

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Four

Module 4: The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment *Parables, Myths and Symbols of the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*

What does this module aim to do?

Its purpose is to support you in becoming familiar with the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra, one of the earlier Indian Mahāyāna Sūtras and one of the most influential in Far Eastern Buddhism; and, in particular, to find your own way to engage personally with what has strongly appealed to the spiritual imaginations of generations of practitioners: the Sūtra's story, parables, myths, symbols and archetypes.

How?

Notwithstanding the helpfulness of commentaries – and Sangharakshita's *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra* is very good indeed – there can be no substitute for reading the Sūtra itself. This is the primary study material. So do read as much of the Sūtra as you can, and the bits you like several times; if you can, compare translations. You can download the recommended translation of the Sūtra by Burton Watson from a number of websites (see below).

At the very least, read Cittapala's Abridgement (included in the Module's Appendix); the relevant sections of which I'm recommending you should read aloud in your group each week, a practice close to the traditional mode of disseminating the Sūtra. Given the length of the Sūtra, I suggest starting with the chapters of the Sūtra that the Abridgement uses (see the table below). So whilst there is introductory material in the first two weeks of the module, you could get hold of a copy of the Sūtra and start reading now!

Sangharakshita has stressed that however much you manage to read, it's crucial to approach the Sūtra as you might a good novel, or play, or poetry: to enjoy and immerse yourself in the story that unfolds. Aim to study the doctrinal details, what they mean and their import, later. First off, try to experience the Sūtra as a whole, to let it touch you, to let its story and revelations make an emotional impact on you, to speak to your heart as much as your intellect, and especially to your imagination.

While this Module, as a whole, is about reading and listening to the Sūtra, the first two units are about how to read it. The first 'How to read the Sūtra' brings together a number of Sangharakshita's thoughts on Buddhist Canonical literature, the importance of myth and the crucial role of imagination in relating to this material. By imagination I mean that faculty of ours that, in understanding the metaphorical nature of language, resolves and transcends any tensions between thinking and feeling faculties, to apprehend truths in a higher or deeper dimension of reality. The second unit, 'The Mahāyāna's stance', collates some key points about the Mahāyāna's distinctive articulation of the Dharma finding

expression in the Sūtra, knowledge of which makes it easier to understand the Sūtra as we read.

As you read, please also take a look at the questions attached to each unit. These have been prepared to spark off your own reflections and explorations. While each unit has a number of questions, some will appeal to you more than others; I suggest concentrating on those. Even going into just one question fully is sufficient; it's ok not to look at all of them.

While the questions may be helpful, some of you may find they keep you in an overly rational mode, and consequently may prefer to explore your responses to the Sūtra in other ways or through different media, i.e. less conceptually, for example, with crayons, paints, or some plastic medium, or through a variety of creative writing exercises.

While you can simply 'translate' the action of the Sūtra from one medium into another as a way of assimilating the material, you could also try to go a step further in expressing your understanding of the Sūtra's message, and any further implications it has for you and others. For example, you could imagine, or find contemporary examples, of how the Sūtra's stories, or elements within it, impact on your understanding of situations you may know of, real or imagined. You could explore the impact on you of any parts of the Sūtra that you experience with particular emotional charge, i.e. any of the characters; what happens to them; the nature of their story; or its underlying themes that have particular meaning for you.

Likewise in your group, you may prefer to not get drawn into a lot of conceptual discussion, but use group role plays to explore your responses to the Sūtra, the principles involved in one of the scenes from the Sūtra, and any ramifications they have in situations from your own life, or someone you know. For example, arising from your reading of the Parable of the Burning House could come a group improvisation exploring the theme of ethical urgency, and the dilemmas implicit in acting 'skilfully' for the greater good of all concerned.

In group discussion, help each other to engage with the spirit of the Sūtra. Clarify your personal responses, e.g. what in the Sūtra inspires and uplifts, or, alternatively challenges and disturbs you? What are the nature of your doubts, reservations, etc? Are there any implications for your life? Your attitude? And the choices you make? In all this, avoid literalism, i.e. remember to make allowance for the figurative and metaphorical nature of language.

For those with both time and enthusiasm for more background reading and study, I have attached a number of items and questions in the Appendix, i.e. suggestions for taking your interest further (as time progress I will add to these). Commentaries, as I said, can be very helpful, and if you do have time I strongly recommend reading Sangharakshita's *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment*, that is based on edited versions of his lectures along with edited transcripts of questions and answers with himself and study group leaders. Given that doing this may take more time than you have available, it might be easier if

you could share this with other group members, one member taking ten minutes to present Sangharakshita's key points to the group each week.

Module outline

Unit	Unit Title	Recommended chapters in Sūtra
1	How to read the Sūtra	
2	The Mahāyāna's stance	
3	The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra	1, 2, 3, 4,5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 22
4	Transcending the Human Predicament	1, 2, 3, 7
5	The Myth of the Return Journey	4
6	The Jewel in the Lotus	8, 10, 25
7	Symbols of Life & Growth	5
8	The Revelation of Abundant Treasures	11
9	The Eternal Buddha	14, 15
10	The Parable of the Good Physician	15,16, 22

Course text

Watson, B., (trans.), 1993, *The Lotus Sūtra*, Chichester: Columbia University Press.

Recommended Text available for free download on a number of websites accessible via Google. For example, at the time of going to press:

<http://lotus.nichirenshu.org/lotus/Sūtra/english/hokke-idx.htm>

Appendix

- Cittapala's Abridgement.
- Suggestions for further reading, project work, more questions.

Unit 1 – How to Read the Sūtra

Aim

To clarify how to approach reading the Sūtra and to appreciate its riches, while discussing the crucial importance of imagination in this.

Preparation

This unit's homework is a précis condensing a number of Urygen Sangharakshita's different lectures and published writings (see references below). Read this and reflect on one or more of the questions that you'll find at the end.

“Throughout the world's history, the figure of the story-teller, encircled by a crowd eager to know what will happen next, is central and vital. In stories and tales, myths and legends, a culture recognizes itself and identifies its needs and its ideals. On an individual level too, through these narratives we recognize the deep and inchoate stirrings within our own hearts. Our strongest memories of stories may be associated with childhood, but the hold of story-telling on our hearts does not really leave us when we grow up; it takes on new guises. In our culture, scientists and the manipulators of the media may appear to be the purveyors of truth, but it is still to stories – films, novels, even computer games - that we turn for a more satisfying version of reality. Stories have the power to cut through our mental chatter and hold us spellbound, strangely attentive to the fate of imaginary or long-dead characters. And when we emerge from the compelling world of the imagination, in some mysterious way we seem able to make more sense of the ordinary world that we experience day to day.

In the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* or ‘Lotus Sūtra’, we meet the Buddha as a story-teller. The Buddha, surrounded by a great crowd of disciples – monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen – not to mention a vast assembly of non-human beings, chooses to tell a story because conceptual explanation has failed to convince many in his audience. Indeed, it has thrown them into utter confusion. The Buddha has simply pointed out that, despite all their spiritual attainments, they do not yet know everything. They have something more to learn. The very idea sends shock-waves through the entire assembly. Five thousand disciples, unable to believe their ears, get up and walk out. And those who stay are bewildered. ‘What more can they have to learn, profoundly versed in the Dharma as they are? What can the Buddha mean?’

The Buddha was perhaps expecting this. Remarking that, ‘Through a parable, intelligent people reach understanding,’ he launches into a story that will explain matters. This one parable convinces some of his listeners. They rejoice, they tell a parable of their own expressing their gratitude. And as more and more parables are told, more and more disciples do at last grasp what the Buddha has been talking about. These parables, perhaps the most significant in the entire range of Buddhist canonical literature, are famous throughout the Buddhist East.

We may discover it comes as quite a relief to listen to stories such as those in the Sūtra, in spite of, or even as an escape from, the fast moving media-world we live in. And more than this, contrary to a misplaced sense of guilt, we may discover that allowing ourselves to just sit and listen is not far from a childish distraction. After all it's worth remembering 'listening' – receptivity, willingness to learn, open-heartedness - is, according to Buddhism, the first level of wisdom; 'śravaka', often translated as 'monk,' literally means 'one who hears'.

The Lotus Sūtra speaks almost exclusively in the language of images, of poetry, of myth and symbol, of simile and metaphor. These make up the language of the imagination, the language of the emotions. Although the Sūtra is very long, its conceptual content is minimal. Concepts address the conscious mind. But images appeal to the unconscious depths that - as modern psychology has made us aware - are within us all. The Sūtra, therefore, appeals not to the head but to the heart, not to our intellect but to our imagination.

The Sūtra is not just a collection of stories and parables. It is in itself in form a sort of drama, even a sort of mystery play. It has for its stage the entire cosmos, and the action lasts for millions of ages. The *dramatis personae* consist of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Arhats, gods, demons, and humankind; that is, all sentient beings whatsoever. And the atmosphere of the Sūtra is very strange, an atmosphere of miracle and marvel. As the Sūtra unfolds, what we see is a sort of transcendental sound and light show. As for the theme of the drama, it is a very great one indeed. It is Enlightenment; not just the Buddha's Enlightenment, or the disciples' Enlightenment, but the Enlightenment of all sentient beings whatsoever.

Like many popular tales of myth and fantasy, whether traditional like the stories of King Arthur, or modern like *The Lord of the Rings* and some forms of science fiction, the Sūtra can spark off something within us of which we were not previously aware; we can be moved and inspired, often without being able to say how or why. If we really allow ourselves to become absorbed in the Lotus Sūtra, we become part of it. We join the great assembly and experience ourselves right in the midst of it, taking part in the events of the Sūtra as they unfold. When we are touched by the poetic, mythic, symbolic in this kind of way, something in us, that is of archetypal significance, is being worked out on the historical plane which gives us a fuller and richer experience, so that we see it for what it is more clearly. In this way, we can come to experience a deeper meaning to our existence, satisfying a universal human thirst within us.

Experience of this type can convince us that whatever our rational, conceptual, historically-orientated consciousness may comprehend, there is an imaginative or archetypal dimension to life that eludes it. While undoubtedly we belong to the realm of historical reality, we also belong to this realm of archetypal reality. It may come as a shock to realise that we experience the archetypal realm only because we ourselves, are, on another level, archetypal beings. The Lotus Sūtra can only reveal this world to us because it is our own world, the one we actually

live in, but usually without knowing it. But it is not a question of leaving the realm of historical reality behind; we exist in them both all the time, whether we are aware of it, or not. It's analogous to the way we experience our waking and dream lives. If we are to give a complete account of ourselves, we must describe not only our waking life but also our dream life; and significantly, most of us find this very difficult to do. All too often whereas the two seem discontinuous, occupying different planes, it is possible to be aware in such a way of the continuity of the relation between the two.

When we say the Lotus Sūtra is a myth, what do we mean? A myth emerges, not out of thin air, but out of spiritual necessity. It comes into being when people have very strong feelings and profound aspirations about what goes beyond personal situations that need to be projected into an, as it were, objective form. By myth, in this sense, we do not mean something false, untrue or mere fantasy. On the contrary, a myth points to something deeply true, an expression, through image and story, of truths beyond the direct grasp of our intellect. It is like a diamond: its beauty is fully revealed when worked on by a master jeweller, its facets sparkling with reflected light and iridescent colour. In this way we come to understand that meaning is not a thing that we grasp by looking in a dictionary. Meaning is meaning for each of us, something we personally experience. Our thirst for meaning is therefore our search for our self, our quest for totality, the wholeness of our own being, that lives partly, if not essentially, in a realm, not of clearly defined meanings, but of undefined, even undefinable meanings.

Notwithstanding the huge popularity of the Lotus Sūtra, sometimes people find it difficult to engage with. While it may appear to be set in what we think of as our normal world, being a Mahāyāna Sūtra it is essentially free from the contingent, the determinate, from time, space and causality, from historical reality. So it is not to be taken literally. As has already been said, to get the most from our encounter with the Sūtra, it's important to set out to enjoy and immerse ourselves in it in the way we might a good novel, play or poetry; to allow ourselves to be captivated by its atmosphere and magic – this being more an openness to feeling and emotional resonance than intellectual understanding and analysis. It is true that we may well feel more at home with Western literature that deals often with ordinary human predicaments with which we can easily identify. But human frailty is not the only possible subject for literature; it is not always the most inspiring and uplifting. The Sūtra takes us away from ordinary human life and its problems to give us a taste of the magical. If we read the Sūtra as literature rather than dogma, as poetry rather than scientific fact or philosophical truth, we may perhaps be more open to its spiritual message.

In reading the Lotus Sūtra as literature, hard work as it may be at times, we engage with it for its own sake rather than for some ulterior purpose, not because we *have* to, perhaps out of some sense of an external authority telling us we should, or a sense of fundamentalism that this is 'The Word', but because we have a natural

affinity with it, because we are spontaneously drawn to it, because we find ourselves immersed in an emotionally positive mental state as a consequence.

As we read, we should open ourselves to being moved by the power of the literature, to read the Sūtra in such a way as to allow our self to experience its total impact; to read the Sūtra as a whole, appreciating its artistic unity so as to grasp its fundamental significance, its gestalt, i.e. not reading it piecemeal, and not concentrating on the parts at the expense of the whole.

And most importantly as we read, we should have in mind that the Sūtra is recounted from the lips of Ananda as *Buddhavacana*, the word of the Buddha, a communication to the hearts and minds of those yet unenlightened from the heart and mind of an Enlightened One, whose sole purpose is to serve the happiness and welfare of all sentient beings. This calls for us to take the Sūtra seriously, i.e. far from the Buddha indulging in flowery language just for its own sake, he is communicating something that he thinks is worth communicating, that is meant to move us at the deepest level of our being and spiritual intuition.”

References

Editor’s Preface in Sangharakshita, 1993, *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Glasgow, Windhorse.

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

The Glory of the Literary World – Reflections on the Buddhist Canonical Literature in Sangharakshita, 1993, *The Priceless Jewel*. Windhorse, Glasgow, pp.159-175.

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

Suggested questions

Please reflect on one, or more, of the questions below:

1. How do you characteristically respond to the mythic, the poetic, parable, legend and story in Western culture, and also in Buddhist literature? Explore two or three great works of art that particularly move you? Pay attention to how you derive meaning from them.
2. Are there any Buddhist stories, parables, myths or symbols that you warm to and find yourself imaginatively engaging with?
3. Reflect on what you find to be the most effective and useful way to engage with stories, parables, myths and symbols? Is it sufficient for them to stand without further ‘explanation’? How would you respond to a more ‘art’-based approach to exploring your responses, e.g. using pencil or paint, or creative writing?

4. What is your own personal bias in respect of abstract, conceptual language on the one hand, and non-rational, poetic language on the other? How does this work itself out in your own life? How is this reflected in terms of how you relate to scientific and poetic truths?
5. How do you relate to the contention that archetypal experience is as significant as our ongoing everyday experience of ourselves?

In the group

Share and discuss any relevant experience sparked off by reading the text above and the questions that have been of interest to you, as well as any other issues relating to the principal themes of the unit.

Unit 2 – The Mahāyāna’s Stance

Aim

This unit, in focusing on the spiritual tradition of the Mahāyāna from which the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* emerged, aims to help us clarify some of the spiritual concerns and attitudes that inspired Mahāyāna practitioners and that are expressed throughout the Sūtra.

Preparation

As for the last unit, below is a précis condensing a number of Ugyen Sangharakshita’s lectures and published writings (see references below). Read this and reflect on one, or more, of the questions that you’ll find at the end.

“In discussing how best to read the Sūtra we have come to some understanding of why the Lotus Sūtra explores the Dharma principally through parables, myths, symbols and archetypes. As we read the Sūtra, it is also important to bear in mind that it is a product of the second great phase of Indian Buddhism, the Mahāyāna. And while the fundamentals, the essence of the Dharma remains the same, the way the Sūtra presents the Dharma reflects the particular emphases and perspectives of the Mahāyāna.

Although one way to deepen our understanding of these concerns is through studying the history of the development of the Mahāyāna – and there are some excellent explorations of this (see ‘Further reading’ in the Appendix) – in this unit we will simply introduce a few of the distinctive emphases of the Mahāyāna expressed in the Lotus Sūtra.

In keeping with the Sūtra’s mode, we’ll start with a parable. Let’s suppose that there is a terrible famine somewhere of the kind that still happens. People are gaunt and emaciated, and there is horrible suffering. In a certain town in the country which has been struck by this famine there live two men: one old, one young, who each have an enormous quantity of grain, easily enough to feed all the people.

The old man puts outside his front door a notice which reads: ‘Whoever comes will be given food.’ But after that statement there follows a long list of conditions and rules. If people want food they must come at a certain time, on the very minute. They must bring with them receptacles of a certain shape and size. And holding these receptacles in a certain way, they must ask the old man for food in certain set phrases which are to be spoken in an archaic language. Not many people see the notice, for the old man lives in an out-of-the-way street; and of those who do see it, a few come for food and receive it, but others are put off by the long list of rules. If food is only available on those terms it seems less troublesome to go hungry. When the old man is asked why he imposes so many rules, he says, ‘That’s how it was in my grandfather’s time whenever there was a

famine. What was good enough for him is certainly good enough for me. Who am I to change things?’ He adds that, ‘if people really want food they will observe any number of rules to get it. If they won’t observe the rules they can’t really be hungry.’

Meanwhile the young man takes a great sack of grain on his back and goes from door to door giving it out. As soon as one sack is empty, he rushes home for another one. In this way he gives out a great deal of grain all over the town. He gives it to anyone who asks. He’s so keen to feed the people that he doesn’t mind going into the poorest, darkest, and dirtiest of hovels. He doesn’t mind going to places where respectable people don’t usually venture. The only thought in his head is that nobody should be allowed to starve. Some people say that he’s a busybody, others that he takes too much on himself. Some people go so far as to say that he’s interfering with the law of karma. Others complain that a lot of grain is being wasted, because people take more than they really need. The young man doesn’t care about any of this. He says it’s better that some grain is wasted than that anyone should starve to death.

One day the young man happens to pass by the old man’s house. The old man is sitting outside peacefully smoking his pipe, because it isn’t yet time to hand out grain. He says to the young man as he hurries past, ‘You look tired. Why don’t you take it easy?’ The young man replies, rather breathlessly, ‘I can’t. There are still lots of people who haven’t been fed.’ The old man shakes his head wonderingly. ‘Let them come to you! Why should you go dashing off to them?’ But the young man, impatient to be on his way, says, ‘They’re too weak to come to me. They can’t even walk. If I don’t go to them they’ll die.’ ‘That’s too bad,’ says the old man, ‘they should have come earlier, when they were stronger. If they didn’t think ahead that’s their fault. Why should you worry if they die?’ But by this time the young man is out of earshot, already on his way home for another sack. The old man rises and pins another notice beside the first one. The notice reads: ‘Rules for reading the rules.’

No doubt you’ve already guessed one possible reading of the parable: that it contrasts two very different attitudes to spiritual life and our motives for engaging in it. The old man can be seen to represent the Hīnayāna; the young man the Mahāyāna; the ‘stock’ characters of Arhat and Bodhisattva respectively found in so many Mahāyāna Sūtras. The famine is the human predicament, the people of the town are all living beings, and the grain is the Dharma, the teaching. As a universal religion, Buddhism addresses itself not to any particular group or community, but potentially to each and every human being. Nevertheless, just as in principle both the old man and the young man are willing to give out grain to everybody, so in principle both the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna are universally applicable, i.e. meant for all, but we find there are important differences in approach and emphasis.

The Mahāyāna derives its inspiration not only from the Buddha's teaching but also from the way he lived his life, particularly the very evident compassion that motivated the Buddha's entire life. This is why the Mahāyāna stresses both wisdom and compassion, saying that compassion inevitably arises from true wisdom. Mahāyāna scriptures say, 'Wisdom and Compassion are the two wings of the bird of Enlightenment, and with one wing only it cannot fly.' The life story of the Buddha shows that he didn't wait for people to come to him. He didn't just sit under the bodhi tree and wait for disciples. During the forty-five years following his Enlightenment, he travelled far and wide to seek people out and teach them. Time and time again the scriptures report the Buddha as saying, 'I went to them and said...' He used to go out to meet people - merchants, queens, goatherds, flower-sellers – and afterwards tell his disciples, 'I went to them and said...' And if someone came to see him, the Buddha would take the initiative in the conversation. He would greet the newcomer and put them at their ease, so that they felt welcome. This was the living example of the Buddha.

In the same spirit the Mahāyāna goes out to meet people. The Mahāyāna literally speaks the language of the people it is addressing. For example, in all the Mahāyāna Buddhist countries - China, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia – the scriptures were translated from the Indian languages into the local language from the very first. Tibet didn't even have a written alphabet when Buddhism first arrived there. The first Tibetan Buddhists created a literary language so that the Tibetan people could read them for themselves. But more than this, the Mahāyāna also tries to speak the appropriate language of its audience, not just literally but metaphorically.

The young man's activity, coming from his compassionate concern for others' welfare, exemplifies the Mahāyāna's great emphasis on 'skilful means' (*upāya-kauśalya*), i.e. the use of whatever pragmatic means, pertinent in particular circumstances, that lead in the direction of authentic spiritual freedom. On a practical level, this is essentially a matter of approaching people, not through some ulterior motive such as wanting them to convert to Buddhism, but as an expression of positive feeling, kindness, friendly concern, and natural spontaneous awareness of what they need, empathizing with and encouraging them. This is what draws people to follow the Dharma, which is itself the greatest of 'skilful means', and what constitutes the life-blood of the Sangha.

Consequently, one of the Buddha's teachings that the Mahāyāna is concerned to emphasise is the simple – but profound – realization that concern for the welfare and the spiritual development of other people is an integral part of one's own spiritual development. Indeed, to be concerned with one's own development but completely uninterested in that of other people is self-defeating in the long run.

The Mahāyāna's great spiritual hero, the Bodhisattva - a being (*sattva*) dedicated to the attainment of Enlightenment or awakening (*bodhi*) – draws inspiration from the figure of Siddhartha Gotama setting out on the quest for Enlightenment. The

Bodhisattva is one in whom the urge to grow which is present in every living being has become self-conscious. Realizing that the urge to develop spiritually is potential in all living beings, a Bodhisattva feels a sense of solidarity with other beings, and could not possibly ignore them and think solely in terms of his or her own salvation. Bodhisattvas therefore dedicate themselves to Enlightenment not just for their own sake but for the sake of all living beings whatsoever.

