literally believe that we are already that Awakened Being, these developmental practices do not make sense. And if we are already Enlightened, why should we limit our spontaneous wisdom by practicing the precepts, for example?

Such a completely literal approach to the Tathāgatagarbha idea may seem so unrealistic that it is hard to believe that anyone could have taken it seriously, but it has its proponents in the modern West, and it has been a factor in traditional Buddhism, especially perhaps in Japan. For example Eisai, one of the great figures of the Zen school in Japan – which bases itself squarely on the *Tathāgatagarbha* doctrine – complains about this tendency in some of his fellow practitioners. Eisai spent two periods in China imbibing the authoritative Cha’an teachings, and when he returned from his second trip he was shocked to see the way that some Zen teachers presented the Dharma back in Japan. Referring to the followers of a certain Nonin, he says:

⁵⁴ *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, tr T Suzuki.

“But these say, ‘There are no precepts to follow, no practices to engage in. From the outset there are no passions; from the beginning we are enlightened. Therefore we do not practice, do not follow the precepts. We eat when we are hungry, rest when we are tired. Why recite the Buddha’s name, why make offerings, why eat vegetarian food?’ ”⁵⁵

He goes on to say that these people are like those who have a wrong view of emptiness – they must be avoided at all costs.

Tathāgatagarbha and our practice

Many people are inspired by the Tathāgatagarbha idea, and we need all the inspiration we can get in our practice. This is perhaps the most powerful argument for the doctrine, but there are also a traditional set of negative traits that the Buddha is said to have taught the doctrine in order to counteract, which include the following:

- Lack of confidence: If we feel we have no connection with Buddhahood, we may despair of ever reaching it; whereas if we believe there is something of the Buddha already in us, this can give us a great deal of confidence in our ability to change in a positive direction.
- Arrogance and conceit: These arise when we think we are special – either uniquely gifted or uniquely flawed; but if all beings share the Buddha-nature, we see that we are not special at all, and everybody deserves the same level of respect that we wish for ourselves.
- ‘Not seeing others as oneself’: Buddha nature is, at bottom, who we really are, but it is transpersonal, it is not anybody’s property, and my Buddha-nature is the same as yours; if we truly saw this we would literally see others as ourselves, and the way we behave would be transformed.

But clearly the Tathāgatagarbha idea also has some definite dangers if we approach it in the wrong way, as we have seen. Is there any way that we can avoid the dangers while still benefitting from any inspiration and motivation to practice that the idea gives us? To answer this question we need to take a step back and consider what Buddhism tells us about the nature of truth, and about what Sangharakshita tells us about the difference between mythic and literal truth.

The Dharma tells us clearly that we cannot know the nature of things by talking or reasoning about it – we can only know it by direct experience, by Awakening. Anything said about it will be misleading. So the Buddha in the Pāli Canon avoids saying much at all about the nature of reality, and confines himself to a negative approach, telling us what is **not** true. It is *not* true to say that an Enlightened being

⁵⁵ Quoted in *The Development of Japanese Zen*, by P Yampolsky, in *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, ed K Kraft, p.143

continues to exist after death, or that he ceases to exist, or both, or neither. What **is** true is beyond the categories in which we are used to thinking.

But we humans seem to need some positive statements about the nature of reality, if only to inspire us to move towards it. If we have no direct vision of our own, the purely negative approach of the Pāli Canon can easily lead us into nihilism, especially if it is combined with a basically materialistic outlook.

So the Mahāyāna sometimes tries to say something positive about the nature of things, as a concession to us unenlightened humans. It tells us that we are all the same Suchness as the Tathāgata and all other beings and things; or that mind underlies all things; or that we all have the Tathāgatagarbha. However these positive statements are metaphor, they are mythic and poetic truth, rather than literal truth. As such they are perhaps more ‘true’ than anything we could currently imagine as literal truth, but the fact remains that they are not literal truth. If we take them as myth and metaphor they might be helpful to our spiritual life, inspiring us and firing our imagination. But if we take them as literal truth, turning them into dogma, and believing all that would be implied if they were literally true, they could have very negative effects for us.

The Tathāgatagarbha doctrine is an example of this. If we engage with it as a creative myth it could inspire us and fire our imagination. If we imagine that we are a Buddha now with enough intensity, we may act, speak and think more like a Buddha – insofar as we can imagine what this might be like – and our potential for Enlightenment may be activated. To be at all realistic, such an imaginative exercise needs to be combined with practices that will help us to develop to become more like a Buddha, and which on the face of it are not compatible with the idea that we are already a Buddha. So we need to be able to hold two apparently conflicting ideas at the same time, without wishing to iron out the inconsistencies to produce a neat creed or dogma. We need to accept that we do not yet know the whole story.

But if we take the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine as literal truth, turning it into a dogma, and thinking that it is the only truth, all sorts of negative consequences will follow. If we believe we are literally Enlightened right now, why practice? We do not need to develop positive emotion through practices such as the mettā bhāvanā; perhaps we are an anxious, depressed or grumpy Buddha, but so be it - doing anything to develop beyond these traits would imply we are not already Enlightened, and would contradict our dogma. We do not need to cultivate śraddhā and reverence through practices such as pūjā; we may be an arrogant and individualistic Buddha, but again, so be it - to do anything to develop beyond these flaws would contradict our rigid view, and anyway, because we are already a Buddha, we ourselves are the proper object of our reverence!