The Mahāyāna vision sees that all forms of life in the universe on all levels, and perhaps especially on the human level, are interrelated and interacting. This vision is not static, for the individual forms that make it up are in motion, all are heading in one direction. Admittedly, some are a little further ahead, and some are lagging behind, but they are all moving towards the same goal, and they are all, directly or indirectly, in contact with one another. The urge to Enlightenment, the transcendent urge to something above and beyond the world, is innate in all life, but it is a blind urge, like that of lotus plants sunk in the mud groping for the light, and it becomes self-conscious in the Bodhisattva.

But we should not think, ‘Hīnayāna – bad’, ‘Mahāyāna – good’. These two great Buddhist traditions enshrine enormously important spiritual principles that have appealed to practitioners to this day, the contrast between them helping to elucidate those principles. Evidence of the contrast between the Bodhisattva and the Arhat is plentiful in the Mahāyāna scriptures, and indeed the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*. For a really vivid impression you have only to look at the Buddhist paintings and sculptures produced in India and China. The Bodhisattva is usually depicted as a beautiful young man or woman sitting on a delicate lotus flower. He or she has a graceful figure, long flowing locks, and many fine ornaments. The Arhat, on the other hand, is usually an old man with a bald head and bushy eyebrows. Clad in a shabby monastic robe, he leans wearily on a knotted staff. No lotus seat for him - he is usually standing on solid rock, or sometimes, for a change, floating on the ocean.

The Bodhisattva represents the transcendental spiritual ideal in all its perfection and purity, the abstract ideal not stained by anything of the world, but lifted above it. The Bodhisattva is not young as distinct from being old, but eternally young, which means that the youthfulness of the Bodhisattva represents something outside time and space.

The Arhat, by contrast, represents the realization of the ideal under the conditions and limitations of space and time, the stress of history. So the Arhat is not just somebody who is old, but somebody who has become old. No wonder the Arhat has a weather-beaten, worn look.

The youthful figure of the Bodhisattva represents the ideal as it exists outside space and time, and the Arhat is that same ideal incorporated within the historical process, manifesting under the conditions of space and time. The very fact of those conditions means that the ideal cannot manifest fully. Even if you have realized

that the eternally youthful Bodhisattva represents you as a human being, can you manifest that spiritual ideal fully in your life? Your life has only a certain length, and you have only two arms, two legs, and one pair of hands. There is so much to do, and so much that you cannot do. So within the historical process the ideal cannot actually be manifested fully by any individual, not even by the Buddha. The historical Buddha died. To manifest the ideal fully he would have had to go on living for ever and ever, and living everywhere. A limitation is automatically imposed if you are existing under the conditions of space and time as an ordinary human being. This is what the Arhat represents, and this is why he appears battered and bowed. The ideal is there, but it is there as manifested under the conditions of space and time.

Another reading of our parable could be as follows: until we have reached a relatively refined level of spiritual practice, there is little point in exploring metaphysical subtleties; while we are still finding it difficult to concentrate the mind, or practise mindfulness in the affairs of everyday life, it is more important to focus on basic principles, such as generosity (*dāna*). Without this preparation the deeper insights of Buddhism may remain for us just matters of philosophy in the narrow intellectual sense, with no real bearing on our own lives. This is why the Dharma as presented in such works as the Lotus Sūtra is so popular.

Nevertheless some introduction to the Mahāyāna's 'philosophical perspectives' can help us with what may appear at first sight fantastical in works such as the Sūtra, and help explain why Mahayanists used what to our minds are 'science-fictional' flights of fancy.

The Mahāyāna wants to stress that we should see existence not statically, but dynamically; not in terms of entities, but in terms of processes; not in terms of fixed solid unchanging things, but terms of what are called *dharmas* – an untranslatable term which means something like 'phenomena.' These dharmas are in the ultimate sense neither existent nor non-existent – the terms 'existent' and 'non-existent' themselves are only ideas of our own mind. Dharmas being neither existent nor non-existent, they have no separate characteristics by which they can be distinguished or recognised. Because they have no separate characteristics, they are inconceivable and inexpressible.

While it might be relatively easy to say, this is not easy to understand deeply. We can find ourselves speaking of higher spiritual experience, even Nirvana, as if we know all about it. But we don't. While we may think we can conceive of it, in fact, we don't really know anything about it at all. And it is vital to remember this. It means that as we progress in the spiritual life, we are going forward into the unknown. Spiritual emancipation is always freedom from the known; its attainment always of the unknown, the unpredictable, the unforeseen, even the unforeseeable. The truth is that spiritual emancipation is inconceivable.

It is not that we don't know anything about higher spiritual experiences. Since existence itself is inconceivable, the fact is we don't really know anything about anything at all. It's not that we don't know very much, or that we don't know it very well. This statement is to be taken quite literally: we don't know anything about anything. But of course we think we know, and on that basis we build up all sorts of thought-constructions, ideas, attitudes, views and philosophies. But, according to the Mahāyāna these are nothing but delusions.

So here is a paradox: the Dharma reveals the nature of existence – but if the nature of existence is inconceivable and not to be fathomed by thought, it cannot be uttered in words. And not only do we not know anything about anything, we cannot really say anything about anything. Even Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot really teach the Dharma in words. So how is the Dharma to be communicated and taught?

The Mahāyāna seeks to demonstrate the Dharma through action, and frequently through magical action. According to Buddhist tradition, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas possess all sorts of magical powers. They can move things from place to place, create things, transform themselves into the likeness of anything they wish. Moreover, they can do this on a cosmic scale. They can move whole universes, and play with space and time. This is the stuff of transcendental science fiction in which the magical acts are seen to demonstrate the Dharma.

There is good reason for this: existence itself is frequently compared to a magic show, like a magical illusion. Just as dharmas are neither existent nor non-existent they cannot be said to really appear nor disappear. Existence is just like a great collective hallucination, that the Mahāyāna also compares to a dream, an echo, a mirage, a reflection, a ball of foam, and so on. But, for all this the Mahāyāna is not trying to tell us that nothing exists at all. What it questions is the ultimate validity of the conceptual constructions that we superimpose upon our experience. Where we go wrong is in interpreting our experience in terms of fixed, solid, unchanging things. This is why the Mahāyāna regards magical acts as being demonstrations of the Dharma: because these acts are themselves an illustration of what existence is really like.

Bearing these concerns of Mahāyāna practitioners in mind we will be more able to mine the riches deep within the Sūtras they wrote to express their inspiration and love of the Dharma.”

References

Sangharakshita, *The Universal Perspective of Mahāyāna Buddhism in The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993.

Sangharakshita, 'The Magic of a Mahāyāna Sūtra' in *The Inconceivable Liberation, Themes from the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa: a Mahāyāna Buddhist Text*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993:

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

Suggested questions

Reflect on one or more of the questions below:

1. Can you summarize the difference in the perspectives of the Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna?
2. As exemplified in the 'Parable of the Young and Old Man', Sangharakshita asserts that, whilst all forms of Buddhism are in principle universal, the Mahāyāna is more effectively universal in practice than Hīnayāna. This is because, in following the example of the Buddha in going forth out of compassion to communicate truth to others, the Mahāyāna stresses both Wisdom and Compassion. The Mahāyāna does not wait for people to come to it, but goes out to them in many different ways. Explore for yourself what makes for a 'universal' perspective. To what extent are you motivated by it?
3. If we find 'Basic Buddhism' communicated within the pages of the Pāli Canon, what need for Mahāyāna Sūtras, and spending time with them?
4. To what extent do you engage with the ideal of the Bodhisattva, and hence might think of yourself as a 'Novice bodhisattva'? If so, what particularly attracts you in the Bodhisattva's path of training? What challenges does it pose for you in your life? Or would you prefer to see yourself as a potential Arhat? Wherein lie any dangers of literalism for the practitioner?
5. What do you make of the Mahāyāna's concern to envisage magical action as a means to exemplifying the inconceivable nature of experience?

In the group

Share and discuss any relevant experience sparked off by reading the text above and the questions that have been of interest to you, as well as any other issues relating to the principal themes of the unit.

Unit 3 – The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra, The White Lotus Sūtra

Aim

To get an introductory overview of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* and a sense of how the story unfolds, its shape and feel.

Preparation

Before you get hold of a copy of the Sūtra, (or even the Abridgement) and start reading, as a first step I strongly recommend listening to Sangharakshita's audio-lecture: *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment* (link below), in which he introduces the story of the Sūtra, chapter by chapter (you can also download a transcript of the talk from the same site). This will come as near as you can get to the original mode of oral transmission by which the Sūtra passed from generation to generation until it was written down.

As you listen, just listen: imagine the story unfolding in your mind's eye, as it were, visualising the scenes like watching a film. The Sūtra is a kind of transcendental science-fiction: at times strange, bizarre, unfamiliar, unintelligible, incomprehensible, surreal. Stop your rational mind from ticking; don't think, or ask yourself what it means, or what it's getting at; don't try to work it out. For now just let the Sūtra's images work their own effect; allow yourself to feel and imagine the story unfolding.

You can listen online, or download Tracks 6-14 of the mp3/mp4 audio-file formats at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=96>

The total length of this section of the talk is 65 minutes.

Afterwards, reflect on some of the questions below:

1. What impact has the story of the Sūtra as a whole made on you? What kind of a feeling are you left with? This may not be easily put into words. It may be more of a sense of 'something', even some kind of meaningful embodied experience: definite but more physical and kinesthetic than conceptual.
2. Clarify your personal responses to the Sūtra, e.g. do you feel inspired and uplifted, or alternatively, challenged and disturbed? What are the nature of any doubts or questions you may have?
3. What do you make of the Sūtra both as a whole and any particular aspects of it that strongly appeal to you? What is your overall felt sense of its meaning and purpose?
4. Ask yourself: "Are there any implications here for my life: my attitude, my approach to spiritual life, the choices I make?"

In the group

Discuss your experience of doing the preparation with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material in the Appendix.

Alternatively, spend the evening reading the Abridgement together, assigning different parts to different readers. It will take approx. 2 hrs 15 minutes.

Unit 4 – Transcending the Human Predicament

Aim

To explore our individual response to the Buddha’s revelation of Universal Enlightenment in the Sūtra’s first three chapters, and to engage with questions implicit to practising upāya or ‘skilful means’ as highlighted through the ‘Parable of the Burning House’.

Preparation

For a succinct recapitulation of the first three chapters of the Sūtra, read the relevant paragraphs, reproduced here, from Chapter Nine of Sangharakshita’s *The Eternal Legacy*, pp.109-112.

“As in the case of a number of other Sūtras, both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, the venue of the great revelation is the Gṛdhra-kūṭa or ‘Vulture-Peak’ overlooking Rājagṛha. In the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, however, the earth is spiritualised, and the Peak represents, not a geographical expression, but the summit of existence. This is indicated by the fact that around the Buddha are gathered not only twelve thousand Arhats but eighty thousand Bodhisattvas, besides tens of thousands of gods and other non-human beings with their followers. To this vast assembly he preaches the *Vaipulya-sūtranta* known as the *Mahā-nirdeśa* or ‘Great Exposition’.

Flowers fall from the heavens and the universe shakes. He then enters into deep meditation, whereupon there issues from between his eyebrows a ray of light which illumines upward to their highest heavens and downwards to their lowest hells, innumerable world-systems in the infinitude of space, revealing in each one of them a Buddha teaching the Dharma to his disciples, and Bodhisattvas sacrificing life and limbs for the sake of Supreme Enlightenment. Voicing the curiosity of the whole congregation, Maitreya inquires of Mañjuśrī the meaning of this sublime spectacle. The latter, who has witnessed such wonders before, under previous Buddhas, replies that the emission of the Ray has always preceded the promulgation of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, which he believes the present Exalted one to be about to preach (Chapter 1).

Emerging from his meditation, the Buddha proceeds to justify the transition from the more elementary teaching to which he had hitherto confined himself and the higher one now to be disclosed. Addressing Śāriputra, and through him the whole assembly, he declares that truth in its plenitude can be understood only by the Tathāgatas. Others must have faith in the Word of the Buddha and approach it gradually, step by step, through a series of progressive stages. For this reason it had been necessary for him to preach, by way of introduction, first the lower, preparatory ideals of the Arhat and the Pratyekabuddha. Had he all at once revealed to his disciples the highest truth, telling them outright that they too were one day to attain Supreme Enlightenment, they would never have believed him. Even now, despite the entreaties of Śāriputra, he is doubtful whether the

congregation is ready for his ultimate revelation. For some, who refuse to accept it, it may even be an occasion of spiritual disaster. As though in confirmation of his words, five thousand Hīnayāna disciples, recoiling in dismay from the threatened supersession of their cherished ideals and achievements, withdraw from the assembly. To the faithful that remain, Bodhisattvas and Disciples (*śrāvakas*) both, the Buddha reveals the final truth.

The three different yānas or vehicles which he has appeared to preach, representing the Arhat, the Pratyekabuddha and the Bodhisattva ideals, are only temporary expedients made necessary by the diversity of temperament among the disciples, as well as by their varying degrees of spiritual development. In reality there is but One Vehicle (*ekayāna*), the Great Vehicle (*Mahāyāna*), wherein the Buddha himself abides and by means of which he delivers sentient beings, leading them from the provisional to the final truth, from partial to complete enlightenment. Were he to act otherwise he would be guilty of spiritual selfishness. Supreme Buddhahood alone is for all the ultimate goal. Whoever practise the pāramitās, ‘engage in devotional observances’ - offering even a single flower in worship – have, as it were, already become Buddhas. The one thing needful is faith (*śraddhā*), not in the sense of belief in unverifiable propositions, but in that of the existential response of one’s total being when confronted by the image of the highest spiritual perfection (Chapter 2).

This response to the Buddha’s words elicits from Śāriputra, who, overjoyed that he is to become a Fully Enlightened One, regrets at having hitherto devoted himself to the realization of an inferior ideal. The Buddha tells him that he and the other disciples took the Bodhisattva Vow under him aeons ago, but that temporarily forgetful of the fact, he had, in his present existence, wrongly imagined the Hīnayānic Nirvana to be the highest possible achievement. In the inconceivably distant future, he predicts, Śāriputra will become a Tathāgata called Padmaprabhāsa or ‘Lotus-Radiance’, his Buddha-field (*-kṣetra*) will be known as the Vimala, ‘Dustless’ or ‘Passionless’, and his aeon (*kalpa*) as the Mahāratnaprati-maṇḍita or ‘Great Jewel-Adorned’. He will train and mature countless Bodhisattvas.

Though Śāriputra had accepted the new dispensation with such alacrity, other members of the congregation are still tormented by doubts. Was the previous teaching actually false? Have they gained nothing at all by following it so devotedly over such a long period? Has the Buddha not deceived them? In order to reassure and finally convince these disciples the Buddha tells the first of his tremendous parables, that of the Burning House. At great length, with splendour of language and abundance of picturesque detail, he describes how a prominent elder, possessed of inexhaustible riches, lived with his numerous progeny in an old, dilapidated, vermin-infested mansion. One day fire breaks out. The children, absorbed in play, do not notice what has happened; but their father, who is outside, realises that they are in imminent danger of destruction and calls to them to come out.

Since they ignore his appeals, and go on playing, he resolves to have recourse to a stratagem. Knowing that his boys were inordinately fond of playthings of various kinds, he again calls out to them, this time promising to some goat-carts, to others deer-carts and to yet others bullock-carts. On hearing these words they all come rushing and tumbling out of the burning house. Having brought them to safety, the elder bestows upon them, in response to their demands, not the three different kinds of cart actually promised, but bullock-carts only, all of the most splendid workmanship imaginable. For he feels that possessed as he is of inexhaustible riches it would be unbecoming for him to bestow upon his own offspring inferior things. The burning house is conditioned existence; the children, sentient beings; the wise elder, the Buddha. By the three kinds of vehicle are typified the Arhat, the Pratyekabuddha, and the Bodhisattva ideals. The bullock-carts in which, after their escape from the house, the children all equally ride, is the Buddha-yāna or Mahāyāna.

In promising one thing and giving another the elder was not guilty of falsehood, for he had from the beginning determined to save his children by means of an expedient. No more, therefore, is the Buddha himself guilty of falsehood in first preaching the Three Vehicles to attract all sentient beings and afterwards saving them by means of the One Vehicle only (Chapter 3).”

Read Chapters 1-3 of the Sūtra. As you do so reflect on one, or more, of the questions below:

1. Which elements in these first three chapters, as well as the parable, are you drawn to, and why? What kind of spiritual issues are raised for you?
2. The parable’s principal metaphor of the ‘Burning House’ has had an enduring effect on the Buddhist imagination, as well as raising challenging questions for both teachers and disciples. In what ways do you experience ‘the burning house’ of saṃsāra? Do you resonate with the metaphor of the human condition being that of a predicament or trap? Are you prone to ‘escapism’? If so, how? Are there any particular ‘games’ that you are not so willing to ‘let go of’, to ‘move on from’? In what sense could Buddhism be said to promote ‘escapism’ (as other religions are similarly accused by scientific rationalists)? How do you respond to the criticism that the parable is effectively a secularized vision of Heaven and Hell?
3. What sort of ‘vehicle’ will really work to ‘get you out of your burning house’? Is this really any different to any other vehicles that you know of? How important is that?
4. Can you identify in any way with the Father’s predicament? How do you envisage reconciling ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’ approaches? The parable might appear to suggest that ‘ends can justify the means’? What do you think about this? What do you make of the parable’s exemplification of ‘skilful means’ (upāya)? How do you make sense of the Sūtra’s claim that the father has not acted dishonestly in

offering his children different carts but then giving them all the same kind? How does this relate to the distinction between Doctrine (*dharma*) and Method (*vinaya*)?

5. The ‘Parable of the Burning House’ is told by the Buddha in the wake of a number of his advanced followers deciding they have learnt all that they need to learn. What do you make of the incident in the Sūtra of the Arahats ‘walking out’? What do you think this says about the relationship of a Teacher(s) to his or her disciples, and the notion of ‘living independently of the Teacher’s dispensation’? What do you make of reviewing your whole understanding of the Dharma whenever you gain a new insight into an aspect of it?
6. How could the distinction between ultimate (*paramārtha-satya*) and relative (*samvṛti-satya*) truths help with rationalising the justification of any activity as skilful means, e.g: “It works for me”?

In the group

1. Assigning parts to different readers, read aloud Chapters 1-3 of the Abridgement of the Sūtra, (reproduced in the Appendix).
2. Discuss your experience with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, or other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material or other exercises suggested in the Appendix.
3. Conclude your session by reading the excerpt from the Abridgement again.

Unit 5 – The Myth of the Return Journey

Aim

To explore those symbols that speak to us of the human condition, to examine in what sense we personally are ‘on a return journey’, and to engage further with the questions inherent to the use of ‘skilful means’.

Preparation

The Buddha’s four most senior disciples tell the ‘Myth of the Return Journey’ as a way of expressing their delight in the Buddha’s revelation of the ‘higher truth’ – that they too can follow the Buddha’s example in achieving supreme Enlightenment.

For a succinct recapitulation of this section of the Sūtra, read the relevant paragraphs, reproduced here, from Chapter Nine of Sangharakshita’s *The Eternal Legacy*, pp.112-113.

“This parable is not without effect. Four of the leading elders, Subhuti, Mahākātyāyana, Mahākāśyapa and Mahāmaudgalyāyana, though at first amazed by the Buddha’s prediction of Śāriputra to Supreme Enlightenment, now realise that even for Arhats like themselves who, owing to age and decrepitude, have so far remained content with the Hīnayānic Nirvana, it is not too late to transfer their allegiance to the higher Bodhisattva ideal and aspire after Buddhahood. Elated by the glorious prospect, they give expression to their joy, which Mahākāśyapa, with the Buddha’s permission, explains in the form of a parable.:

A young man has left home and for many years wandered from place to place abroad, becoming all the while poorer and more wretched. His father, after searching for him in vain, settles in a certain city and engaging in business amasses immense riches. Eventually, by accident, the son reaches that very place and happens to see his father seated in his mansion surrounded by all the paraphernalia of wealth, but without being able to recognise him. The rich man, however, at once recognises his son, and dispatches his attendants to call him. The poor wretch, afraid of being arrested, falls down senseless with fear. Realising that years of poverty have debased his son’s mind, the rich man decides not to announce their relationship all at once. Instead, he sends first an attendant to set him at liberty, and afterwards two shabbily dressed men to hire him as a scavenger. When he has been employed for some time the father, disguising himself, contrives to approach him periodically, admonishing him to work well, promising to increase his wages, and eventually declaring that he will henceforth regard him as his own son. As a result of this treatment, mutual confidence develops between the two, and the son gradually learns to go in and out of his adoptive father’s mansion as he pleases. One day the rich man falls ill, and knowing he will soon die, commits the management of his entire property, and all his affairs, to the son, who is now equal to the responsibility. Finally, on his deathbed, he publicly relates the whole story, declaring that the supposed manager

is in reality his son and the natural heir to his immense riches. The son, on hearing these words, is filled with joy at such an unexpected stroke of good fortune.

As Mahākāśyapa proceeds to explain, the rich man is the Buddha, while the poor son represents himself and the other disciples who, after removing the dirt of the passions, have been content to receive Nirvana as it were for their day's wages. The announcement that the real relation between the two was that of father and son is like the Buddha's declaration that the Arhats are not hirelings of the Dharma but his own true sons, that is to say Bodhisattvas, and heirs to the infinite riches of Supreme Enlightenment. Like the poor man, they too are astounded and rejoice (Chapter IV)."

Read Chapter 4 of the Sūtra. As you do so reflect on one, or more, of the questions below:

1. What are the main point(s) being communicated through this myth to you? Are there any elements in the myth that you particularly identify with, or that speak to you? How do you experience that? Are there any particular spiritual issues there for you?
2. In what ways do you experience your (spiritual) life as 'a journey'? How, if at all, could you view this as 'a return'? Even if you don't have a sense of 'returning', how would doing so make a difference to your experience of 'journeying'?
3. Are there any other symbols, perhaps coming from great works of art, that speak to you of the human condition? In what ways does this bring out different dimensions of your experience to that of 'life as a journey'?
4. If we read the Myth of the Return Journey as symbolising different dimensions of our own individual psyche, what do you personally draw from it that speaks to you of a relationship between your Higher and Lower Selves? How can this language work as a skilful means?
5. Does this Myth promote paternalism?
6. What are you learning about the Buddhist conception of *upāya* or 'skilful means'? In what ways do you see the parables exemplifying the four 'means of unification' (*saṃghrahavastu*): generosity, loving speech, beneficial activity and exemplification, that is said to be one of the key elements of skilful means?

In the group

1. Assigning parts to different readers, read aloud Chapter 4 of the Sūtra from the Abridgement (reproduced in the Appendix).
2. Discuss your experience with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that

members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material or other exercises in the Appendix.

3. Conclude your session by reading the excerpt from the Abridgement again.

Unit 6 – The Jewel in the Lotus

Aim

To continue to explore the symbolism of lower and higher self through firstly the parables of the ‘Place of Jewels’, and the ‘Drunkard and the Jewel’, and secondly that of Avalokiteśvara’s mantra.

Preparation

While Chapter 10’s parable of the ‘Drunkard and the Jewel’ has similar motifs to that in the ‘Myth of the Return Journey’, there are some essential differences that are interesting to explore. At the same time, as Sangharakshita demonstrates in his lecture, the parable has close resonances with Avalokiteśvara’s mantra. So, although Avalokiteśvara’s role in the Lotus Sūtra is arguably peripheral, this is an opportunity to pay attention to Chapter 25, devoted to perhaps the most prominent of Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas.

For a succinct recapitulation of this section of the Sūtra, read the relevant paragraphs, reproduced here, from Chapter Nine of Sangharakshita’s *The Eternal Legacy*, pp.114-117.

“Interest now shifts from the future to the past. Addressing the whole body of his disciples, the Buddha speaks of Mahābhijñānabhibhu, a Tathāgata who had flourished incalculable aeons earlier and whose career in certain respects parallels his own. While the rest of this Buddha’s followers had remained content with the Hīnayāna doctrine, his sixteen *śrāmaṇera* sons, born before his retirement from the world, had aspired to Supreme Enlightenment, and for their benefit he had preached the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*. All of them had subsequently been crowned with the highest spiritual achievement, the youngest being none other than the speaker, Śākyamuni, himself. The countless beings to whom the sixteen, as *śrāmaṇeras*, had given instruction, were now reborn as human beings and had become Hīnayāna bhikshus. Similarly those who, at the time of his parinirvāṇa, were still unable to accept the Mahāyāna, would be reborn in other world-systems where, under his guidance, they would continue their training and be led, eventually, into the way of Supreme Enlightenment.

His seeming entry into *parinirvāṇa* was only a device for training monks of lower aims. In reality there could be only one parinirvāṇa and one *yāna*, not a second or a third. The Tathāgata preached the Hīnayāna Nirvana for the sake of those who were bent on the enjoyment of trifling things and deeply attached to human desires. This is illustrated by a parable:

A guide is conducting a large party of travellers through a dense forest, along a dangerous and difficult road, to Ratnadvīpa, ‘The Place of Jewels’, their destination. On the way the travellers become exhausted, and tell the guide they want to turn back. The latter, out of pity, thereupon conjures up a magic city and invites them to rest and refresh themselves therein. Only when they have regained

their strength does he cause the city to disappear and urge them to complete their journey. The magical city is the Hīnayānic Nirvāṇa conjured up, as it were, by the Buddha out of compassion for those who might otherwise have turned back, discouraged, before reaching Supreme Enlightenment. It is a temporary, provisional state, for the true Nirvana is Buddhahood itself.

The Buddhas, the onward Leaders,
Call the resting-place Nirvāṇa,
But, perceiving Their people rested,
They lead on to Buddha-Wisdom.¹

The effects of Śākyamuni's exhortations now begin to be felt among the congregation at large, and more and more disciples come forward to confess their shortcomings and announce their acceptance of the new teaching. Pūrṇa Mairāyaṇīputra, whom the Buddha extols as the foremost of his preachers, is predicted to Supreme Enlightenment, likewise five hundred other distinguished Arhats. As Mahākāśyapa had done, they give expression to their feelings by means of a parable which, being shorter than most of the others, may be quoted in full:

‘World-honoured One! It is as if some man goes to an intimate friend’s house, gets drunk, and falls asleep. Meanwhile his friend, having to go forth on official duty, ties a priceless jewel within his garment as a present, and departs. The man, being drunk and asleep, knows nothing of it. On arising he travels onward till he reaches some other country, where for food and clothing he expends much labour and effort, and undergoes exceedingly great hardship, and is content even if he can obtain but little. Later, his friend happens to meet him and speaks thus: “Tut! Sir, how is it you have come to this for the sake of food and clothing? Wishing you to be in comfort and able to satisfy all your five senses, I formerly in such a year and month and on such a day tied a priceless jewel within your garment. Now as of old it is present there and you in ignorance are slaving and worrying to keep yourself alive. How very stupid! Go you now and exchange that jewel for what you need and do what-ever you will, free from all poverty and shortage.”’²

The jewel represents the aspiration after Supreme Enlightenment which, though taught them by the Buddha in a previous existence, the Arhats had temporarily forgotten (Chapter VIII).

Further predictions follow. Ananda, Rahula, and two thousand other disciples are in turn assured of the highest spiritual perfection. The apparent favouritism shown to Ananda, whose prediction is couched in particularly glowing terms, is explained as the consequence of his Original Vow that, till the time of his own Supreme

¹ *ibid.* Ch.7, last four lines.

² *The Threefold Lotus Sutra* Bunno Kato, Yoshiro Tamura, and Kojiro Miyasaka (New York and Tokyo, 1975), p.177.

Enlightenment, he would be the guardian of the Dharma of future Buddhas (Chapter IX).

The Hīnayāna disciples having been persuaded to accept the higher spiritual ideal, Śākyamuni impresses upon all the Bodhisattvas present the supreme importance of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* and the necessity for its preservation. Addressing the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja or ‘King of Healing’ he declares that those sentient beings, of the various types and classes represented in the assembly, who hear but a single verse or word of this Sūtra, or by so much as a single thought delight in it, are all assured of Supreme Enlightenment. Moreover, the written text is not only to be read, recited, copied and expounded, but ceremonially worshipped with all manner of precious things. Thereby incalculable spiritual benefits will accrue. On the other hand, while all other blasphemy, even the Buddha, is comparatively trivial, the sin of abusing Sūtra, or defaming its devotees, is extremely grave. Such indeed, is its transcendent virtue, that beings having even the remotest connection with it are blessed. Those who worship it become themselves worthy of worship.

In particular should the preacher of this Sūtra be honoured even with flowers, perfumes and jewels. The preacher himself, however, must be endowed with qualities commensurate with those of the discourse. He should ‘enter into the abode of the Tathāgata, be clad with the Robe of the Tathāgata, and sit on the sacred Seat of the Tathāgata... The abode of the Tathāgata is love (*maitrī*) towards all sentient beings. The Robe of the Tathāgata is great patient forbearance (*mahākṣanti*). The sacred Seat of the Tathāgata is the Voidness of all the elements of existence (*sarvadharmā-śūnyatā*).’³ Besides cherishing and protecting such a preacher, Śākyamuni promises, he will from time to time appear before him in a pure and shining spiritual form (Chapter X).

...In the Sanskrit text as now extant there ensues a series of episodes, devoted to the cult of various Bodhisattvas, such as Bhaiṣajyarāja, who offer spells (*dhāraṇīs*) for the protection of the Sūtra, Gadgadaśvara, and Avalokiteśvara (Chapters XXI-XXVI). As these interrupt the continuity of the action, and are no doubt interpolations, they are described in Chapter 11, below. ...

...Chapter XXIV (of the Sūtra) celebrates the praises of the great Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, here also called Samantamukha, and which even now often circulates as an independent work. Asked why Avalokiteśvara is so called, the Buddha replies it is because he delivers from fire, flood, shipwreck and other calamities those who invoke his name. He, too, assumes different forms according to the needs of sentient beings. Towards the end of the chapter his compassionate regard for suffering humanity is hymned in verses of uncommon pathos and beauty:

O you, whose eyes are clear, whose eyes are friendly,

³ *Saddharmapundarikasutram*, p.155.

Whose eyes betray distinguished wisdom-knowledge;
Whose eyes are pitiful, whose eyes are pure,
O you, so lovable, with beautiful face, with beautiful eyes!
Your lustre is spotless and immaculate,
Your knowledge without darkness, your splendour like the sun,
Radiant like the blaze of a fire not disturbed by the wind,
Warming the world you shine splendidly.

Eminent in your pity, friendly in your words,
One great mass of fine virtues and friendly thoughts,
You appease the fire of defilements which burn beings,
And you rain down the rain of the deathless Dharma.”

Then read Chapters 7-10, and 25 of the Sūtra in one or another of its full translations, as well as Edward Conze’s translation of the Bodhisattva Akśayamati’s famous paean of praise to Avalokiteśvara, reproduced below. As you read reflect on one or more of the questions below:

1. What are the significant different emphases between the ‘Parable of the Drunkard and the Jewel’ and the ‘Myth of the Return Journey’? Which elements of the parable do you most identify with, and why? What kind of spiritual issues do they pose for you? Do they bring out any fresh perspectives on how to envisage the notion of ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ self?
2. As symbols, what do you make of ‘sleep’ and ‘drunkenness’? How do you relate to them personally?
3. In what ways does the symbolism of the jewel appeal to you?
4. What are your personal responses to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara? Is a Bodhisattva particularly associated with compassion meaningful to you? Explore your personal responses to the myth of Avalokiteśvara’s birth (attached in the Appendix) – what do you make of the 11 headed, 1000-armed form?
5. Avalokiteśvara’s mantra can be literally translated as ‘The Jewel in the Lotus’ - what does this suggest to you? Can you explain how a mantra works? How do you respond to the idea that symbols are not necessarily visual? What place do you see for music?

In the group

1. Assigning parts to different readers, read aloud Chapters 7, 8, 10 of the Sūtra from the Abridgement (reproduced in the Appendix).
2. Discuss your experience with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material or other exercises in the Appendix.
3. Conclude your session by reading the excerpt from the Abridgement again.

Devotion To Avalokiteśvara

Strong in fine knowledge, Avalokiteśvara surveys

Beings afflicted by countless ills,

And by many ills oppressed.

He thus becomes the Saviour of the worlds with its gods.

He has reached perfection in wonder-working power,

He is trained in abundant cognition and skill in means.

Everywhere in all the ten directions of the world,

In all the Buddha fields he can be seen.

And the terrors of the untoward and bad re-births,

In hells, in brute creation, and in Yama's kingdom,

And the oppressions from birth, old age, and sickness,

Will slowly come to an end for living beings.

Thereupon the Bodhisattva Akṣayamati, joyous and contented in his heart,

Spoke these verses:

“O you, whose eyes are clear, whose eyes are friendly,

Whose eyes betray distinguished wisdom knowledge;

Whose eyes are pitiful, whose eyes are pure,

O you, so lovable, with beautiful face, with beautiful eyes!

Your lustre is spotless and immaculate,
Your knowledge without darkness,
Your splendour like the sun,
Radiant like the blaze of a fire not disturbed by the wind.

Eminent in your pity, friendly in your words,
One great mass of fine virtues and friendly thoughts,
You appease the fire of the defilements which burn beings,
And you rain down the rain of the deathless Dharma.

In quarrels, disputes and strife,
In battles of mean, and in any great danger,
To recollect the name of Avalokiteśvara,
Will appease the troops of evil foes.

His voice is like that of a cloud or drum;
Like a rain-cloud he thunders, sweet in voice like Brahma.
His voice is the most perfect that can be,
So one should recall Avalokiteśvara.

Think of Him, think of Him, without hesitation,
Of Avalokiteśvara, that pure being.
In death, disaster and calamity,
He is the saviour, refuge and recourse.

As he who has reached perfection in all virtues,
Who looks on all beings with pity and friendliness,
Who is virtue itself, a great ocean of virtues,
As such Avalokiteśvara is worthy of adoration.

He who is now so compassionate to the world,
He will be a Buddha in future ages,
Humbly I bow to Avalokiteśvara
Who destroys all sorrows, fear and suffering.”

Saddharma-puṇḍarīka, XXIV, vv 17-27

Conze, Horner, Snellgrove, Waley (Eds.), *Buddhist Texts through the Ages*, Harper & Row, London, 1954, pp.194-6

Unit 7 – Symbols of Life and Growth

Aim

To explore as fully as we can the difference in how we personally experience the implications of two common – contrasting – symbols for spiritual life: a) organic, ‘spatial’ symbols, e.g. an unfolding lotus, b) ‘temporal’ ones such as the path and the journey?

Preparation

After the parables and myths of the chapters so far, we now encounter one of the most enduring of Buddhist poetic images, no less potent and dramatic. To mine its riches, we need to bring a fine sensibility to bear.

Here are the relevant paragraphs from p.113-4 of *The Eternal Legacy* recapitulating Chapter 5 of the Sūtra.

“Praising the four elders for their discernment, the Buddha explains that the qualities of the Tathāgata are beyond calculation. Knowing as he does both the Absolute Truth and the inmost hearts of sentient beings, he leads them into the way of Supreme Enlightenment by tactfully adapting his teachings to their individual dispositions and capacities. This procedure is illustrated by two parables:

A dense raincloud arises, its moisture universally fertilising the plants, shrubs, and trees; but though nourished by the same rain, and springing from a common soil, all these grow according to their own species, and bring forth different kinds of flowers and fruits. In the same way the Buddha preaches one universal Dharma, but sentient beings are benefited by it in accordance with their different capacities. Again as the sun shines on all alike, making no distinction of great or small, high or low, so the Buddha diffuses over all beings impartially the Light of Truth.

At this point Mahākāśyapa raises various questions, which the Buddha answers with the help of two more parables. According to the first of these the differences of nomenclature between the three yānas is comparable to that between, for example, a curd-jar, a butter-jar, and so on, which derive their respective designations from their contents; the jars themselves being the same. Even so, though the Buddha-yāna is one only, three yānas are spoken of by the Tathāgatas by reason of the difference of mental endowment among sentient beings. In the second parable, a blind man after having his eyesight restored, by a skilful physician, is urged to acquire, by means of meditation, the still more powerful supernormal vision of the Saint. Just as ordinary eyesight occupies an intermediate place between blindness and yogic vision, so the Nirvāṇa of the Arhats constitutes a respite on the way from a state of spiritual ignorance to the final and complete illumination of a Buddha. Ultimately there is one Nirvāṇa for the followers of all three yānas, not three separate Nirvanas (Chapter V).”

Read Chapter Five of the Sūtra. As you do so reflect on one, or more, of the questions below:

1. In what sense could it be said that you yourself are becoming a living symbol of life and growth? For example, do you feel the impact of the Dharma on you in the same way as a plant responds to rain and sun? What sort of plant, as it were, are you? What is particularly characteristic to the way you grow and develop? You might like to draw, paint a picture, or write some lines, or find some other way to express your experience of this.
2. In what ways have you, or are you, changing as a consequence of meeting the Dharma? How do you experience this? What 'stages of growth or development' have you experienced? Is it helpful to express this 'poetically'? Are there any other 'spatial' symbols, images, myths, archetypes that express this well for you?
3. What do you think is the significance of the plant imagery compared to that of the journey? How does the contrast between your experience of being on a spiritual journey with that of being a living symbol of life and growth impact on you? Do you experience any paradox or conflict in this? Is it a productive tension? Can you see any limitations or advantages to the plant imagery?

In the group

1. Assigning parts to different readers, read aloud Chapter 5 of the Sūtra from the Abridgement.
2. Discuss your experience with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material in the Appendix.
3. Conclude your session by reading the excerpt from the Abridgement again.

Unit 8 – The Revelation of Abundant Treasures

Aim

To deepen our understanding and appreciation of the unfolding events and elements within chapter 11 of the Sūtra.

Preparation

Read the relevant paragraphs of *The Eternal Legacy*, pp.117-120, reproduced below.:

“This assurance having been given, we come to the impressively dramatic scene of the whole marvellous pageant. Suddenly there springs up from the earth, and towers into the sky, a Stūpa of stupendous size and unbelievable magnificence. Made of the seven precious things, and most superbly adorned, its light, fragrance and music fill the entire earth. From the midst of the Stūpa there comes a mighty voice praising Śākyamuni for his preaching of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* bearing witness to the truth of all that he has said. In response to the enquiry of Mahāpratibhāna or ‘Great Eloquence’, a Bodhisattva, Śākyamuni explains that the Stūpa contains the entire body of an ancient Buddha called Prabhūtaratna or ‘Abundant Treasures’, who, ages ago, had made a vow that, after his parinirvāṇa, his Stūpa would spring forth wherever the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* was being expounded, so that he would bear testimony to the truth of its teaching.

The assembly is naturally desirous of beholding the actual body of the Tathāgata, miraculously preserved within the Stūpa but according to another vow made by Prabhūtaratna, if a Buddha in whose presence his Stūpa has sprung forth is desirous of showing him to his disciples, that Buddha must first of all cause all the Buddhas who have emanated from him, and who are preaching the Dharma throughout the universe, to return and assemble in one place. To fulfil this condition, Śākyamuni emanates a ray which illuminates innumerable pure Buddha-fields in the ten directions of space, revealing the Buddhas there. Knowing the significance of the summons, each of them informs the host of his Bodhisattvas that they must go to the Sahā-world and worship Śākyamuni Buddha and the Stūpa of the Tathāgata ‘Abundant Treasures’. Thereupon the Sahā-world is instantly purified for their reception. The earth, transformed into the blue radiance of lapis lazuli, becomes adorned with jewel-trees, and marked off in squares with golden cords. Gods and men, other than those of the congregation, are translated elsewhere; villages, towns, mountains, rivers and forests disappear. The earth smokes with incense, and its ground is strewn with heavenly flowers.

To a world so purified come five hundred Buddhas, each attended by a great Bodhisattva, and take their seats on five hundred magnificent lion-thrones beneath as many jewel-trees. All the available space in the world-system is thus already exhausted, and the Buddhas who have emanated from Śākyamuni Buddha have hardly begun to arrive. In the same way that he has already purified and transformed the Sahā-world, the latter therefore purifies for the reception of the

incoming multitudes untold millions of worlds in the eight directions of space. Only when all these Buddhas have arrived, taken their seats beneath the innumerable jewel-trees, and worshipped him each with a double handful of jewel-flowers does Śākyamuni, understanding the desire of the congregation, ascend into the sky and with a sound like thunder open the door of the Stūpa.

Seated in his entire body, within, as though meditating, they see the Buddha Prabhūtaratna, who, lifting up his voice, again commends Śākyamuni. Awestruck, the congregation praises the unprecedented marvel, and scatters over the two Buddhas heaps of celestial jewel-flowers. Prabhūtaratna invites Śākyamuni to share his throne. Seeing the two Buddhas seated side by side in the Stūpa, far above their heads, the congregation desires to be raised to the same level. Whereupon, by his supernatural power, Śākyamuni receives the whole assembly into the sky, at the same time demanding, in a loud voice: ‘Who is able to declare the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* Sūtra in this Sahā-world? Now indeed is the time. The Tathāgata not long hence must enter Nirvāṇa. The Buddha desires to bequeath this *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* Sūtra, so that it may endure for ever.’⁴

Before anyone can reply there occurs the episode, or rather the group of episodes, that constitutes Chapter XII of Kumārajīva’s Chinese version. In the extant Sanskrit text this forms the latter half of the previous chapter. Interrupting to some extent the continuity of the ‘action’, it may well be an interpolation; though in spirit and style it fully accords with the text as so far delivered. The Buddha recounts how, in one of his previous existences, he had as a king sacrificed possessions, body and life itself for the sake of the Dharma. Eventually, after abdicating in favour of his son and making a public proclamation offering himself as a servant to whosoever would teach him a Great Vehicle, he had received the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* from a hermit. This hermit was none other than Devadatta who also, the Buddha now predicts, in the far distant future will become a Tathāgata. Numerous advantages, moreover, will accrue from the hearing of this ‘Devadatta Chapter’ of the Sūtra.

At this point occurs an interruption. Emerging from the Nadir, a Bodhisattva named Prajñākūṭa, or ‘Wisdom-Heap’, solicits the return of Prabhūtaratna to his own world-system. At Śākyamuni’s request, however, the latter stays to have a talk with Mañjuśrī, who arrives on a thousand-petalled lotus-flower from the Nāga Palace in the depths of the ocean, where he had converted innumerable beings. In the course of conversation it transpires that his most gifted pupil is the eight-year-old daughter of the Nāga king, who has, so the great Bodhisattva declares, the power of speedily attaining Buddhahood. Prajñākūṭa doubts this; but the princess appears in person before them, and extols the Buddha in verse. Śāriputra is still more sceptical, doubting not only that she should be able to attain Buddhahood speedily, but that a woman should be capable of such an achievement at all. However, the princess transforms herself into a male Bodhisattva who, going

⁴ *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law*, p. 163.

instantly to a distant world-system, attains Supreme Enlightenment there and preaches the Dharma.

Both these episodes illustrate the universality of the Mahāyāna, from the benefits of which even evil-doers like Devadatta are not excluded, and within whose embrace superficial differences such as those of age and sex have no significance (Chapter XI).”

Read one or another of the full translations of Chapter 11. As you do so reflect on one, or more, of the questions below:

1. What do you make of the dramatic action in Ch.11 of the Sūtra? How do you make sense of the Buddha Abundant Treasures’ appearance and his vow? What does this all mean?
2. Spend some time looking at photos of different Stūpas, and exploring your response to them; Google has a wealth of images.
3. What do you make of Stūpa-worship? Is the Stūpa just a funereal reliquary, or can you get a feeling for how it embodies the continuing presence of Enlightened Ones?
4. In what sense does the Stūpa work as a symbol for you? Can you see how it could be a symbol of the synthesis of Path and Goal for you?

In the group

1. Assigning parts to different readers, read aloud Chapter 11 of the Sūtra from the Abridgement.
2. Discuss your experience with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material in the Appendix.
3. Conclude your session by reading the excerpt from the Abridgement again.

Unit 9 – The Eternal Buddha

Aim

In this, and the next unit, we pursue the meaning of the revelation of the Buddha's Eternal Enlightenment as portrayed through the symbolism of the Lotus Sūtra's climactic chapters.

Preparation

Read the relevant paragraphs from Chapter Nine of *The Eternal Legacy*, (pp.120-124):

“...No sooner are they over, than a response to Śākyamuni's demand for persons able to declare the Sūtra is forthcoming. Bhaiṣajyarāja and another Bodhisattva, appropriately called Mahāpratibhāna, or 'Great Eloquence', declare their readiness to preserve and propagate it throughout the world-system after his parinirvāṇa. Even in the evil age to come, they promise, when beings would be difficult to convert, they will patiently propagate this Sūtra, pay it every kind of homage, and be unsparing of body and life. All the Arhats who have been predicted to Buddhahood pledge themselves to do likewise. Seeing Mahāprañāpati Gautami and Yaśodharā standing disconsolate, as no prediction has been made concerning them, Śākyamuni not only assures his foster-mother and former wife that they were included in his previous prediction of the entire assembly to Buddhahood but now gives them each an individual prediction, whereupon, amidst universal rejoicings, they undertake to preserve and propagate the Sūtra throughout all world-systems except the Sahā-world, which has already been covered by the preceding vows.