To avoid the danger of this sort of literalism and dogmatic fundamentalism, Sangharakshita suggests that we should avoid the language of Buddha-nature and

Tathāgatagarbha, and focus instead on the language of potential. However some people find that this does not have the same imaginative power as the Buddha-nature idea – the fact that we *could* become a Buddha in the future is hardly as encouraging as the fact that there is something of the Buddha in us already!

Perhaps we need a sense that we have some direct connection with Buddhahood, something we can experience *now*, to make our practice real and powerful. This sense could be provided by thinking more in terms of *śraddhā* – which Sangharakshita describes as, “The response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe.” It is this sense of something ultimate in us that we need in order to give us a heartfelt connection with the ideal, and to give us the confidence and longing that allow us to move towards it. For some people this sense of ‘something ultimate in us’ is provided by thinking in terms of Buddha-nature, and perhaps there is no harm in this, as long as this is seen for what it is - an inspiring poetic vision, a creative myth, and not a dogma. But thinking more in terms of *śraddhā* has some definite advantages, because we feel faith in relation to something that we admit is beyond ourselves as we are now. We may have the seed or embryo of Buddhahood within us – the literal meaning of Tathāgatagarbha – and this ‘something ultimate’ may cry out to make itself heard, but we do not delude ourselves that full Buddhahood is anything other than a distant goal for us. In this way we avoid the dangers of self delusion, arrogance and spiritual inflation that go along with an immature approach to the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine.

Myth, poetry, and Mahāyāna visions of reality

We have seen that the positive statements that Mahāyāna Buddhism makes about the nature of reality are meant to be taken as myth and poetry, rather than as literal truth, and that when we take them literally and try to turn them into dogma we can get into all sorts of trouble. So perhaps the most effective of these Mahāyāna visions of reality are those that obviously present themselves as poetic and mythic, rather than masquerading as philosophy. One example of this – with which we will round off this module – is the vision of things presented by the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*.

This sutra presents us with a magical world in which each grain of dust contains innumerable world systems, and in which each moment contains eternity. It presents us with a vision of a holistic universe in which every phenomenon ‘interpenetrates’ every other, so that nothing is separate, and everything affects everything else, without the need for any direct chain of material causation. The universe is like one huge mind, or a dream, or a magical illusion. All of the apparently separate things and beings, from Buddhas on down, are all so intimately mutually interrelated that they cannot be said to exist as separate entities at all. This vision is illustrated by the image of Sudhana’s Tower, which Sangharakshita describes as follows:

“ ...the interior of the tower reveals itself as being as wide as the sky... it contains countless palaces, porches and windows... gemstones and tapestries... gold and jewels... [and] countless beautiful birds sing melodiously... while throughout the infinity of the tower are disposed infinitudes of lotus flowers... [and] rows of trees and great mani-gems emitting rays of light. Within the tower are hundreds and thousands of towers, each one as exquisitely adorned as the main tower and as wide as the sky, at the same time offering no obstruction to all the rest.

Thus in the state of mutual interpenetration there is this perfect harmony and perfect order. Sudhana sees himself within all the towers collectively as well as within each single tower, and his joy knows no bounds. He is freed from individualistic notions, and revels in an emancipation transcending all limitations.”⁵⁶

On that poetic vision of the magical world of mutual co-arising we will end this module.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Do you ever have a sense that your mind is ‘luminous’ underneath its ‘adventitious defilements’? Does your experience in meditation ever give you a sense of this?
2. Which of the two parables from the Lotus Sutra described in the text appealed most to you when you first came across it – the story of the rich man’s son that Sangharakshita calls the ‘Parable of the Return Journey’, or the parable of the jewel in the robe? Can you identify why it appealed to you?
3. Which parable do you think is a more realistic description of the spiritual life, and why? (Note that this is a different question!)
4. Do you find the Tathāgatagarbha idea inspiring? If so, tell the group how bearing it in mind alters your approach to practice.
5. Do you suffer from any of the negative tendencies that the Buddha is said to have taught the Tathāgatagarbha doctrine to counteract, i.e:
 - Lack of confidence.
 - Thinking you are ‘special’.
 - ‘Not seeing others as oneself’.

Try to be honest!

⁵⁶ *The Eternal Legacy*, by Sangharakshita, pp.229-230

6. Are you ever tempted to abandon or reduce your emphasis on ‘developmental’ practices such as the mettā bhāvanā? If so, has this session changed your attitude to these practices? (How often do you do the mettā bhāvanā?)
7. In what way is Sangharakshita’s idea of śraddhā as, “The response of what is ultimate in us to what is ultimate in the universe,” similar to the Tathāgatagarbha idea? In what ways is it different?
8. Which of the Mahāyāna visions of reality discussed in this module means most to you?