Finally, having appealed in vain for an absolute directive from the Buddha, the Irreversible Bodhisattvas announce their determination to disseminate it throughout the world-systems in all the directions of space. These various promises given, the assembly in unison begs the Buddha to have no anxiety about the future of the Sūtra, assuring him that despite abuse, calumny and persecution, it will proclaim it in the dreadful dark age to come (Chapter XII).

Mañjuśrī points out that this is a tremendous responsibility. The Buddha, agreeing with him, declares that in order to accomplish their mission the Bodhisattvas will have to be endowed with four qualities (dharmas). They must, (i) be perfect in their conduct (*ācāra*), (ii) confine themselves to their proper sphere of activity, avoiding unsuitable company, and dwelling inwardly in the true nature of Reality, (iii) maintain a happy, peaceful state of mind (*sukhasthita*), unaffected by zeal or envy, and (iv) cultivate feelings of love (*maitrī*) towards all sentient beings. These are explained in detail, the exposition constituting a fine description not only of the ideal preacher of the Sūtra, but also, in effect, of the perfect monk as conceived by the Mahāyāna. Endowed with such qualities, the Buddha tells the assembly, a Bodhisattva will be able to gain a hearing from all classes of people, from kings and ministers to ordinary householders. He impresses upon the minds

of his auditors the unique value of the Sūtra committed to their charge by means of the following parable:

Desirous of extending his domains, a great ‘Wheel-rolling’ (*cakravarti*) king goes to war. His soldiers fight heroically, so that well pleased with their conduct the king bestows upon them, according to their desert, all manner of things by way of reward, from houses and lands, including whole cities, to gorgeous apparel, slaves, conveyances, and treasures of gold, silver and gems. Only the crown-jewel on his head he gives to none. Even so the Tathāgata, pleased with the conduct of his disciples in the holy war against Mara, graces them with spiritual gifts such as the meditations, the emancipations and the powers, together with the whole wealth of the Dharma. In addition, he gives them the city of Nirvāṇa. Yet he does not yet preach to them the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* Sūtra. However, just as the king, seeing the valour of his troops, eventually bestows upon them even the priceless crown-jewel itself, so the Tathāgata, beholding the exploits of his spiritual warriors, at last reveals to them this supreme Sūtra (Chapter XIII).

The great Bodhisattvas, numerous as the sands of the Ganges, who have come with their Buddhas from the other world-systems, now offer their services to Śākyamuni in his Buddha-field. Telling them that their help is not required, the latter declares that he has in his Sahā-world innumerable Bodhisattvas who will be able, after his parinirvāṇa, to protect and keep, read and recite, and preach abroad the Sūtra. At this the universe trembles and quakes, and from the space below the earth there issues a great host of Irreversible Bodhisattvas all accompanied by their retinues. Advancing one by one, they salute in turn all the Buddhas, beginning with Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna, and then glorify them in various hymns. So numerous are the Bodhisattvas that these proceedings occupy fifty minor kalpas, during which time the whole assembly remains silent; but through the supernormal power of Śākyamuni the period seems but half a day. An exchange of civilities follows between Śākyamuni and the four leaders of the vast host.

Maitreya and the disciples, who all this while have been amazed at the sudden apparition of all these unknown Bodhisattvas, ask whence they have sprung and how Śākyamuni can claim them for his own. The disciples of the other Buddhas present put each to their own Buddha the same question. Approving their enquiries, and urging them to be resolute, Śākyamuni tells Maitreya:

‘Ajita! Know thou!

These great Bodhisattvas,

Who, from past numberless Kalpas,

Have observed the Buddha wisdom,

All of these are my converts,

Whose minds I have set on the Great Way.

These Bodhisattvas are my sons
Who dwell in this Buddha-world.
Ever practising the Dhuta deeds,
Joyfully devoted to quiet places,
Shunning the clamour of crowds,
With no pleasure in many words.
All these sons of mine,
Learning and keeping the Law of my Way,
Are always zealous day and night,
For the sake of seeking Buddhahood;
They dwell below the Sahā-world,
In the region of space beneath it.
Firm in their powers of will and memory,
Ever diligent in seeking wisdom,
They preach every kind of mystic law,
Their minds devoid of any fear.
I, near the city of Gaya,
Sitting beneath the Bodhi-tree,
Accomplished Perfect Enlightenment;
And rolling the supreme Law-wheel,
I then taught and converted them
And caused them to seek the One Way.
Now they all abide in the never-relapsing state,
And every one will become a Buddha.’⁵

This declaration serves only to increase the perplexity of Maitreya and the disciples. How is it possible, they wonder, that the Master should have instructed so great a host in so short a time? They remind him that only fifty years have passed since his own enlightenment beneath the Bodhi-tree, yet he is claiming to have converted and trained an incalculable host of Bodhisattvas belonging, it would seem, to past ages and other world-systems. It is as though a young man of twenty-five should claim centenarians as his sons, and the latter acknowledge him as their father (Chapter XIV).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.196-197

In reply to these questions Śākyamuni now makes his grand revelation. The scene is therefore the climax of the entire spiritual drama of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, up to which the preceding scenes have led, and the truths of which their teachings have to some extent foreshadowed. Herein Śākyamuni reveals himself as being, sub specie aeternitatis, the Eternal Buddha; or rather, the Eternal Buddha reveals himself as Śākyamuni and all the other Buddhas, who are not independent entities but the various guises under which he, the Supreme Reality, appears at different places and in different ages.

All the worlds of Gods, men and asuras declare: ‘Now has Śākyamuni-Buddha, coming forth from the palace of the Śākya-clan, and seated at the place of enlightenment, not far from the city of Gaya, attained to Perfect Enlightenment, But, good sons, since I veritably became Buddha, there have passed infinite, boundless, hundreds, thousands, myriads, *kotis*, *nayutas* of *kalpas*. [That is to say, he is eternally enlightened.]⁶ From that time forward I have constantly been preaching and teaching in this Sahā-world, and also leading and benefitting the living in other places in hundreds, thousands, myriads, *kotis*, *nayutas* of numberless domains.’⁷

He it was who, according to the dispositions of beings, had created Dīpaṅkara and other Buddhas, and made them, as an expedient, deliver discourses and attain parinirvāṇa. Appearing as Śākyamuni, he tells beings of his birth in the world and of how, retiring from the household life as a youth, he had attained sambodhi. Had he announced that he had become a Buddha millions of years ago it would not have produced a favourable effect on people’s minds. Nevertheless he was not guilty of falsehood, because a Tathāgata viewed the universe as devoid of origination and cessation, without rebirth or parinirvāṇa, neither existent nor non-existent, neither real nor unreal, neither the same nor different. His viewpoint being completely different from that of an ordinary person it does not constitute a lie when, in order to teach the Dharma to beings of different conduct, aspirations and ideas, he has recourse to various expedients. In reality the life of a Tathāgata is unlimited; he never dies. ...”

Read Chapters 14 and 15 of the Sūtra. Reflect on one, or more, of the questions below:

1. Who are these ‘emanations’? How do you find the enormous vistas that the Sūtra speaks of? How are we to relate to them?
2. Do you share Maitreya’s doubts? Are you convinced by the Buddha’s reply?
3. The opening verse of Blake’s *Auguries of Innocence* reads:

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.200-201. Cf. *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka or The Lotus of the True Law* translated by H. Kern (Oxford 1984), ‘The Sacred Books of the East’ Volume XXI, pp.288-289.

⁷ *The Lotus of the Wonderful Law*, p.289.

*“To see a World in a Grain of Sand,
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.”*

Explore any affinity you see between this vision and that expressed in the Sūtra.

4. Read the précis below of excerpts (given in the Appendix) taken from two of Sangharakshita’s lectures, and reflect on the themes of ‘Eternity and Time, Buddha and Bodhisattva’; discuss your responses, questions and doubts. How do you relate to the concept of ‘Eternity’ and an Eternal Buddha? Isn’t this simply ‘eternalism’ via the back door? What does it mean to say that the path and goal are discontinuous? How does all this affect your understanding of Chapter 11 in the Sūtra, and the Revelation of Abundant Treasures?

“We usually – and up to a point quite justifiably – think of the Buddha as a historical figure, and this is quite correct as far as it goes. And we think of the Buddha’s attainment of Enlightenment as a historical event that took place two thousand five hundred years ago. We regard the Buddha’s attainment of Enlightenment as something occurring in time, within this dimension of time. And so long as we make it clear that we are speaking popularly, conventionally, then this isn’t altogether wrong.

While Buddhahood can be regarded as the culmination of the evolutionary process, a culmination that is reached through and by means of personal effort, if we go on to think of Buddhahood itself as existing in time, this is quite wrong. This is altogether wrong because although the Buddha is a historical person, Buddhahood itself exists outside time. Buddhahood exists in what we call the dimension of eternity, a new dimension beyond time and beyond the evolutionary process.

Likewise it is only too easy to think of the Bodhisattva’s Path and the Bodhisattva goal in the same sort of way, rather literally. It’s only too easy to think of the Bodhisattva’s path, leading up, as it were, to Buddhahood as though to the door of a house. We think of the Bodhisattva as going along step by step, stage by stage, and one day he comes up against this great and wonderful door or gateway of Nirvana, all glistening and pearly and golden and there it is, just like coming to the door of a house, and he just enters, he just goes in.

But it isn’t really like that at all. When you come to the end of the Bodhisattva path, when you come in fact to the end of the spiritual path, you don’t find a gate, you don’t find a doorway - you don’t find any sort of house, any sort of spiritual, any sort of celestial mansion waiting for you. So what do you find? When you get to the end of the path, you don’t find anything at all – there’s just nothing there. The path just ends. The path just comes to an end. The path just stops, and there you are at the end of the path with nothing there. The path, as I’ve said, just ends.

So you find yourself, as it were, (again a metaphor so don't start taking it literally), you find yourself at the edge of a precipice. The path has gone on nicely, step by step, stage by stage, mile after mile, and you had counted all those milestones, and you were expecting to arrive in comfort at the door, the entrance of a great house, a mansion, but no - you find that the path ends right at the edge of a precipice. And there you are standing right on the edge of the precipice, and the precipice goes down not just a few feet, or even a few miles, it just goes down to infinity. Now what is one to do?

The Bodhisattva represents the dimension of time, because - obviously - the Bodhisattva path is followed in time. It's something that happens, that has a past, and a present and a future; it doesn't go beyond time. But the Buddha represents the dimension of eternity. The Buddha represents the goal, and the goal is gained out of time. One reaches the end of the path in time, but one shouldn't think that one attains the goal in time: one can attain the goal out of time or one can put it another way and say that the goal is eternally attained.

The Buddha says, 'Don't think that I was Enlightened forty years ago. That is just your way of looking at it. I am eternally Enlightened.' And when the Buddha makes that statement it's the eternal Buddha speaking or Buddhahood itself speaking, not any particular person, not any particular individual, however great. So when the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* Sūtra speaks in terms of the eternal Buddha, one is not to understand the word 'eternal' in the sense of indefinitely prolonged in time, but rather in the sense of being outside time altogether.

We have therefore two principles: we've a principle of Buddhahood out of time, in the dimension of eternity, and we've a principle of Bodhisattvahood in the dimension of time. One, the principle of Buddhahood, eternity is transcendent. The other, the principle of Bodhisattvahood, in time, the principle of growth, evolution, development, is immanent. The one, the first represents perfection eternally complete, eternally achieved. The other represents perfection everlastingly in process of achievement, in the world order, through the evolutionary process. And the two are discontinuous. The one does not lead into the other. They are discontinuous, discrete.

Now the question that arises is, 'Can we leave them like this?' Is this the last word that can be said on the subject, that here you've got Buddha, there you've got Bodhisattva, there you've got eternity, there you've got time, discontinuous, discrete. Is this the last word that can be said on the subject? Well certainly not according to the Mahāyāna, and especially not according to the Tantra. There's no question though of merging one into the other. The solution isn't as easy as that. It isn't saying, 'Well time is illusory, merge it in eternity,' or, 'Eternity is illusory, merge it in time.' No. They both are, irreducibly there – Buddhahood, Bodhisattvahood, eternity, time – they can't be merged, the one in the other.

Rather, according to the Mahāyāna and again especially according to the Tantra, it's a question of realizing both of them simultaneously. In other words realizing Buddha and Bodhisattva simultaneously, eternity and time simultaneously. Seeing everything as eternally achieved and at the same time eternally in process of achievement. Seeing that these two do not contradict each other. One may say one has to see that everything moves but nothing moves. The two are there both, in a sense, contradictory - movement but no movement - but they're both there - one can deny neither of them.

In the same way, one may say the Buddha sits eternally beneath the Bodhi tree. The Buddha has always sat beneath the Bodhi tree and always will sit. At the same time the Bodhisattva is eternally practising the pāramitās, the Perfections, life after life to infinity, and that these two, Buddha and Bodhisattva, represent different aspects of one - one might even say the same – Reality. Reality as existing out of time in, as it were, eternity, and Reality as progressively revealed in time.”

In the group

1. Assigning parts to different readers, read aloud Chapters 13, 14, 15, and 16 of the Sūtra (up to just prior to the ‘Parable of the Good Physician’) from the Abridgement.
2. Discuss your experience with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material or other exercises in the Appendix.
3. Conclude your session by reading the excerpt from the Abridgement again.

Unit 10 – The Parable of the Good Physician

Aim

This unit focuses on the Parable of the Good Physician, told by the Buddha to illustrate his skilful means in entering parinirvāṇa.

Preparation

For a succinct recapitulation of this section of the Sūtra, read the relevant paragraphs, reproduced here, from Chapter Nine of Sangharakshita's *The Eternal Legacy*, pp.124-126:

“...In reality the life of a Tathāgata is unlimited; he never dies. Were he to remain constantly among men, however, familiarity would breed contempt, and beings would become arrogant and lazy. In order to increase their longing for his presence, he tactfully tells them that the appearance of a Tathāgata in the world is a rare occurrence and manifests the phenomenon of entering into parinirvāṇa. This is illustrated by a parable:

An eminent physician who has been away for a long time returns home to find his sons suffering from the effects of poisoning. Happy to see their father again, they ask him to cure them. While some of the sons take the medicines he prescribes and are restored to health, others, who are deeply affected by the poison, refuse to do so. In order to bring the latter to their senses the physician therefore retires to a distant country and sends them word of his death. The shock produces the desired effect. Realising that they are now orphans with no one to help them, the sons take the medicines their father had left behind and are cured. Hearing of their recovery, the physician later on returns and shows himself to them still alive. Being actuated by a desire to benefit others, neither the Buddha nor the physician can be accused of falsehood (Chapter XV) (p.125).

The effect of this revelation on the congregation is profound. Vast hosts, innumerable as the sands of the Ganges, attain various spiritual insights and powers. All the while flowers, incense and jewels, together with other precious things, fall in showers on the assembly; celestial canopies are raised on high, and countless Bodhisattvas sing the praises of the Buddhas. Śākyamuni then tells Maitreya that the merit of developing faith in the Eternal Life of the Tathāgata, as just revealed, incalculably surpasses that of cultivating the first five *pāramitās* throughout infinite ages. Besides exceeding in value all formal religious observances, whether erecting Stūpas, temples, or monasteries, such faith in fact renders them superfluous. Possessing such faith one will see the Buddha on the Spiritual Vulture-Peak surrounded by the celestial host ever preaching this Dharma. He will see, too, the realm in which he lives resplendent with palaces and jewels. By the preservation and propagation of the Sūtra, in conjunction with the practice of the first five *pāramitās*, infinite merit will be gained and one will speedily reach Perfect Knowledge.

He adds: ‘If any one reads and recites, receives and keeps this Sūtra, preaches it to other people, or himself copies it, or causes others to copy it; moreover, is able to erect Stūpas and monasteries, and to serve and extol the Śrāvaka-monks, and also with hundreds, thousands, myriads, kotis of ways of extolling, extols the merits of the Bodhisattvas; also if he to other people, with various reasonings, according to its meaning, expounds this Law-Flower Sūtra; again, if he is able to keep the commandments in purity, amicably to dwell with the gentle, to endure insult without anger, to be firm in will and thought, ever to value meditation, to attain to profound concentration, zealously and boldly to support the good, to be clever and wise in ably answering difficult questionings... those people have proceeded towards the Wisdom-terrace, and are near to Perfect Enlightenment, sitting under the tree of enlightenment.’⁸

So great is the value of the Sūtra that one who preaches it is to be venerated as the Buddha himself, and a Stūpa erected wherever he expounds as much as a phrase of the sacred text (Chapter XVI)”

Read the ‘Parable of the Good Physician’ in Chapter 15 of the Sūtra. As you do so, reflect on one or more of the questions below:

1. How do you make sense of the Buddha’s claim in the Sūtra that he does not enter extinction, and only appears to do so as a skilful means?
2. What is the spiritual significance of prominent elements of the parable, e.g. the father going to a distant country, the sons becoming delirious from drinking the father’s medicines, the sons saying they don’t want to be cured, and their grief at the father’s death? What do you make of the claim that if the Buddha were here all the time, we would not appreciate him, nor follow the Dharma?
3. How do you respond to the notion of humanity being psychologically and spiritually ‘sick’, and the Dharma as ‘medicine’? What are the benefits and limitations of seeing life from this perspective? How does this contrast with the imagery of ‘The Burning House’?
4. Sangharakshita says in his commentary that the main point of the parable is that we are on our own, and that we are most likely to develop when we realize this. What do you make of this? How do you reconcile this with the importance of Sangha?
5. C. G. Jung ‘defined’ archetypes as basic psychic patterns common to all humanity, expressed in myths, religions, dreams and creative works of individuals. The same pattern expresses itself in different forms through different cultures and individuals; any sensory object serving as ‘image’, through which an archetype expresses itself. Sangharakshita extends the meaning envisaging a stratification of successive stages of unfoldment, or manifestation, of an archetype. Archetypes

⁸ *ibid.* p.213

exist ultimately on a transcendental level, only fully realised in Enlightenment. Prior to that we encounter them through their expression on successively lower planes of the *a-rūpalokas* as subtle visions, and as emerging in sensory experience as mythic, symbolic images of human cultures. ‘The Parable of the Good Physician’ embodies the archetype of the Divine Healer, as discussed in Sangharakshita’s *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment*, chapter 8. In what ways do you connect with this? Are there any particular images that particularly appeal to you conveying something of this archetype? For example: medicine man, shaman, guru?

In the group

1. Assigning parts to different readers, read aloud the ‘Parable of the Good Physician’ (Chapter 16) from the Abridgement.
2. Discuss your experience with reference to any questions that have been of interest to you, other issues arising in relation to the text, and any further reflections that members of the group may wish to share from engaging with material or other exercises in the Appendix.
3. Conclude your session by reading the excerpt from the Abridgement again.

White Lotus Sūtra Appendix

Introduction

This Appendix is large, principally because it contains an Abridgement of the ‘Lotus Sūtra’. Aside from that, it aims to provide some extra reading material, suggestions for further reading and talks to listen to, group and project work, and more questions. It is a bit of a treasure-trove, full of all sorts, to support those who wish to take their exploration of the Sūtra further, to spark you off and get you going. So use only what is useful and appeals to you. Being arranged by unit to reflect material that is relevant to each unit, you’ll find some material, especially references, is repeated.

A very obvious next step in taking your understanding of the Sūtra further is to read Sangharakshita’s *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*. This is an excellent introduction and commentary. It also has some very good material arising out of question and answer sessions with Sangharakshita.

Suggested reference materials

Course texts

Cittapala, *The White Lotus Sūtra – Abridged*, 1999, in this Appendix – see below, or www.cittapala.org.

Primary sources

Bunno Kato, Yoshira Tamura, & Kojiro Miyasaka, (trans.), *The Threefold Lotus Sūtra*, Weatherhill/Kosei, New York, 1980.

<http://tinyurl.com/yzs7hw5>

Hurvitz, L., (trans.), *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1976.

<http://tinyurl.com/yjvupp9>

Reeves, G., (trans.), *The Lotus Sūtra*, Wisdom, Somerville, MA, 2008.

(US) <http://tinyurl.com/yjgp6bu>

(UK) <http://www.wisdom-books.com/ProductDetail.asp?PID=18578>

Watson, B., (trans.), *The Lotus Sūtra*, Columbia University Press, Chichester, 1993.

<http://tinyurl.com/yd3ycqk>

General background

Nagapriya, *Visions of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Windhorse, Cambridge, 2009 (particularly Chps. 1-4).

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=732>

Sangharakshita, *Parables, Myths and Symbols of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the White Lotus Sūtra*, Dharmachakra Archives, 1971.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X12>

Sangharakshita, *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=340>

Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=454>

Subhuti, Chapter 2: ‘The Unity of Buddhism’ in *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Windhorse, 1998.

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

Unit 1 – How to read the Sūtra

Sangharakshita, *The Glory of the Literary World – Reflections on the Buddhist Canonical Literature in The Priceless Jewel* (pp.159-175), Windhorse, Glasgow, 1999.

<http://www.sangharakshita.org/books/The%20Priceless%20Jewel.pdf>

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

Sangharakshita, *The Journey to Il Convento* (pp.47-91) in *The Priceless Jewel*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993 .

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

Sangharakshita, *The Religion of Art*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1990.

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

Subhuti, Chapter 10: ‘The Psychology of Spiritual Life’ (p.273ff), in *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition*, Windhorse, Birmingham.

See above.

Unit 2 – The Mahāyāna’s stance

Ray, R.A., *Buddhist Saints in India – A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<http://tinyurl.com/y9sec39>

Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, particularly Chapter 2: ‘The Trikaya Doctrine and The Two Truths’ pp.277-292, and Chapter 3, parts four and five, pp.340-368. Windhorse, 1993.

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

Williams P. with Antony Tribe, Chapters 3-6 in *Buddhist Thought*, Routledge, 2000.

<http://tinyurl.com/yf56k9k>

Williams, P., *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Routledge, 2009.

<http://tinyurl.com/yj94axy>

Unit 3 – The Saddharmapuṇḍarīka

Sangharakshita, Chapter 9: ‘The White Lotus of the True Dharma’ (pp.103-131) in *The Eternal Legacy*, Windhorse.

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

Sangharakshita, Chapter 2: ‘The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment’ in *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse, Glasgow.

See above.

Unit 4 – Transcending The Human Predicament

Ratnaguna, *Abundance in the White Lotus Sūtra, Madhyamavani No.1*, Spring 1999:

<http://madhyamavani.fwbo.org/1/lotus.html>

Sangharakshita, Chapter 3: ‘Transcending the Human Predicament’ in *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

Unit 5 – The Myth of the Return Journey

Sangharakshita, Chapter 4: ‘The Myth of the Return Journey’ in Sangharakshita, *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

Sangharakshita, Chapter 3: ‘On Being All Things to All Men’ in *The Inconceivable Emapancipation – Themes from the Vimalakirti-Nirdesa*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1995.

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

Unit 6 – The Jewel in the Lotus

Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel* (pp.7-16), in *The Priceless Jewel*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

Sangharakshita, Chapter 7: ‘The Jewel in the Lotus’ in *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

Unit 7 – Symbols of Life and Growth

Sangharakshita, Chapter 5: ‘Symbols of Life and Growth’ in *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

It’s worth seeing if you can find Dr. Conze’s translation of this section of the Sūtra in Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, Ch.5: ‘The Lotus of the Good Law – On Plants’, p.105-113, as well as a shorter, poetically evocative translation (p.139-40) in Conze,

Horner, Snellgrove, Waley, (Eds.), *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, Harper, London, 1964.

http://openlibrary.org/b/OL9070658M/Thirty_Years_of_Buddhist_Studies

<http://tinyurl.com/yjosm2c>

Unit 8 – The Revelation of Abundant Treasures

Sangharakshita, Chapter 6: ‘Five Element Symbolism and the Stupa’ in *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

Unit 9 – The Eternal Buddha

Sangharakshita, Chapter 8: ‘The Buddha and the Bodhisattva: Eternity and Time’ (p.202ff) in *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=454>

Unit 10 – The Parable of the Good Physician

Sangharakshita, Chapter 8: ‘The Archetype of the Divine Healer’ in *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

Sangharakshita, *St. Jerome Revisited* (pp.47-91) in *The Priceless Jewel*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993.

See above.

Audio: <http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=164>

Appendix: Unit 1 – How to read the Sūtra

Reread the following excerpt from the first few pages of Part 1, Week 5, *The Buddha – The Mythic Buddha*, from the Foundation Year of the *Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras*, pp. 30-4:

Introduction

For Buddhists in the East the life story of the Buddha is much more than a historical account – it is a poetic myth full of profound meanings that resonate in the depths of the mind. In the following text Sangharakshita looks at a number of these mythic elements in the story of the Buddha, bringing out some aspects of their significance, and in the process making the point that from a spiritual point of view poetic truth is just as important as historical truth – or perhaps more so. To feel the impact of the mythic and poetic elements in the Buddha's story we need to open up to them imaginatively, and not just engage our rational, critical mind. In particular it might be helpful look at some representations of the incidents described in the text in Buddhist art, and to bring any art that appeals to you to the study group.

Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha

(Text condensed from *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, by Sangharakshita, Chapter 3: 'Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha'.)

The language of the depths

If we look below the rational, conceptual surface of man's mind, we find vast unplumbed depths which make up what we call the unconscious. The psyche in its wholeness consists of both the conscious and the unconscious. The unconscious, non-rational part of man is by far the larger part of his total nature, and its importance is far greater than we generally care to recognize. Consciousness is like a light froth playing and sparkling on the surface, whilst the unconscious is like the vast ocean depths, dark and unfathomed, lying far beneath. In order to appeal to the whole person, it isn't enough to appeal just to the conscious, rational intelligence that floats upon the surface. We have to appeal to something more, and this means that we have to speak an entirely different language from the language of concepts, of abstract thought; we have to speak the language of images, of concrete form. If we want to reach this non-rational part of the human psyche, we have to use the language of poetry, of myth, of legend. This other, no less important, language is one that many modern people have forgotten, or which they know only in a few distorted and broken forms. But Buddhism does very definitely speak this language, and speaks it no less powerfully than it speaks the language of concepts. Some people are under the impression that Buddhism speaks only the language of concepts, of reason; that it is a strictly rational system, even a sort of rationalism. Such a misunderstanding is in a way quite natural in the West. After all, most of our knowledge is derived from books, magazines, lectures, etc., so that although we may not always be aware of this, our approach is in terms of rational, conceptual understanding. But if we go to the East we see a very different picture. In the Eastern Buddhist countries people tend to the other

extreme. They tend to be moved and influenced by the images all about them without easily being able to give a rational, conceptual formulation of what they actually believe.

So far as Buddhism in the West is concerned, much more attention has been given to the conceptual, analytical, intellectual approach. We now have to give much more time and much more serious attention to the other type of approach, to begin to try to combine both these approaches, unite both the conceptual and the non-conceptual. We need a balanced spiritual life in which both the conscious and unconscious mind play their part. It is therefore through the language of poetry and myth that we are going to approach our subject, changing over from the conceptual approach to the non-conceptual, from the conscious mind to the unconscious.

Here we shall be encountering some of what I have called the ‘Archetypal Symbolism in the Biography of the Buddha’. To allow for this encounter, we have to be receptive, to open ourselves to these archetypal symbols, to listen to them and allow them to speak in their own way to us, especially to our unconscious depths, so that we do not just realize them mentally, but experience them and assimilate them, even allowing them eventually to transform our whole life.

The meaning of ‘archetypal symbolism’

Now, let us define our key terms. What is an archetype? Broadly speaking, an archetype is the original pattern or model of a work, or the model from which a thing is made or formed. And what do we mean by symbolism? A symbol is generally defined as a visible sign of something invisible. But philosophically and religiously speaking it is more than that: it is something existing on a lower plane which is in correspondence with something existing on a higher plane. To cite a common example, in the various theistic traditions, the sun is a symbol for God, because the sun performs in the physical universe the same function that God, according to these systems, performs in the spiritual universe: the sun sheds light and heat, just as God sheds the light of knowledge and the warmth of love into the spiritual universe. One can say that the sun is the god of the material world, and in the same way God is the sun of the spiritual world. Both represent the same principle manifesting on different levels. ‘As above, so below.’

Two kinds of truth

Various Western scholars in modern times have tried to write full, detailed biographies of the Buddha. There is quite a lot of traditional material available. Western scholars have explored this abundant material thoroughly, but having gone through the various episodes and incidents, they divide them into two great ‘heaps’. On one side, they put whatever they consider to be a historic fact. On the other side they put what they consider to be myth and legend. Now this is all right so far as it goes, but most of them go a step further, and start indulging in value judgements, saying that only what they regard as historical facts are valuable and relevant. As for the myths and legends, all the poetry of the account, they usually see this as mere fiction, to be discarded as completely worthless. This is a very great mistake, for we may say that there are two kinds of truth: what we call scientific truth, the truth of concepts, of reasoning; and in addition to this – some

would say above this – there is what we may call poetic truth, or truth of the imagination, of the intuition. This is at least equally important. The latter kind of truth is manifested in what we call myths and legends, as well as in works of art, in symbolic ritual, and also quite importantly in dreams. And what we call the archetypal symbolism of the biography of the Buddha belongs to this second category. It is not meant to be historic truth, or factual information, but poetic, even spiritual, truth. We may say that this biography of the Buddha in terms of archetypal symbolism is not concerned with the external events of his career, but is meant to suggest to us something about his inner spiritual experience, and therefore to shed light on the spiritual life for all of us.

Examples of archetypal symbolism

I will now give a few examples of archetypal symbolism from the biography of the Buddha.

The Twin Miracle

A traditional text says:

“Then the Exalted One standing in the air at the height of a palm tree performed various and diverse miracles of double appearance. The lower part of his body would be in flames, while from the upper part there streamed five hundred jets of cold water. While the upper part of his body was in flames, five hundred jets of cold water streamed from the lower part. Next, by his magic power the Exalted One transformed himself into a bull with a quivering hump. The bull vanished in the east and appeared in the west. It vanished in the north and appeared in the south, it vanished in the south and appeared in the north. And in this way the great miracle is to be described in detail. Several thousand kotis of beings, seeing this great miracle of magic, became glad, joyful and pleased, and uttered thousands of bravos at witnessing the marvel.”

I am not going to say anything here about the Buddha’s transformation into a bull – I am going to concentrate here on the ‘Twin Miracle’ proper, in which the Buddha emits both fire and water. First of all, the Buddha stands in the air. This signifies a change of plane, and is highly significant. It represents the fact that what is described does not happen on the earth plane, or on the historical plane.

The Twin Miracle is not a miracle in the usual sense, not something magical or supernatural happening here on this earth, but something spiritual, something symbolic, happening on a higher metaphysical plane of existence. Having stood in the air, in this metaphysical dimension, the Buddha emits fire and water simultaneously: fire from the upper half of the body, water from the lower, and vice versa. On the higher plane of existence where he now stands, fire and water are universal symbols. They are found all over the world, in all cultures, all religions. Fire represents ‘spirit’, or ‘the spiritual’; and water represents matter, the material. Fire, again, represents the heavenly, principle; water the earthly principle. Fire represents the active, masculine principle; water the

passive, feminine principle. Fire represents the intellect, and water the emotions. Fire again represents consciousness, and water the unconscious. In other words, fire and water between them represent all the cosmic opposites.

The fact that the Buddha emitted fire and water simultaneously represents the conjugation of these great pairs of opposites. This conjunction on all levels, and on the highest level of all especially, is synonymous with what we call Enlightenment. This episode of the Twin Miracle tells us that Enlightenment is not a one-sided affair, not a partial experience, but the union, the conjunction, of opposites, of fire and water, at the highest possible level.

The ladder between heaven and earth

Let us now turn to another episode. According to the Theravada tradition, the Buddha preached what became known as the Abhidharma to his deceased mother in the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (a higher heavenly world where she was reborn when she died, seven days after his birth). When he returned to the earth, he descended by means of a magnificent staircase, attended by different gods, divinities, and angels. In the texts this staircase is described in very glorious terms, as being threefold, made up of gold, silver, and crystal.

The staircase or the ladder between heaven and earth is also a universal symbol. For example, in the Bible there is Jacob's ladder, which has the same significance. The staircase is that which unites the opposites, which links, draws together, heaven and earth. In the Buddhist texts, the archetypal significance of this episode of the Buddha's descent is enhanced by colourful, glowing descriptions in terms of gold and silver and crystal, and different coloured lights, and panoplies of coloured sun-shades and umbrellas, and flowers falling, and music sounding. These all make a strong appeal not to the conscious mind, but to the unconscious, to the depths.

The World Tree

Another important variant to the theme of the union of the opposites is what is generally known as the 'World Tree', or 'Cosmic Tree'. The Buddha, according to the traditional account, gained Enlightenment at the foot of the Bodhi Tree – 'Bodhi' meaning transcendental wisdom, or 'Awakening'. A tree's roots go deep down into the earth, but at the same time its branches tower high into the sky. So the tree also links heaven and earth, is also a symbol of the union, or harmony, of opposites. The World Tree is found in many mythologies. For instance, we have the Norse Yggdrasil, the World Ash – roots deep down, branches right up in the heavens, and all the worlds suspended on the branches. We also get the identification of the Christian cross with a World or Cosmic Tree. I have seen a representation of the crucifixion where branches were growing out of the sides of the cross, and the roots went deep down into the soil. The cross also, like the World Tree, links heaven and earth cosmically, in the same way that Christ unites the human and the divine natures psychologically.

The Diamond Throne

Closely associated with the idea of a ladder, or a staircase, or a tree, is the image of the central point. In all the traditional accounts of the Buddha's Enlightenment he is represented as sitting on what is called the 'Vajrāsana', which literally means the 'Diamond Seat', or 'Diamond Throne'. The diamond, the vajra, in Buddhist tradition represents the transcendental element, the metaphysical base. According to tradition, the Vajrāsana is the centre of the universe. One can compare this with the corresponding Christian tradition that the cross stood on the same spot as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, from which Adam and Eve had eaten the apple, and that this spot represents the exact centre of the world. This centrality in the cosmos of the Vajrāsana suggests that Enlightenment consists in adopting a position of centrality. This metaphysical, or transcendental, centrality, which constitutes Enlightenment, amounts to the same as the union of opposites about which we have spoken.

[End of extract]

Read the Introduction and Chapter 1: 'Entering the Mahāyāna Imagination' (pp.3-23) in Nagapriya, *Visions of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Cambridge, Windhorse, 2009.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=732>

Read Subhuti's 'The Psychology of Spiritual Life' in Chapter 10: 'The Making of a New Buddhist Culture' found in his *Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition* (pp. 273-284).

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

Further questions for reflection

1. Are there any contemporary Western 'languages' that you find especially lend themselves to communicating the Dharma? What do you find yourself drawn to, and what potential limitations and pitfalls do you see?
2. Clarify in your own mind what is meant by the terms: 'symbol', 'archetype', 'myth', 'poetic' truth, 'Imaginal faculty'. You may want to consult a dictionary and Thesaurus.
3. What do you make of Sangharakshita's extension to the meaning of 'archetype', and how he equates this with the purpose of spiritual life?
4. How do you respond to the following statement? "*It is not a question of justifying Buddhism in scientific terms, but rather understanding sense-derived knowledge within the context of a knowledge that is not sense-based. In other words, the knowledge that is derived from the senses fits into a much larger pattern of knowledge that is apprehended by the fusion of reason with emotion in a higher*

faculty of archetypal knowledge, what we may call ‘vision’, ‘insight’, or ‘imagination.’”

5. Do you have a sense of your own ‘personal myth’? Has reading Subhuti’s presentation in any way clarified this for you? What questions does it raise for you?

Appendix: Unit 2 – The Mahāyāna’s Stance

Read and explore contemporary contributions accounting for the arising of the Mahāyāna tradition (see ‘Suggested reference materials’ above), and reflect on how these presentations affect your understanding of the Sūtra.

Start with:

Nagapriya, Chapter 2: ‘The Origins of the Mahāyāna’ (pp.24-41) in *Visions of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Windhorse, Cambridge, 2009.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=732>

You could also pursue this through the following:

Ray, R.A., *Buddhist Saints in India – A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<http://tinyurl.com/y9sec39>

Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*, Windhorse. Particularly Chapter 2: ‘The Trikaya Doctrine and The Two Truths’ (pp.277-292), and Chapter 3, parts four and five (pp.340-368).

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

Williams P., with Antony Tribe, *Buddhist Thought*, Chapters 3-6, Routledge, 2000.

<http://tinyurl.com/yf56k9k>

Williams, P., *Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Routledge, 2009.

<http://tinyurl.com/yj94axy>

Nikkyo Niwano, *A Guide to the Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Kosei, 1981:

<http://www.rk-world.org/publications/GuideLotusSutra.pdf>

Possible project topic

In what ways does recent scholarship affect a reading of Sangharakshita’s presentation of the Mahāyāna? If you’re particularly keen, I’d recommend looking at Nattier, J, *A Few Good Men – The Bodhisattva Path According to The Inquiry of Ugra* (particularly Chsapters 4, 5, and 7), Hawaii Univ. Press, Honolulu, 2003.

<http://tinyurl.com/yjwbe5q>

Appendix: Unit 3 – The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra

Since the essence of this course is to enjoy and get to know the Sūtra at first hand, you are encouraged to repeatedly return to parts of the Sūtra, again and again. Over and above all the other units' recommended 'tasks', this remains the primary aim. Nevertheless there are a number of very helpful supporting materials:

Read Chapter Two in Sangharakshita's *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

Take a look at the opening pages of Chapter Nine in Sangharakshita's *The Eternal Legacy: 'The White Lotus of the True Dharma'*, pp.103-131, appended immediately below. The bulk of the chapter is reproduced in the main text to this module.

Dip into any of the episodes that particularly appeal to you, either by reading the Sūtra itself, or use Cittapala's Abridgement that covers chapters: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 22. If you do read the Abridgement, please do go on to read those sections that attract you in one or another of the full translations of Sūtra.

Literary criticism is a complete subject in its own right, and something you may be familiar with, or know nothing of. While clearly the Sūtra is not a literary work in the European tradition, a critical literary approach to your reading of the Sūtra may bring interesting insights. In this vein, you could be asking yourself the kinds of questions I've given below:

- In what does the Sūtra's story consist? How are its major themes, points and 'message' being conveyed? What is its overarching purpose, feel and character? How does it unfold? How does the form of the Sūtra contribute to this?
- How do the different incidents and parables contribute, support and relate to the unfolding of the whole story, its shape and quality? What gives this Sūtra its particular feel, distinctive character?
- Taking the story as a whole, or any particular incident or parable, wherein lies the dramatic tension, oppositions, even conflict either between characters or within any particular characters? What values are being portrayed at variance? What resolutions, if any, are played out, or suggested? How is this portrayed?
- What sorts of world do the Sūtra, and the parables portray? What does the Sūtra convey about the characters involved? How do the characters and the worlds they inhabit interrelate?
- How does the language used affect our perception and interpretation? This is where comparison of different translations can be particularly revealing. How does the repetition of the story in prose and poetic forms affect us? Does it help carry the story forward at all? What dramatic purpose does it fulfil?

- Is the reader meant to simply ‘observe’ the story as something that happened to the key characters, or are we drawn into the story so that it becomes ‘our’ story as well? In what sense could the different characters represent different ‘sub-personalities’ within the reader, i.e. in what sense can we bring a psychological interpretation to our reading?

Reproduced here is the first and last portions of Chapter 9 of Sangharakshita’s *The Eternal Legacy*, not provided in the main study module:

“(p.103) So far as literary form is concerned, as distinct from doctrinal substance, the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* or ‘White Lotus of the True Dharma’ is contemporaneous, as we have seen, with the Pāli Tipiṭaka. That is to say, it belongs to the first century C.E. So much, at least, is generally acknowledged even by the most rigorous of scholars, though sometimes not without the reservation that only the nucleus of the work is as old as this. Winternitz, for example, remarks, ‘We shall most probably be right in placing the nucleus of the work as far back as the first century A.D., as it is quoted by Nāgārjuna, who probably lived towards the end of the 2nd century A.D.’ With the exception of Chapters XXI-XXVI of the extant Sanskrit text, however, which are patently extraneous, the Sūtra is so much a literary unity that it is difficult to pick out any one chapter or group of chapters as constituting its original nucleus. Even so, this is not to assert that even the main body of the Sūtra is of one uniform chronological texture throughout. Although, apart from amplifications, elaborations and minor interpolations, it was not produced by a process of gradual accretion, the character of the work as a literary composition is such as still to admit of differences of age between one portion and another. The differences occur, however, not with regard to the main body of the Sūtra taken as a whole but within its individual constituent chapters.

Each of these chapters consists of two kinds of material, (p.104) one alternating with the other: *gāthās* or verses, and prose. While the language of the former is what is variously termed Mixed or Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, or sometimes the Gatha Dialect, that of the latter is pure Sanskrit. The subject-matter of the two is more or less identical. As in some other parts of the Canon, whatever is said in verse is repeated, sometimes with variations, in the prose portions, so that in the case of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, ‘Each section, prose and verse, would, if separated, make a fairly complete whole.’ For reasons into which we cannot enter here, most scholars believe that the verse portion is on the whole earlier than the prose and that the latter, consisting originally of short connecting passages which, as the language of the *gāthās* became obsolete, were expanded so as to constitute a rough guide to the meaning of their more archaic verse counterparts. N. Dutt is apparently of a different opinion. He points out that, ‘The use of Mixed Sanskrit in the *gāthās* and Pure Sanskrit in the prose portions was the rule in the first or second century A.C. or earlier when the Mahāyāna texts were being composed for the first time. In the *gāthās*, emphasis was laid more on diction and melody than on grammar, provided the content was anyhow intelligible.’

Whatever be the truth of the matter, it ought in any case to be borne in mind that the terms commonly used by scholars to describe the respective languages of the prose and verse portions of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* are apt to be misleading. This is all the more necessary inasmuch as these terms are used with reference not only to this Sūtra but in connection with other canonical works. By 'Pure' Sanskrit is meant that form of the language which conforms to the rules established by the grammarian Pāṇini. Thus neither the Vedas nor the Upaniṣads are written, or rather composed, in Pure Sanskrit. By Mixed Sanskrit, which because it is used in Buddhist works and represents a cross between the literary and the spoken language, is also called Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, is meant that form of the language which, instead of conforming to the 'classical' Pāṇinian model, kept close to the richer and grammatically less hidebound speech-forms of the vernacular. Despite the disapproval of modern purists, no pejorative (p.105) connotation really attaches to the term Mixed Sanskrit. The difference between the two is not unlike that between Elizabethan English, with its greater exuberance, and the more 'correct' medium favoured by writers of Queen Anne's reign.

There appear to have existed two recensions of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, one consisting of twenty-seven chapters, literally 'turnings' (*parivarta*) of the wheel of the Dharma, and one of twenty-eight. Fortunately for our knowledge of this supremely important work, the former has survived complete in Nepal, whence various copies have been procured, ranging in age from the eleventh to the beginning of the eighteenth century C.E. Fragments of much older manuscripts, dating from the fifth to the sixth century and representing both recensions, have also been recovered, in recent times, from Central Asia and Eastern Turkestan, while from Gilgit in Kashmir has come an equally ancient copy of more than three-quarters of the work that agrees with the Nepalese manuscripts.

Another manuscript, discovered at Turfan, contains an Uigur-Turkish translation of the *Samantamukha-parivarta*, corresponding to Chapter XXIV of the complete Sanskrit text, to the divisions of which all our references will be made. This difference in the number of chapters is due, not to the presence in one recension of an additional chapter not found in the other, but simply to the fact that the latter part of Chapter XI in the Nepalese or complete Sanskrit text, has been reckoned as an independent chapter.

According to Nanjio, eight or nine translations of this Sūtra were made into Chinese, the earliest, now lost, being executed by Dharmarakṣa in the year 265 C.E. Three translations are still available. The first, that of Dharmarakṣa, a multi-lingual Yueh-chih who may or may not be identical with the first translator, was made in 286 C.E. The second, that of Kumārajīva, followed in 406 C.E. Both these versions consist of twenty-eight chapters and in both of them, more importantly, Chapter XXVII of the complete Nepalese Sanskrit text occurs not at the end of the work but about three fifths of the way through as Chapter XXIII, in the case of Dharmarakṣa's version, and as Chapter XXIV, in the case of Kumārajīva's, the discrepancy being due to the fact that whereas the former places the

Samantamukha-parivarta immediately before this ‘concluding’ chapter the latter places it immediately after. What inferences can be drawn from these differences it is difficult to say. Chapter XXVII of the Nepalese Sanskrit text undoubtedly forms the natural (p.106) conclusion of the Sūtra, but whether Kumārajīva, realising that Chapters XXI— XXVI (of this text) were an interpolation, relegated them to the end of his version, or whether he found them already so relegated in the Kucha script text from which he is said to have worked, we do not know. The sequence of chapters found in Dharmarakṣa’s version, however, may well indicate that the *Samantamukha-parivarta* came to be associated with the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* at an earlier date than the remaining five interpolated chapters. The third Chinese translation still extant is that produced in 601 C.E., by Jñānagupta and Dharmagupta, two monks reputed to be of Indian origin. In number and sequence of chapters this version agrees with the Sanskrit text, as well as with the Tibetan translation.

Of the three versions Kumārajīva’s is undoubtedly the most popular. The *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* is not only a religious classic, but a masterpiece of symbolic spiritual literature, and his rendering, with the help of Chinese poets and scholars during the most creative period of Chinese art and letters, though hardly a literal translation does ample justice to these qualities. It therefore occupies, throughout the Far East, a position analogous to that of the *Authorised Version of the Bible* in Anglo-Saxon lands.

Scholars have remarked on the comparative paucity of explicit doctrinal instruction in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*. While concurring with their observation, we cannot agree that this constitutes a defect, as they would seem to imply. Corresponding to the distinction between the intellect and the emotions, between science and poetry, there are two great modes for the communication of spiritual truths, and therefore two principal types of religious literature. One mode is conceptual, addressing itself to the understanding by means of abstractions; the other is existential, appealing to the emotions and the will through concrete actions and sensuous images. While the first excogitates systems of religious philosophy and theologies, the second gives birth to magic, myths and legends. To one, as its natural literary expression, appertains the treatise and the tractate, the polemic and the discursive, descriptive treatment of religious ideals; to the other the religious drama, the story and the song. As representatives of the first stand such works as Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, Śāṅkara’s commentary on the *Brahma Sūtras*, and St. Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica*. The second (p.107) is exemplified by pre-Euripidean Greek Tragedy, the Gospel parables, the stories of Chuang-tzu and St. Francis’s *Canticle of the Sun*. Broadly speaking the latter belong to the historically earlier and more creative stages of religious development, the former to the later.

Within the limits of the Buddhist Canon, the scientific type of religious literature is represented by the treatises of the *Abhidharma-Piṭaka* and by the Prajñā-pāramitā corpus, and the imaginative by the ‘Birth-Stories and the Glorious Deeds’, as well

as by a class of Mahāyāna Sūtras of which the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* is the first example. It is, therefore, a mistake to search for, and yet a greater one to bemoan the absence of, a content which the nature of this Sūtra as a work of symbolic spiritual literature precludes it from possessing. This is not to say that conceptual elements are altogether lacking. Many of the more important Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna doctrinal categories occur in one place or another; but their position is a subordinate one, and while contributing to the composition of the Sūtra, they do not in any way determine its basic structure.

The *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* constitutes, in fact, a remarkable, perhaps a unique, synthesis of all the principal imaginative elements. In form it is dramatic; its significance resides not only in what is said, but in what is done. For example, instead of merely stating that the more conceited among the Śrāvakas were unable to accept the Mahāyāna teaching, it actually shows them, as though on a stage, rising from their seats and quitting the assembly when the Buddha announces that they have something more to learn (Chapter II). Similarly, we are not just given a discourse on the universality of the Mahāyāna, and how the highest spiritual attainment is open to all irrespective of sex, but allowed to see for ourselves the Naga princess transforming herself, in the twinkling of an eye, into a male Bodhisattva and departing for a distant universe called, significantly, ‘The Pure’ (*vimalā nāma lokadhātu*), and becoming a Buddha there (Chapter XI).

Soothill – from whose incomplete but poetic version from Kumārajīva most of our quotations will be taken – is therefore right in his general estimation of the Sūtra:

‘From the first chapter we find the Lotus Sūtra to be unique in the world of religious literature. A magnificent apocalyptic, it presents a spiritual drama (p.108) of the highest order, with the universe as its stage, eternity as its period, and Buddhas, gods, men, devils, as the dramatis personae. From the most distant worlds and from past aeons, the eternal Buddhas throng the stage to hear the mighty Buddha proclaim His ancient and eternal Truth. Bodhisattvas flock to his feet; gods from the heavens, men from all quarters of the earth, the tortured from the deepest hells, the demons themselves crowd to hear the tones of the Glorious One.’

Obviously such a drama as this is not naturalistic but symbolic.

The *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* has for one of its principal contents another of the grand imaginative elements, namely myth and legend. Instead of depicting the petty vicissitudes of human life, much of it describes the sublime activities of colossal and mysterious beings, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, in world-systems unthinkably remote from our own in both space and time. Dramatic unity is preserved by the device of a Jātaka-like identification of one or another of these beings, or one of their disciples, with Mañjuśrī, or Maitreya, or one of the other actors in the drama, including its great protagonist, Śākyamuni himself. Such descriptions do not merely illustrate the universality of the Mahāyāna and its

teaching in a general way. For when Śākyamuni takes his seat in the sky, with Prabhūtaratna, on a single lion-throne, the incident is clearly symbolical, showing that the two Buddhas, the former belonging to the present and the latter to the infinitely remote past, are in essence one, and that in the Mind of Supreme Enlightenment distinctions of time and place are transcended (Chapter XI).

Closely connected with the myths and legends are the phantasmagoria. Just as the former, though understood literally by Mahayanists in the past, are essentially neither history nor geography, so the latter are not really magic. Śākyamuni projects from between his eyebrows a ray of light which reveals all the worlds in the eastern quarter (Chapter I). Or, to take a more striking, perhaps even grotesque, example, he and the vast concourse of Buddhas foregathered from other worlds protrude their tongues until they reach up to the Brahma-world, (p.109), thus illuminating all directions of space (Chapter XXI). Except in appearance, these are not exhibitions of supernormal power like the Double Miracle (*yamaka-ṛddhi*) at Śrāvastī, when the Master walked up and down in the air emitting simultaneously from his body streams of water and flames of fire. They are visual symbols, and like the myths and legends their real import is spiritual. The ray issuing from between the Buddha's eyebrows is the light of Truth, which does not annihilate the world of concrete particulars but, on the contrary, transfigures it and reveals its true meaning and significance. In the same way the protrusion of the organ of speech symbolises the Absolute's unlimited power of communication with sentient beings.

Yet despite this predominance of the existential mode, action no more excludes utterance in the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* than it does in other forms of dramatic composition. Truth is not only exhibited but also explained. Even here, however, the Sūtra remains true to its essential nature. Though conceptual statement is not absent, the favourite medium for the explicit communication of its central teaching is the parable.

The parables of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* are unsurpassed in the entire range of Buddhist literature, and, together with the grandiose conception of the whole work, they stamp this Sūtra ineffaceably with the hallmark of literary genius. All the more important of them are summarised below. Especially with reference to the Buddha's Enlightenment, or to his knowledge, the Sūtra moreover attempts to convey the meaning of infinity not mathematically but by means of concrete images. We are not told how many aeons have passed since a certain Buddha attained parinirvāṇa, but asked to imagine the earth-element of a whole galactic system ground into ink and then someone going in an eastern direction and letting fall one drop every time he had traversed a thousand such systems: the time which has passed since that Buddha's parinirvāṇa would still immeasurably exceed the time needed to exhaust the ink (Chapter VII). Here this mode of expression, too, is in keeping with the fundamentally non-conceptual character of the Sūtra. ...

The Great Drama concludes with Śākyamuni Buddha's final commission to his disciples before entering parinirvāṇa. Rising from his Lion-throne in the sky, where he has been seated with Prabhūtaratna, he thrice places his right hand in blessing on the heads of the countless Irreversible Bodhisattvas and solemnly entrusts to them the preservation and promulgation of the Sūtra. This done, he requests all the Buddhas present to return to their own domains, saying: 'Buddhas! Peace be upon you. Let the Stūpa of the Buddha Abundant Treasures be restored as before.' As these words are pronounced, the innumerable emanated Buddhas from every direction, who are seated on Lion-thrones under the jewel-trees, as well as the Buddha Abundant Treasures, the host of infinite, numberless Bodhisattvas, Viśiṣṭacaritra and others, also the four groups of Śrāvakas, Śāriputra and the rest, as well as the worlds, gods, men, asuras and so on, hearing the words of the Buddha, all rejoice greatly (p.129).

Though the ramifications of its symbolism might well be the study of a lifetime, the leitmotif of this tremendous apocalyptic drama emerges from the welter of scenes and exuberance of language with sufficient force and clarity. To give a conceptualized abstract of its teaching is therefore superfluous. This does not mean, however, that there are no misunderstandings to be avoided. Largely on account of Chapter XV, entitled *Tathāgata-ayuspramāṇa* or 'The Tathāgata's Infinite Life', modern writers, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, have accused the Mahāyāna of deifying the founder of Buddhism and thus introducing into his religion a theistic element incompatible with the decidedly non-theistic character of what is supposed to have been the primitive evangelium. Based as it is on a misunderstanding, the accusation cannot be sustained. Theism involves the conception of an eternal, omnipotent creator, but since no Buddhist text, of any school, attributes to the Buddha the creation of the universe, it is impossible to speak of him as God without radically modifying the traditional meaning of this term.

Far from deifying the Buddha, in the sense of formally investing him with theistic attributes, what the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* really does is to reveal another, a transcendental dimension of the Buddha's human greatness, thus enabling us to see him, and with him the totality of existence, not according to the flesh but *sub specie aeternitatis*. In terms of the Trikāya doctrine, some acquaintance with which is indispensable to an understanding of the Mahāyāna, it enables us to see not merely his Nirmāṇakāya but his Sambhogakāya and Dharmakāya as well. The latter are, however, not so much independent, or as it were superadded bodies, but the former in its ultimate depth, for which reason the Buddha of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, however transcendent in his glory, is not any new, supra-historical figure, of the type of which there were many to hand when the Sūtra was composed, but still Śākyamuni the mendicant Indian teacher. Though expressed with help of mathematical symbols, his infinite life therefore represents not the indefinite prolongation, in time, of a particular enlightened personality, but the fact that Enlightenment, being the full realization of ultimate Reality, transcends time altogether. Hence the Buddha, as the possessor of this Infinite Life, is not to

be identified with the (p.130) eternal God of popular theism. In the same way his various exhibitions of supernatural power, such as the protrusion of the tongue and the shaking of the universe, are not evidence of omnipotence, nor even magic feats, as they might be in a Hīnayāna Sūtra, but concrete symbols of spiritual truths.

The minor details of the parables, also, are not to be applied too literally nor pressed too far. The fact that, in the ‘Parable of the Burning House’, the Buddha is spoken of as the father and sentient beings as his sons means simply that his compassion for those involved in the Saṃsāra is analogous to the love of a father for his children. It certainly does not imply that according to the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* he is actually the creator of mankind.

These misunderstandings having been corrected, all that need be remarked, by way of conclusion, is that in a sense the subject-matter of the Sūtra is the Sūtra itself. Like a world, it revolves on its own axis. The dramatic ‘situation’ out of which the whole action develops is the Buddha’s proclamation that he is about to reveal a truth transcending all his previous teachings, in other words, that he is going to preach the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*. Again, the revelation of his Infinite Life, forming the climax of the entire work, follows, by way of elucidation, upon his declaration that, having sufficient Bodhisattvas of his own to protect and propagate the Sūtra after his parinirvāṇa, he has no need of the services of those hailing from other Buddha-fields.

Finally, the ideal Buddhist is depicted as one who is ardently devoted to the Sūtra. In terms of the Three Jewels, the Buddha is the revealer of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, the Dharma is the spiritual life and dramatic action of which it consists, and the Sangha the community of those who, participating in that life and action, have pledged themselves to the preservation of the sacred text and promulgation of its teaching. Thus, the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* represents a synthesis, at the Mahāyāna level, of the most precious part of the Buddhist heritage, with the first of the Three Jewels predominating. Indeed, certain more glowingly eulogistic passages of the text would seem to suggest that the words *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* connote much more than just the title of a Sūtra, however great, being in truth the appellation of a ‘figured flame’ that not only blends but as a unity transcends the Three Jewels, and is itself the supreme (p.131) object of devotion and transcendental knowledge, the mysterious, all-comprehending ultimate Reality.”

Abridgement of the White Lotus Sūtra

This rendering of *The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* is an abridgment produced for WBO Day 1999 (the annual anniversary celebrating the founding of the Order) derived by using selected excerpts from *The Lotus Sūtra* translated by Burton Watson (Columbia Press 1993), Soothill's *Lotus of the Wonderful Law* (1930), *The Threefold Lotus Sūtra* trans. Bunno Kato (Weatherhill, 1984), *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* trans. Leon Hurvitz (Columbia 1976), *The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* trans. H. Kern (*Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXI). Whilst intending to remain as faithful to the original texts as much as possible, readers should bear in mind the inevitably interpretative means I've employed with such an extensive abridgement.

The form I've chosen to present the Sūtra is that of a 'dramatic' reading, i.e. in which the individual voices are made clear. While any one reader could find a way to make these voices distinct, this form of presentation also lends itself to a number of readers, each taking a voice, 'part' or role. Either way, this helps to draw out what I believe was probably the original oral mode of telling the story of the Sūtra. That is, before the Sūtra was written down, it will inevitably have been 'told' with elements of improvisation and personal elaboration on the part of any particular raconteur to help bring the telling to life in the imaginations of any particular audience.

1: Introduction

Ananda: Thus have I heard: At one time when the Buddha was staying at Rajagriha, the City of Royal Palaces, he assembled on Mount Grdhrakuta a great multitude of leading bhikshus, in all twelve thousand. All were arhats, faultless – their outflows exhausted, never again subject to earthly klesas; their minds free, they had attained what was to their advantage, being emancipated from all bonds of existence. Also assembled were eighty thousand Bodhisattva-mahasattvas, none of them ever regressing on the path to Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. All had mastered the dharanis, and being eloquent, delighted in teaching and turning the irreversible wheel of the Dharma.

Present also were Indra, king of the gods, with his twenty thousand sons, as well as the eight Naga kings, four Kimnara kings, four Gandharva kings, four Asura kings, four Garuda kings, each with several hundreds of thousands of followers. And there was also King Ajatashatru, the son of Vaidehi, with several hundreds of thousands of followers. Each of these, after making obeisance before the Buddha, withdrew and took a seat to one side.

Then the World-honoured One, surrounded by this great fourfold assembly, received offerings and tokens of respect and was honoured and praised. And after all this had been concluded, for the sake of the Bodhisattvas the Buddha taught the Mahāyāna Sūtra called *Ananta-nirdesa*, a teaching to instruct the Bodhisattva, one that is guarded and kept in mind by the Buddhas.

When the Buddha had finished teaching this Sūtra, he sat with his legs crossed in lotus position and entered into the samadhi called *Ananta-nirdesa-pratisthana-samadhi*, in which his body and mind were motionless. At that time the heavens rained down great mandarava and manjushaka flowers, scattering them over the Buddha and the great assembly, and everywhere the Buddha world quaked and trembled in six different ways. And as a consequence the *bhiksus, bhiksunis, upasakas, upasikas, devas, nagas, yakshas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kimnaras, mahoragas*, human and nonhuman beings in the assembly, as well as the petty kings and wheel-turning sage king, all of this great assembly, obtained that which had never been before, were filled with joy and, pressing their palms together, gazed at the Buddha with a single mind.

Then the Buddha, from the curl of white hair between his eyebrows, sent forth a ray of light illuminating eighteen thousand worlds in the eastern quarter. There was no place that the light did not penetrate, reaching downward as far as the Avichi hell and upward to the Akanishtha heaven.

Here, in this our own world, could be seen the living beings in the six paths of existence in all of those other lands. Likewise one could see the Buddhas present at that time in those other lands and could hear the Sūtra teachings which those Buddhas were expounding, as well as the bhiksus, bhiksunis, upasakas and upasikas who through practice had attained the Way. So too were *Bodhisattva-mahasattvas* to be seen who, through various causes and conditions, and various types of faith and understanding, and in various forms and aspects were carrying out the way of the Bodhisattva. And one could also see the Buddhas who had entered parinirvāṇa, and the stupas adorned with the seven treasures erected for their Buddha relics.

And then the Bodhisattva Maitreya had this thought:

Maitreya: The World-honoured One has manifested these miraculous signs. But what is the cause of these auspicious portents? An unfathomable event such as this is seldom to be met with. Since the Buddha, the World-honoured One, has entered into samadhi, who shall I question about this? Who can give me an answer? Manjushri, son of the Dharma-*raja*, has already personally attended and given offerings to immeasurable numbers of Buddhas in the past. Surely he must have witnessed such unprecedented signs as these? I will now question him.

Manjushri!

Why does our Master and teacher

From the white curl between his eyebrows

Radiate this great light?

The rain of mandarava

And manjushaka flowers

And fragrant breezes of sandalwood

Delight our every heart.
The earth is everywhere adorned and purified,
Quaking and trembling in six ways.
All are filled with joy and delight,
Rejoicing in body and mind,
Having gained what they never had before.
Buddha son, Manjushri,
Why has the World-honoured One
Sent forth this bright beam of light?"

Ananda: Then Manjushri replied:

Manjushri: Good sons! I suppose that the Buddha, the World-honoured One wishes now to expound the ultimate truth, to pour down the rain of the true Dharma, to raise the banner of the true Dharma, to kindle the torch of the true Dharma, to blow the conch of the true Dharma, to beat the great drum of the true Dharma, to elucidate the meaning of the true Dharma. Whenever in the past I have seen this auspicious portent among the Buddhas, they sent forth a beam of light like this, and after that they expounded the ultimate truth of the Dharma. Therefore we should know that, when the present Buddha manifests this auspicious portent of light, he will do likewise. He wishes to cause all living beings to hear and understand the real truth, which is difficult for all the world to believe. The Tathagata is about to teach the Mahāyāna Sūtra called *The Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* – the ‘White Lotus of the Real Truth’, revealing the meaning of the true essence of phenomena, a teaching to instruct the Bodhisattva, one that is guarded and kept in mind by the Buddhas. Human beings will now come to know it. Let us press our palms together and wait with a single mind. The Buddha will pour down the rain of the Dharma to fully satisfy all true seekers of the way. You who seek the three vehicles, if you have doubts and regrets, the Buddha will resolve them for you, bringing them to an end.

Chapter 2: Expedient Means

Ananda: When Manjusri had finished speaking, the World-honoured One, calmly arising from samadhi, addressed Shariputra, saying:

The Buddha: The wisdom of the Buddhas is profound and infinite. The school of their wisdom is difficult to enter and to understand. Not one of the *sravakas* or *pratyekabuddhas* is able to comprehend it. What is the reason for this?

Immeasurable are the world's heroes,
None amongst men,
Nor the world's heavenly creatures
Can fathom the Buddhas.
Long ago I followed countless Buddhas,
And perfectly trod the ways
Of the profound and mystic Dharma,
Hard to perceive and perform.
During infinite kotis of kalpas,
Having followed all these ways,
Attaining fruition on the Wisdom-throne
I perfectly understand
The meaning of every nature and form.
I and the Buddhas of the universe
Alone can understand these things –
The Truth, beyond demonstration,
The Truth, beyond expression,
The Truth, beyond the realm of terms.
But among living beings none comprehend it,
Except Bodhisattvas unshaken in the power of faith.
Shariputra!
Even the many arhats who,
Have already cut off all outflows
And now dwell in their last birth,
Even such persons have not the power needed.
Though men like Shariputra filled the whole world,

Though they pooled their capacities,
They could not fathom the Buddha-Wisdom.
With the Buddhas of the ten directions
Only I understand these truths.
Shariputra!
The words of the various Buddhas never differ!
Toward the Dharma taught by the Buddhas
Cultivate a great power of faith.
I announce to all assembled:
Through the power of expedient means,
To pry living beings from their attachments,
The Buddha has long taught preparatory doctrines,
According to his disciples' capacities,
He has shown the Way to attain release
By means of the three vehicles.
But now the Buddha will reveal
The mysterious, incomprehensible,
Profound, subtle and wonderful Dharma,
The perfect Truth in full.

Ananda: Now when the sravakas and Arhats amongst the great assembly heard the Buddha speak in this way, each reflected: 'For what reason does the World-honoured One now so earnestly praise expedient means, saying that the Dharma attained by him is so profound and difficult to understand and that the meaning of what he is about to teach is so difficult to comprehend that it is beyond the grasp of the sravakas or pratyekabuddhas? Since the Buddha has taught but one principle of emancipation, by which we have attained nirvana, we cannot follow the gist of what he is saying now.'

Shariputra, understanding their doubts and he himself not yet fully understanding, addressed the Buddha, saying:

Shariputra:

O Sun of Wisdom!
Great Sage and World-honoured One!
At last, unasked, you will announce the highest truth.
But now the fourfold assembly

Is fallen into a net of doubts.
For what reason do you so earnestly
Praise expedient means,
The foremost device of the Buddhas'
Profound, subtle and wonderful Dharma
so difficult to understand?
From times past I have never heard
This kind of teaching from the Buddha.
With folded hands and reverent minds,
We beg the World-honoured One
To expound this matter
Wishing to hear of the Perfect Path.

Ananda: After Shariputra had made this request three times, the World-honoured One replied:

The Buddha: Shariputra, three times you have stated your earnest request. How can I refuse to speak? Listen attentively and carefully ponder. For your sake I will now explain the matter clearly.

Ananda: But when the Buddha had spoken these words, some five thousand bhiksus, bhiksunis, upasakas and upasikas in the assembly immediately rose from their seats. Bowing to the Buddha, they withdrew, and left the great assembly. What was the reason for this? The root of sin in these beings was so deep and their haughty spirits so enlarged that they imagined they had attained and understood what in fact they had not. Being so mistaken, they would not remain where they were. The World-honoured One was silent and did not try to detain them. After they had left, the Buddha said to Shariputra:

The Buddha: Now this assembly of mine is free of useless twigs and leaves, having none but the firm fruit of the steadfast and true.

Shariputra, the Buddhas' words
Are not empty or false.
The Buddhas teach the Dharma,
Employing countless expedient means,
Discussing causes and conditions,
Using words of simile and parable
To expound innumerable teachings.

But bhiksus and bhiksunis
Obsessed by utmost arrogance,
Upasakas in self-conceit,
Upasikas in unbelief,
Such the like as these
Perceiving not their error
And faults in moral law,
Nursing only their flaws,
Such small-wits have gone.
This chaff, these unhappy men,
Shutting out this Truth,
Hide from the Buddha's majesty, -
(Now) has this assembly nor twigs nor leaves,
But only the true and real.
Shariputra! Listen carefully
To the Dharma obtained by the Buddhas,
Which by infinitely skilful means,
They expound for all creatures.
This Dharma cannot be understood
Through pondering or analysis.
Like the udumbara,
Seldom seen in flower,
So the Buddhas rarely teach
This subtle, wonderful Dharma.
The Buddha, thoroughly knowing
The thoughts of living beings,
The nature of their desires,
And the ways they tread,
According to their capacity,
With various reasonings, parables,
Terms and tactful ways,
Causes them all to rejoice.

To the dull who have failed,
Under countless Buddhas,
To walk the profound and mystic Way,
But who delight in petty rules,
And to those greedily attached to mortality,
Being harassed by suffering
To these I teach Nirvana.
Such is my first expedient in
Leading them to Buddha-wisdom.
Not yet could I say to them,
'You all shall attain to Buddhahood',
For the time had not yet arrived.
But now the very time has come
And I must teach the Great Vehicle.
But when I teach this Buddha-Way,
The ignorant, lacking wholesome roots,
Remain confused and deluded,
And accept not my teaching.
By stubbornly clinging to base desires,
Infatuated with greed and delusion,
They suffer the utmost misery.
Revolving through the six realms
They pass from generation to generation,
Poor in virtue and of little happiness,
Oppressed by suffering.
Dwelling in the thickets of opinion,
Relying on empty propositions,
They become rooted in false philosophy,
Tenacious and unyielding,
Self-inflated and arrogant,
Suspicious, sycophantic and insincere.
During thousands and millions of kalpas

Such hear not the name of Buddha,
Nor ever learn of the Truth;
These men are hard to save.
In the perilous round of mortality,
In continuous, unending misery,
Firmly tied to their passions
As a yak in love with its tail,
Such, smothered by greed and infatuation,
Blinded and seeing nothing,
Seek not the Buddha, the Mighty,
And the Truth that ends suffering.
But deeply sunk in heresy,
By suffering seeking to rid suffering
Such are hard to save;
For the sake of all these creatures
My heart is stirred with compassion.
For their sake, Shariputra,
I set up an expedient,
Proclaiming a Way to end suffering,
Revealing it as Nirvana.
Yet, though I proclaim Nirvana,
It is not real extinction.
To teach the Buddha-wisdom
The Buddha employs provisional terms;
But in the Buddha-lands of the ten directions,
All dharmas from the first
Are ever of Nirvana nature,
There is only the Dharma of the One yana,
Not two, still less three.
The Buddha appears in the world
Only for this One Reality;
For never by a smaller vehicle,

Does a Buddha save any creature.
The Buddha abides in the Great-Vehicle
Enriched by meditation and wisdom,
And living by the Truth so attained,
By it all creatures are saved.
The Buddhas open (the eyes of) the living
To the pure Way of the Perfect Knowledge
Of the One Buddha-Wisdom.
Living beings, hearing the Buddha-Dharma,
All enter the One Buddha-yana,
All finally obtain Perfect Enlightenment.
Know, O Shariputra!
Long ago I made a vow,
In desire to cause all creatures
To rank equally with me without distinction;
Now all will be fulfilled:
When a Buddha-son treads the true Path,
In a world to come he becomes Buddha.
Know, Shariputra!
The stupid and those of little wit,
Those tied to externals,
And the proud cannot believe this Truth.
But now I gladly and with boldness
In the midst of (you) Bodhisattvas,
Straightway put aside expediency
And only proclaim the Supreme Way.
It was as expedient means
That I expounded a Three-Vehicle Law.
Let all be free of doubt and perplexity.
World-Honoured Ones, without exception,
Teach this Way: the One Buddha-yana.
(For) all Buddhas take the one vow:

‘The Buddha-way which I walk,
I will universally cause all the living
To attain this same Way with me.’
Though Buddhas in future ages
Proclaim hundreds, thousands, kotis,
Of countless ways into the doctrine,
In reality there is but the One-Vehicle.
In the same fashion that Buddhas,
Past, present, and future, teach this Dharma,
So also will I now proclaim
The one and undivided Dharma.
Even in infinite, countless kalpas,
Rarely may this Dharma be heard,
And those able to listen to it,
Such men as these are rare.
Who hears and joyfully extols it,
Though but by a single word,
Thus pays homage to
All Buddhas in the three realms.
Know, Shariputra,
That this Wonderful Dharma
Is the secret of all the Buddhas.
Rejoice greatly in your heart,
Knowing that you will become a Buddha.”

Chapter 3: Simile And Parable

Ananda: At that time Shariputra, ecstatic with joy, immediately rose, and, pressing his palms together and gazing in reverence at the face of the World-honoured One, said to the Buddha:

Shariputra: Now, when I hear from the World-honoured One this voice of the Dharma, my heart dances with joy, since I have gained what I have never had before. Why do I say this? Because, when in the past I heard how the Bodhisattvas were predicted to attain Buddhahood, I and others felt excluded. I was deeply grieved to think I would never gain the immeasurable insight of the Tathagata. World-honoured One, I have constantly lived in the mountain forest or alone under the trees and always I have thought to myself, ‘we have entered all alike into the nature of the Dharma, so why does the Tathagata use the Dharma of the Lesser Vehicle to deprive us of the opportunity to gain the unsurpassed attainments and body of a Buddha?’

But the fault is mine, not that of the World-honoured One. I failed to understand that the Buddha was employing expedient means, and teaching what was appropriate to our circumstances. For example, when I first heard the Buddha’s teaching, which rooted out my mistaken views, I immediately supposed that I had fully understood the teaching of Emptiness, and assumed I had reached the final goal. I now realise that this was not the true Nirvana.

World-honoured One, for a long time now, day and night, I have repeatedly taxed myself with this thought. But now I hear the Buddha’s gentle voice, hear what I had never heard before, a wonderful teaching, profound, extremely subtle, far beyond ordinary understanding, setting forth the pure Dharma, the means to accomplish Supreme Perfect Enlightenment for all. My doubts and regrets are ended. My heart is filled with joy; my body and mind are at ease; I have gained peace and security. Today, at long last, I indeed know that I am the Buddha’s son, born of the Buddha’s mouth, born through conversion to the Dharma, and received my inheritance of the Buddha’s Teaching! I am certain that I too will become a Buddha!

Ananda: And then the Buddha said to Shariputra:

The Buddha: Indeed, Shariputra, in ages to come, having made offerings to numberless Buddhas, being endowed with all the Bodhisattva practices, the ten powers and other blessings, you will realise the unsurpassed Way. You will become a Buddha, of universal wisdom, venerable, bearing the name *Padmaprabha Tathagata*, Worthy of offerings, Fully and Perfectly Awake, Equipped with Knowledge and Practice, Happily Attained, Knower of the World, Guide Unsurpassed of Men to Be Tamed, Peerless Leader, Teacher of gods and men, Buddha, World-honoured One, and you will save countless multitudes. Your world will be called *Viraja* – ‘Free from Stain’ – pure, without flaw or blemish. Its land will be made of lapis lazuli, its roads bounded by ropes of gold, and seven-jewelled trees in a blaze of colours will constantly bear blossoms and fruit. After countless kalpas have passed, your kalpa will be named *Maharatna-pratimandita* – or ‘Great Treasure

Adornment.’ Why? Because your Bodhisattvas will be infinite, boundless, inconceivable, beyond compare - wherever they walk, jewel flowers will receive their feet. The lifespan of the Buddha Padmaprabha will be twelve minor kalpas. He will then predict the Bodhisattva *Dhriti-paripurna* to become a Buddha whose name will be *Padma-vrsabhavikramin* – or ‘He who walks securely on lotuses.’ After that Buddha Padmaprabha has passed into extinction, the True Dharma will endure in the world for thirty-two small kalpas, saving living beings far and wide. The actions of Padmaprabha Buddha will all be as I have said. This most excellent and holy of men will be foremost and without peer. And he will be none other than you, Shariputra – you should rejoice and count yourself fortunate!

Ananda: Then Shariputra said:

Shariputra: World-Honoured One, now I have no more doubts or second-thoughts; but for the sake of these disciples gathered here, who have heard what they have never heard before, I beg you to resolve their uncertainty.

Ananda: The Buddha replied:

The Buddha: Shariputra, have I not said before that the Buddhas, World-honoured Ones, by a variety of reasonings, parables and terms, teach the Dharma as may be expedient. All these are for the purpose of transforming their disciples into Bodhisattvas. But, let me again by means of simile and parable make this clearer, for intelligent people can thereby reach understanding.

[The Parable of the Burning House]

Shariputra, suppose that in a certain town in a certain country there was a rich elder of great power, advanced in years, his wealth incalculable, owning many estates, mansions and surrounded by servants. One of his houses was large and spacious, but also very old: the foundations were collapsing, the walls cracked and the plaster crumbling, its ceilings falling in, with pillars rotten at their base, beams slipping, and the roof and rafters crooked and aslant. And in this house lived a great many people – a hundred, two hundred, perhaps as many as five hundred. But also living as well were all manner of venomous creatures such as rats, mice, snakes, beetles, insects, raccoons, weasels and many types of birds. Packs of dogs, driven by hunger and fear, raced through the house searching for food. The house stank of excrement and overflowed with streams of filth. And all manner of ferocious demons and evil spirits, shrieking and howling, roamed everywhere making the house fearful and perilous.

One day, quite suddenly, a fire broke out, and spreading quickly, the house was soon ablaze. As it happened, the rich man was standing outside the gate to the house, when someone said to him, ‘A little while ago, all your young children went into the house to play.’ Greatly alarmed, the rich man rushed into the burning house to save them. But when he saw huge flames leaping up on every side, he was very fearful, thinking, ‘Although we can escape to safety through the burning doorway, my children are too

preoccupied enjoying themselves and playing games; my children are very young, knowing nothing as yet, and they love their games, and are completely engrossed in them. Unaware, they don't understand and are not frightened. Though the fire is closing in on them, with pain and suffering imminent, yet they don't mind; they don't think of trying to escape!

Shariputra, this rich man thought to himself, 'I am strong; perhaps I can carry each of them out of the house?' But then he thought, 'There is only one door through which we could go, and it is too narrow and small for me to carry them. All I can do is to warn them that they will get hurt by the flames, that they must be quick to get out in time before they come to great harm.'

So he called out to all his children, saying, 'You must come out at once!' But though the father was moved by compassion and spoke kindly, the children, absorbed in their games, paid no attention to him. They were not frightened, and did not want to pay any attention to him, nor to leave the house. Moreover, they did not really understand what he meant, nor what danger they were in. They merely raced up and down in play, from time to time glancing at their father.

Then the rich man thought, 'My children are taking no notice of me; they are bewitched by their play. But the house is already blazing with this huge fire. If I and my children do not get out at once, we are certain to be burned. I will have to invent some way or another to ensure that the children escape harm.'

So the father knowing his children, knowing which toys and playthings that each child liked and delighted in, called out to them, 'Here are the kind of playthings you like, which are so hard to find. If you don't come and get them now when you can, you will be sorry for it later. I have all sorts of goat-carts, deer-carts, and ox-carts for you to play with; they are all outside the gate now where you can play with them. So hurry up, you must come quickly out of this burning house. Then whatever ones you want, I will give them to you!'

When the children heard their father telling them about these attractive toys, and because the carts were just what they wanted, every one of them eagerly, pushing and shoving one another, came wildly dashing out of the burning house.

When the rich man saw that all his children were safe and no longer in danger, and were all waiting in the square, he sat down greatly relieved and ecstatic with joy. Then the children asked their father, 'The lovely toys you promised that we could play with, the goat-carts and deer-carts and ox-carts – please give them to us now!'

Shariputra, then the rich man gave to each of his children a large chariot, high and spacious, adorned with all manner of precious things, surrounded with railed seats, hung with bells on its four sides, and covered with curtains, splendidly decorated with precious jewels, hung with garlands of flowers, thickly spread with beautiful carpets and vermilion cushions. Each chariot was yoked with pure white bullocks, handsome and strong,

capable of pulling the chariot smoothly, and also with the speed of the wind. Each chariot had many grooms and servants to attend and guard it.

What was the reason for this? The rich man thought to himself, ‘My wealth is limitless and I have many kinds of storehouses that are all filled and over-flowing; it would not be right if I were to give my children small carts of inferior make. These are my children and I love them equally.’ So each child, filled with excitement, mounted his large chariot, gaining something he had never had before, something he had originally never expected, and was free to play and roam as he wished without hindrance.

Shariputra, what do you think of this? Has that elder, in only giving to his children great chariots adorned with rare jewels, been guilty of falsehood or not?”

Ananda: Then Shariputra replied to the Buddha:

Shariputra: No, World-honoured One. This rich man simply made it possible for his children to escape the peril of the fire. He did not commit a falsehood. Why do I say this? Because in having their lives saved, the children already obtained a plaything of sorts. World-honoured One, even if the rich man had not given them the tiniest cart, he would still not be guilty of falsehood. Why? Because this rich man from the outset had made up his mind that he would use an expedient to cause his children to escape. Using a device of this kind was no act of falsehood. How much less so then, when the rich man, knowing that his wealth was limitless and he intended to enrich and benefit his children, gives to each of them a marvellous chariot.

Ananda: The Buddha then said to Shariputra:

The Buddha: Very good, very good! It is just as you say. Shariputra, the Tathagata is like this, for he is a father to all the world. He is born into this triple world, a burning house, rotten and old, to save living beings from the fires of birth, old age, sickness and death, grief, suffering, stupidity, darkness, and the three poisons, to teach them to attain Perfect Enlightenment.

He sees living beings scorched by the fires of suffering, undergoing many kinds of pain because of their five desires and their greed for wealth. He sees how, through striving after their desires and attachments, they undergo numerous pains in their present existence, and later how they suffer the pain of being reborn in hell or as beasts or hungry spirits. And even if they are reborn in the heavenly realm or the realm of human beings, there are all kinds of sufferings, such as the pain of poverty and want, the pain of being parted from loved ones, the bitterness of encountering those they detest.

Yet living beings, drowning in the midst of all this, delight and amuse themselves, unaware, unknowing, without alarm or fear. They feel no sense of loathing and make no attempt to escape. In this burning house which is the triple world, they race about here and there, and though they encounter great sufferings, they remain unconcerned. When the Buddha sees this, he reflects thus, ‘I am the father of living beings. I must rescue

them from their sufferings and give them the bliss of the measureless and boundless Buddha-wisdom to play with.’

Shariputra, the Tathagata also has this thought, ‘If I should only employ supernatural power and wisdom, casting aside every expedient and extol for all creatures the Tathagata’s insight, power and freedom from fear, then they would not by this be saved.’ Why? Because these living beings have not yet escaped from birth, old age, sickness, death, grief and suffering, but are consumed by flames in the burning house that is the triple world. How could they understand the Buddha’s wisdom?

Shariputra, just as that rich man, although he had strength in his body and arms and yet did not use it, but resolutely resorts to a carefully contrived expedient to rescue his children from the peril of the burning house, so it is with the Tathagata. Though he possesses power and fearlessness, he does not use these. Instead he merely employs wise expedients to rescue living beings from the burning house of the triple world saying, ‘You must come out of this triple world with its coarse and shoddy forms so that you can acquire the three vehicles, the vehicles of the sravaka, the pratyekabuddha and the Buddha. Mounted on these three vehicles, you will perfect faculties, powers, perceptions, samadhis, paths and emancipations and become happy and gain incalculable peace and joy. This I guarantee, and that promise will never prove false.’

And furthermore, just as that rich man, first used three types of carts to entice his children, but seeing that they had all escaped from the burning house safely and were no longer threatened, recalled that his wealth was immeasurable and presented each of them with just the great chariot adorned with jewels, the safest, most comfortable kind of all, so the Tathagata does likewise. Just as that rich man was not guilty of falsehood, the Tathagata is without falsehood. Being the father of all living beings, the Tathagata has this thought, ‘I possess measureless, boundless wisdom, power, fearlessness, and the storehouse of the Dharma of the Buddhas. Living beings are all my children. I will give the Great Vehicle to all of them equally so that there will not be those who gain nirvana for themselves, but that all may do so by way of the nirvana of the Tathagata.’

Shariputra, the Tathagata is capable of giving to all living beings the Teaching of the Great Vehicle. But, not all of them are capable of receiving it. For this reason you should understand that the Buddhas employ the power of expedient means. And because they do so, they make distinctions in the one Buddha vehicle and preach it as three.

Chapter 4: Belief And Understanding

Ananda: Then, at that time, when those venerable and wise disciples, Subhuti, Mahakatyayana, Mahakashyapa, and Mahamaudgalyayana had heard the Buddha talk of that unprecedented Dharma, and hearing the World-honoured One's prophecy that Shariputra would attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, they were struck with wonder and ecstatic joy. At once they rose from their seats, and arranging their robes appropriately, bent their right knees to the ground. Pressing their palms together they bowed respectfully, and then gazing up in reverence at the face of the Honoured One, they said to the Buddha:

Subhuti: 'We stand at the head of the bhiksus and all of us are advanced in years. We believed that we had already attained nirvana and that there was nothing further to do, and so we never sought to attain Supreme Enlightenment. It has been a long time since the World-honoured One first began to expound the Dharma. Since that time we have been meditating solely on the concepts of emptiness, non-form and non-action. But as to the Bodhisattva-Dharma, its pleasures and transcendental powers, or of the purifying of Buddha lands and of the salvation of living beings – in these our minds took no joy. Why is this? Because the World-honoured One had made it possible for us to transcend the triple world and to attain the enlightenment of nirvana. Moreover, being old and decrepit, when we heard of Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, which the Buddha uses to teach and convert the Bodhisattvas, our minds were not filled with any enthusiasm. But now in the presence of the Buddha we have heard this sravaka receive a prophecy that he will attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. We are greatly delighted; we have gained what we never had before. Suddenly we have heard a teaching so rarely encountered, something that we never expected. We are profoundly fortunate to have gained great goodness and benefit, an immeasurably rare jewel, something unsought that came of itself. World-honoured One, we wish to tell a parable to make our meaning clear.'

[The Parable of the Return Journey]

Mahakashyapa: It is like a youth who, on attaining manhood, abandoned his father and ran away. For a long time he lived in another country, for perhaps ten, twenty or more years. As he grew older, he found himself increasingly poor and in need. He wandered from place to place in search of clothing and food, roaming farther and farther afield.

The father meanwhile had been searching for his son without success and eventually had taken up residence in a certain city. And at this time the father became powerful and very wealthy, with immeasurable riches and treasures. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, corals, amber, crystal and other gems all filled and overflowed from his storehouses. He had many grooms and menservants, clerks and attendants, and elephants, horses, carriages, oxen, and herds beyond number. His business ventures extended far and wide, and his traders and customers were constantly coming and going. He was held in high esteem and affection by the king, ministers and noble families. For all these reasons his guests were many.

Meanwhile the impoverished son roamed from place to place, scraping his livelihood together, until at last he came by chance to the great city where his father had settled. Although they had been parted for a long time the father thought constantly of his son but, he had never told anyone else about the matter. He merely pondered to himself, his heart filled with sadness, regret and longing. He thought to himself, 'I'm old and worn; I have great wealth and possessions: gold, silver, and rare treasures; my granaries and storehouses are overflowing. But I do not have my son. One day I will die, and all my wealth and possessions will be scattered and lost, for I have no-one to entrust them to.'

In this way he'd constantly reflect, and earnestly repeat to himself, 'If only I could find my son and entrust my wealth and possessions to him, how contented and happy I would be!'

Maha-katya-yana: World-honoured One, one day the son, drifting from one kind of employment to another, famished, weak and gaunt, covered with scab and itch, came by chance to his father's mansion. As he stood at the outer gate, in the distance he was amazed to see a rich man (whom he did not recognise as his father), seated on a lion throne, his legs supported by a jewelled foot-rest, while Brahmins, noblemen, and householders, uniformly deferential, surrounded him. Festoons of pearls worth thousands, or tens of thousands, adorned his body; and clerks, grooms, and menservants holding white fly whisks stood in attendance to left and right. A jewelled canopy covered him, with flowered banners hanging from it, perfumed water had been sprinkled over the ground, heaps of rare flowers were scattered about and precious objects were ranged here and there. Clerks came and went, some counting up gold, silver and precious things, some recording in ledgers incoming and outgoing goods, and noting down bonds. Such were the rich man's many different types of adornments, the emblems of prerogative and marks of distinction.

When the son saw how great was the rich man's power and authority, he was filled with fear and awe and regretted he had ever come to such a place. In some alarm, he thought to himself, 'This must be some king, or very powerful man. This is not the sort of place where I can hire out my labour and gain a living. It would be better to go to some poor village where, if I work hard, I will find a place and can easily earn food and clothing. If I stay here for long, I may be seized and pressed into service!' With this in mind, he hurried away.

But, his father, seated on his lion throne, had instantly spied his son recognising him immediately. His heart was filled with great joy and at once he thought, 'My thoughts have constantly been with this son of mine, but I had no way of seeing him. But now quite unexpectedly he has come, and my longing is satisfied. Though worn with years, I yearn for him as of old. Now at last I have someone to whom I can give my wealth!'

Immediately he dispatched an attendant to go after the son as quickly as possible and bring him back. When the attendant caught up with the son, he laid hold of him. The poor man, surprised and scared, cried out angrily, 'I have done nothing wrong! Why am I

being seized?’ But the attendant held on to him all the more tightly and forcibly started to drag him back.

The son, thinking to himself, ‘I’m innocent! I have not committed any crime; why should I be arrested? Surely I am going to be put to death!’ was so terrified that he sank to the ground, and fainted with despair.

His father, observing this from a distance, immediately sent a messenger, saying, ‘Leave the man alone; I have no need of him. Sprinkle cold water on his face so he will regain his senses. Then say nothing more to him!’

Why did he do that? Because the father, seeing that his son’s disposition was now so humble, knew his own rich and eminent position could only cause his son more distress. Whilst knowing very well that this was his son, he tactfully refrained from saying to anyone, ‘This is my son.’

When the son had revived, the messenger said to him, ‘You’re free to go now, wherever you wish.’ Delighted the son quickly left to look for food in some poor village.

Then the father, hoping to entice his son back again, decided to resort to a device. So he sent two of his attendants, men who were lean, haggard and shabby in appearance, saying to them, ‘Go and find that poor man; approach him casually. Tell him you know a place where he can earn twice the regular wage. If he agrees, then bring him here and put him to work. If he wants to know what sort of work he will be put to, say that he is hired to move dung and filth, and that the two of you will be working with him.’

The two men then set out at once to find the son, and when they had done so, put their proposition to him. The son, getting his wages in advance, decided to join them in their work.

From that day the father secretly gazing out his window would constantly observe his son, his body, gaunt and emaciated, filthy with dust and sweat, and from the dung and excrement he was clearing away. When the father saw how happily his son engaged in this menial work, he was struck with both pity and amazement.

From time to time the father would take off his necklaces, his soft fine garments and his other adornments, and disguising himself in clothes that were ragged and soiled, he would smear dirt on his body. Carrying a dung-hod and acting as a foreman, he would gruffly order the labourers around saying, ‘Get on with your work! Don’t be lazy!’ By this device, he was able to approach his son.

After some time had passed, the rich man called his son to him and said, ‘Now then, young man! You stay and work here; you have no need to go elsewhere! I will increase your wages, and give you whatever you need, whether it is food, clothes or bedding; I also have an old servant I can lend you whenever you need him. Set your mind at ease: I will be like a father to you, so you need worry no further. Why do I say this? You are not

like the other workers: all the time you've been working here, you have never been deceitful, lazy, angry or grumbled. I am getting old, but you are still young and sturdy. From now on, I will treat you like my own son.' And then the rich man gave his son a new name, treating him as if he were his own child, allowing him to come and go in his own house.

Whilst the son was delighted at this turn of events, he nevertheless still thought of himself as a menial worker. Because of this, he continued in his original job, clearing away excrement for a long time, and continued to live in his grass hut outside the rich man's gates. But during this time, the son's self-confidence became stronger and, feeling that he was understood and trusted, he came and went at ease.

Maha-maudgalya-yana: World-honoured One, one day the father fell ill, and bearing in mind that he might soon die, he spoke to his son, saying, 'I have great quantities of gold, silver, and rare treasures that fill and overflow from my storehouses. I want you to become my steward, to take complete charge of the accounting, the income and expenditure. So you must keep your wits about you and see that there are no mistakes or losses. This is what I have in mind, and I want you to carry out my wishes.'

So the son, taking up his new job, took over attending to all the rich man's goods, gold, silver, rare treasures, and various storehouses. In spite of all this wealth he never once thought of appropriating for himself so much as the cost of a single meal. Indeed, he still continued to live where he had before, and at first was unable to abandon his sense of inferiority.

Nevertheless as time passed, the father saw that his son was bit by bit becoming more self-assured and that with a changing view of himself he was become more ambitious and ashamed of his former low opinion of himself. Realising that his own end was fast approaching, the father ordered his son to arrange a meeting with his relatives, as well as the king's representative, high ministers, and noblemen. When they were all gathered together, the father addressed this great assembly saying, 'Gentlemen, know that this is my son, who was born to me. It is over fifty years since from a certain city he left me and ran away, and for a long time he wandered about suffering hardship. But by chance, we met up again. This is in truth my son, and I in truth am his father. Now everything that belongs to me, all my wealth and possessions, shall belong entirely to this son of mine.'

When the son heard his father speak, he was overjoyed at this unexpected news, and he thought to himself, 'Although I have never thought to want or look for such wealth, now it has come of its own accord!'

Subhuti:

World-honoured One! The Buddha likewise,
Knowing our fondness for the petty,
Has never before told us

‘You shall become Buddhas!’
We all, during a long night,
After the true Buddha-wisdom
Never aspired nor sought.
For we, in regard to the Dharma
Thought we had reached finality.
We kept to the dharma of Sunyata
Throughout the long night of time,
Escaping from the triple world’s
Burden of suffering and care,
And dwelt in our final existence,
Where form only remains.
Without doubt, we thought,
To have won the Way
By the Buddha taught,
And thereby the Buddha’s grace to repay.
Although teaching the bodhisattva-dharma,
In that we had no hope.
Our Leader saw and let us be,
For into our minds he looked,
And sought not to stir our zeal
By telling of our true Gain.
Just as the rich elder,
By his own tactfulness,
Knowing his son’s lower bent,
Softens and moulds his mind,
So that later to him
All his riches he can bequeath,
So is it with the Buddha
In the display of his treasures;
Knowing those by trifles pleased,
Yet by skilful devices

Tames he their minds,
And only then teaches the greater wisdom.
To-day we have obtained
What we never had before;
What we previously never looked for,
We have unforeseen obtained,
Just as that poor son
Received inestimable treasures.
World-honoured One!
Steeped in the Buddha Dharma,
For long time have we kept
The Dharma-raja's pure discipline,
Thereby through faultless Dharma,
Attaining to clear vision.
But to-day for the first time
Have we won the Fruit of the Way;
Today we attain the faultless,
Peerless Great Fruit.
Now at last we are
Truly Arhats.
Now at last we are
Truly hearers of the Sound,
Who sing the song of Buddha-Way
For all creatures to hear.
The World-honoured One,
In his great loving-kindness,
With rare and precious things,
Compassionate, instructs
And confers benefits on us;
Through countless kotis of kalpas,
Who could ever repay him?
Service of hands and feet,

Homage all prostrate,
Every kind of offering,
Are all unable this to repay.
Buddhas, Dharma-rajās,
With powers rare and inconceivable,
Boundless and infinite,
Faultless and ineffable,
For the sake of inferior minds,
Are effortlessly patient;
To common folk, attached to externals,
They teach as befits them.
Exercising complete freedom in the Dharma,
Appraised of living beings' desires,
Their pleasures and aspirations,
So, according to their capacity,
The Buddhas, by innumerable parables,
To them they teach the Way.
According as all the living
Have planted wholesome roots,
Knowing the mature from the immature,
And discerning the fruits of each,
The Buddha discriminating,
As is most befitting,
Thereby for the sake of the One Vehicle,
Teaches it as the Three.

Chapter 5: The Parable Of The Medicinal Herbs

Ananda: At that time the World-honoured One said to Mahakashyapa and the other major disciples:

The Buddha: Excellent, excellent, Kashyapa. You have described truly the real merits of the Tathagata. Know Kashyapa! The Tathagata is the *Dharma-rajā*. Whatever he teaches is free from falsity; he expounds all teachings with wise expediency. The Tathagata understands the workings of the innermost hearts of all living beings, penetrating them completely and without hindrance. He observes and understands the end to which all doctrines tend. And his teaching always leads towards Supreme Perfect Enlightenment.

Kashyapa!

It is like unto a great cloud

Rising above the world,

Covering all things everywhere,

A gracious cloud laden with moisture;

Lightning-flames flash and dazzle,

A voice of thunder vibrates afar,

Bringing joy and ease to all.

The sun's rays are veiled,

And the earth is cooled;

The cloud's masses lower and spread

As if to be touched;

It rains down equally

Descending on all sides,

Streaming and pouring unstinted,

Permeating the land everywhere:

Whether by mountain-stream,

River, ravine, or cavern.

Wherever grow plants and trees,

Both great and small,

Thickets, groves and bushes,

Medicinal herbs of many kinds;

Grape-vine and sugar-cane,

The shoots of the ripening grain,

Each in their different soils,
Each with its own name and hue,
The rain moistens them all.
All are abundantly enriched;
The parched ground soaked,
Everywhere herbs and trees grow lush.
From the one water which
Issues from that cloud,
Plants, trees, thickets, forests,
According to need receive moisture.
All the various trees,
Lofty, medium, low,
Each according to its size,
Sprouts and grows
Roots, stalks, branches, leaves,
Blossoms and fruits in their brilliant colours.
Wherever the one rain reaches,
All become fresh and glossy.
According as their bodies, forms
And natures are great or small,
So the enriching rain,
Though one and the same rain,
Yet causes each to flourish.
In like manner also the Buddha
Appears here in the World,
Like unto a great cloud
Universally covering all things;
And having appeared in the world,
He, for the sake of the living,
Discriminates and proclaims
The truth regarding phenomena.
The Great Sage that World-honoured One

Among gods and men
And among other beings - declares:
'I am the Tathagata,
Most Honoured among men;
I appear in the world
Like unto this great cloud,
To pour enrichment on
Parched living beings - one and all,
To free them from their misery,
To attain the joy of peace,
Joys of this world
And joy of Nirvana.
Gods, men, and every one!
Hearken well with mind attentive,
Behold the Peerless Honoured One
Who cannot be equalled!
I appear in the world,
To give rest to every creature,
And to the hosts of the living teach,
The Dharma, pure as sweet dew,
Of one flavour, the Dharma
Of deliverance and Nirvana,
With one transcendent voice
Forever unfolding the means
For the Great Way.
Upon all I ever look
Everywhere impartially,
Without distinction of persons,
Or mind of love or hate.
I am without greed or attachment
Without limitation or hindrance.
Ever to all beings

I teach the Dharma equally;
As I teach to one person,
So I teach to all.
Going, coming, sitting, standing,
Untiringly engaged in naught else,
Ever I proclaim the Dharma.
Like the all-moistening rain
On honoured and humble, high and low,
Precept-keepers and -breakers alike,
Those of perfect character,
And those of imperfect,
Orthodox and heterodox,
Quick witted and dull witted,
Equally on all
I rain down the Dharma,
Pouring it copiously
On the world unwearingly.
Know, Kashyapa
The Dharma taught by the Buddha
Is like this great rain-cloud,
Whose rain of one flavour
Moistens human flowers,
By which each bears its own fruit.
Kashyapa, by various expedients
Such as simile and parable,
I demonstrate the Buddha Way.
For you and others,
I now teach the highest truth:
What you tread is the Bodhisattva-path,
By whose learning and practise,
You shall all achieve Buddhahood.'

Chapter 7: The Magic City

Ananda: Thereupon, the World-honoured One addressed the great assembly, saying:

The Buddha: Bhiksus, when a Tathagata knows that the time has come to enter nirvana, and knows that the members of the assembly are pure, firm in faith and discernment, thorough in their comprehension of the Dharma of Sunyata and deeply entered into meditation practice, then he will call together the assembly of Bodhisattvas and sravakas and will teach this *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* to them. In the world there is no second vehicle for attaining nirvana; there is only the one Buddha vehicle for such attainment.

Bhiksus, you must understand this. The Tathagata in his use of expedient means penetrates deeply into the nature of living beings. He knows how their minds delight in trifling things and how deeply they are attached to human desires. Knowing they are like this, when the Tathagata teaches nirvana, he does so in such a way that those hearing it can readily believe and accept it.

[The Parable of the Magic City]

Suppose there is a stretch of bad road of great length, steep and difficult, barren, without water, wild and deserted, inhabited by venomous beasts, a truly fearful place to men. And suppose there is a large company wishing to pass along that road so they can reach a place where there are rare treasures. And suppose they have a guide, thoroughly acquainted with the perilous road, wise, astute, clear-headed, of resolute mind, who wishes to lead them through this arduous region.

But on the way the group becomes weary and disheartened and they say to the leader, ‘We are utterly exhausted and moreover frightened as well. We cannot go any farther. Since there is still such a long way to go, we would like to turn back.’

Their guide, a man of great resourcefulness, thinks to himself, ‘These wretches are to be pitied! How can they abandon such a fortune of rare treasure as they are seeking and want to turn back!’ Reflecting in this way he decides to resort to a device. In the midst of the perilous road, he conjures up a great walled city with massive gates and lofty towers, its mansions splendidly adorned by gardens and groves, streams, lakes and bathing pools. He says to the company, ‘Don’t be afraid! You must not turn back, for here is a great city where you can stop and rest. Enter this city and quickly restore yourselves. Later when you feel you can go on to the place where the treasure is, you can leave the city.’

Then the group, being utterly exhausted, are overjoyed at such an unprecedented event and exclaim, ‘Now indeed we can escape from this dreadful road and find ease and tranquillity!’ So they press forward and enter the city where, feeling that they have been saved from their difficulties, they settle in comfort.

After some time, when they are all rested and are no longer fearful or weary, the leader makes the magical city disappear, saying to the group, ‘We must go now; the treasure is

close by. That great city was a mere phantom that I conjured up so that you could rest. I saw that you were tired and going to turn back mid-way. But now you must press forward with diligence so that you reach the place of treasure.’

Bhiksus! So it is with the Tathagata. He acts as a great Guide for you all. He well knows that the hard road of birth and death and earthly desires is steep, difficult, long and far-stretching, but that it must be travelled, it must be passed over. He also knows that if living beings hear only of the one Buddha vehicle, then they will not want to see the Buddha, will not want to draw near him, but will be disheartened thinking to themselves, ‘The Buddha-way is long and far-stretching; only after the long suffering of arduous labour can the end be reached!’

The Buddha knows that the minds of living beings are timid and weak, and so, as an expedient, he teaches two stages of Nirvana in order to provide a resting place along the way. But if living beings choose to remain in the secondary stage, then the Tathagata will say to them, ‘You have not yet accomplished your task. Although this place where you choose to remain is close to the Buddha-wisdom, you should consider and ponder further that this nirvana that you have attained is not the real one! It is simply that the Tathagata, as an expedient, has made distinctions within the one Buddha vehicle.’ In this way the Buddha is just like the guide who, when he knew that the travellers were rested, said to them, ‘The place of treasure is nearby. This city is not real. It is merely something I conjured up.’

Chapter 8: Prophecy Of Enlightenment

Ananda: Thereupon the arhats in the assembly reflected to themselves, ‘We rejoice at gaining what we have never had before. If the World-honoured One should give each of us a prophecy of enlightenment such as he has given to his other major disciples, would that not be cause for delight?’ The Buddha, knowing that this thought was in their minds, said to Mahakashyapa,

The Buddha: On these arhats who are now before me I will one by one bestow a prophecy that they will attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. Among this assembly is a major disciple of mine, the monk Kaundinya. He will offer alms to sixty-two thousand million Buddhas, and after that will himself become a Buddha. His name will be ‘Universal Light’ Tathagata, and he will be Worthy of offerings, Fully and Perfectly Awake, Equipped with Knowledge and Practice, Happily Attained, Guide Unsurpassed of Men to Be Tamed, Peerless Leader, Teacher of gods and men, Buddha, World-honoured One. Five hundred arhats, including *Uru-vilva-kashya-pa*, *Gaya-kashya-pa*, *Nadi-kashya-pa*, *Kalo-dayin*, *U-dayin*, *Ani-ruddha*, *Revata*, *Kap-phina*, *Bakkula*, *Chunda*, *Sva-gata*, and the others, will all attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. All will have the same name, being called ‘Universal Light.’

Ananda: Then these five hundred arhats, hearing this prediction in the presence of the Buddha, were ecstatic with joy, and immediately rising from their seats, they made obeisance at the feet of the Buddha, touching their heads to the ground. Rebuking themselves, they confessed their error saying, ‘World-honoured One, we always used to think of ourselves that we had attained final nirvana. But now we know that we were ignorant. Why? Because, although we were capable of attaining the wisdom of the Tathagata, we contented ourselves with petty wisdom.’

[The Parable of the Jewel in the Garment]

Kaundinya: ‘World-honoured One, it is like the story of the man who goes to the house of a close friend and, after getting drunk on wine, falls asleep. Meanwhile his friend, having to go out on official business, sews a priceless jewel as a gift into the lining of the drunk man’s robe. The man being drunk and asleep knows nothing of what has happened. When he has recovered, he sets off on a journey to another country. But encountering great hardship, he has to work very hard and make do with what little he can come by in order to make ends meet.

Later, quite by chance he happens to meet his old friend. But his friend, seeing his condition, remonstrates with him saying, ‘Alas Sir! How have you come to this merely for the sake of food and clothing? Wishing for you to be in comfort and to live in ease, on such-and-such a day and month and year I took a priceless jewel and sewed it into the lining of your robe. It must still be there now. You in your ignorance are slaving and wearing yourself out trying to make a living. How foolish! Take the jewel and exchange it for what you need, and never experience poverty or want again.’

Like this also were we, and
Like this friend is the Buddha.
The World-honoured One, compassionate,
Throughout the long night of time
Has taught us to cultivate
The seeds of supreme aspiration;
But, we being ignorant,
Neither perceived nor knew it;
The way of the arhat attained,
We supposed we had gained extinction.
Gaining but a glimpse of Nirvana,
Contented we sought no more.
Now the Buddha awakens us,
Saying, 'This is not real Nirvana;
In attaining supreme Buddha-wisdom,
Does real Nirvana lie.'
Now we, hearing from the Buddha
Our prediction and its glory,
Body and soul o'flow with joy.

Chapter 10: The Teacher Of The Law

Ananda: Then the World-honoured One addressed the great assembly through the Bodhisattva *Bhaisajya-rajā*, saying,

The Buddha: *Bhaisajya-rajā*, do you see in this great assembly incalculable devas, nagas, yakshas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kimnaras, mahoragas, human and nonhuman beings, as well as bhiksus, bhiksunis, upasakas and upasikas, those who seek to become sravakas, those who seek to become pratyekabuddhas, and those who seek the Buddha way? If any of these various kinds of beings who in the presence of the Buddha listen to one single gatha or a single phrase of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* and even for a moment think of it with joy, I predict that they will attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment.

Furthermore, if, after the Tathagata has passed into extinction, there should be anyone who listens to the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, even one verse or one phrase, and for a moment thinks of it with joy, likewise I predict that they will attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. Again, if there be any who receives, keeps, reads, recites, expounds or copies even a single verse of this *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, and looks upon it with reverence as if it were the Buddha, making offerings to it in various ways with flowers, perfume, garlands, sandal-wood, incense for burning, silk-canopies, banners, flags, garments and music, or even pays homage to it with folded hands, know, *Bhaisajya-rajā*, it is a sign that these people have already paid homage to ten myriad *kotis* of Buddhas, and in those Buddhas' presence taken a great vow: therefore out of compassion for all living beings, they are born among men.

Bhaisajya-rajā, it is like a man who, parched with thirst, searches for water by digging in a tableland. So long as he sees that the soil is dry he knows that water is still far away. But if he does not cease his efforts, bit by bit he sees the soil becoming damper, until gradually he has works his way into mud. Seeing this he is determined in his mind to go on, for he knows that he is bound to be nearing water.

The way of the Bodhisattva is the same as this. This storehouse of the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* is hidden deep and far away where no person can reach it. But now the Buddha has revealed it for instructing and perfecting the Bodhisattvas. As long as a person has not yet heard, not yet understood, and not yet been able to practise this *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, then you should know that that person is still far away from Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. But if any is able to hear, understand, ponder and practise the Sūtra, then you should know that they can draw near to Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. Why? Because in all cases Bodhisattvas, who attain Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, do so through this Sūtra. This Sūtra opens the way from the expedient, partial method to the full revelation of truth and reality.

Should any desire to recite this Sūtra,

Undaunted amidst the multitude

Let him enter the Tathagata abode,

And wearing the Tathagata robe,
Sit on the Tathagata throne.
Great compassion is the abode,
Gentleness and patience the robe,
The emptiness of all dharmas the throne.
Abiding in these, let him delight
In sounding the drum of the true Dharma.

Chapter 11: The Revelation Of The Jewelled Stupa

Ananda: And then suddenly in front of the Buddha a stupa of stupendous size and magnificence sprang up out of the earth and came to rest suspended in mid-air above the assembly. The stupa was five hundred yojanas in height and two hundred and fifty yojanas in width and depth. It was made of the seven precious treasures of gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, moon-stone, agate, pearl and carnelian, being built with thousands of recesses, parapets and railings. It was splendidly adorned with countless canopies, streamers, flags and banners, all made with the seven precious substances. It was hung with festoons of jewels, and myriads of jewelled bells were suspended from it. The exquisite fragrance of the rare tamalapattra sandalwood emanated from it pervading the whole world.

Then the gods of the *Trayastrimsha* heaven rained down heavenly mandarava flowers as an offering to the jewelled stupa, and the vast assembly of devas, nagas, yakshas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kimnaras, mahoragas, human and nonhuman beings made offerings of all manner of flowers, perfumes, garlands, streamers and delightful music, extolling the precious stupa with reverence, honour and praise.

Thereupon from the midst of the jewelled stupa came a mighty voice, speaking words of praise:

Prabhutaratna: ‘Excellent! How excellent, World-honoured Śākyamuni, that for the sake of the great assembly you teach the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* of Great Universal Wisdom, by which Bodhisattvas are instructed, a teaching guarded and kept in mind by the Buddhas! Thus it is, World-honoured Śākyamuni! Truly it is just as you say! All that you have expounded is the truth!’

Ananda: Then the fourfold assembly all experienced the joy of the Dharma, marvelling at this unprecedented event that they had never known before. Rising from their seats, and with their palms together in reverence, they withdrew to one side.

Meanwhile the Bodhisattva-mahasattva *Mahapratibhana*, understanding the question in the minds of those assembled, said to the Buddha:

Mahapratibhana: ‘World-honoured One, for what reason has this stupa risen up out of the earth? And why does this voice issue from its midst?’

The Buddha: Inside this precious jewelled stupa is the complete body of a Tathagata. Long ago, in the distant past, incalculable thousands of myriads of millions of *asamkhyas* of worlds to the east, in a land called *Ratnavisuddha*, there was a Buddha by name *Prabhutaratna*, or, Abundant Treasures. Earlier, when that Buddha was practising the Bodhisattva Path, he made a great vow, saying, ‘After I become a Buddha and have entered parinirvāṇa, if there is anywhere in the universe where the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* is taught, then let my stupa arise and appear in that spot, so that I can listen to the Sūtra, and bear witness to it and praise its excellence.’ And so it is, that wherever in the

universe the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* is taught, that Buddha, through the transcendental powers of his vow, causes this precious jewelled stupa containing his whole body to spring forth, appearing in the presence of those assembled, who hear his voice praising the Sūtra saying, ‘Excellent! excellent!’

Ananda: Thereupon the Bodhisattva Mahapratibhana, knowing the supernatural powers of the Tathagata, spoke to the Buddha, saying:

Mahapratibhana: ‘World-honoured One, we earnestly wish to see the body of this Buddha.’

The Buddha: This Buddha Abundant Treasures has taken a profound vow, saying, ‘If, whenever my stupa appears in the presence of any Buddha so that I may listen to him teaching the Lotus Sūtra, that World-Honoured One should wish to show me to his fourfold assembly, then all the various Buddhas who are his emanations and who are teaching the Dharma in the worlds of the ten directions must return and assemble in that single spot. Only when that has been done will my body become visible.’

Mahapratibhana: World-honoured One, I and the others assembled wish to see these Buddhas that are emanations of the World-honoured One, and to make obeisance to them and worship them.

Ananda: Then the Buddha emitted a ray of light from the curl of white hair between his eyebrows, immediately making visible Buddhas in the eastern region in lands as numerous as five hundred myriads of millions of *nayutas* of Ganges sands. In the southern, western and northern regions as well, and in the four intermediate quarters, wherever the beam of light from the Buddha’s curl of white hair shone, the same was true.

In all these lands, where the earth was of crystal and precious textures and adorned with jewelled trees and hung with jewelled nets, there were countless millions of Bodhisattvas with jewelled canopies stretched above them. The Buddhas in these lands accompanied by immeasurable millions of Bodhisattvas could all be seen teaching the various teachings of the Dharma with subtle, attractive voices.

At that time the Buddhas of the ten directions each spoke to his accompanying host of Bodhisattvas, saying, ‘Good Sons! We must now go to Śākyamuni Buddha in the Saha-world, and pay homage to the precious Stupa of the Tathagata ‘Abundant Treasures.’’

Thereupon this Saha-world instantly became pure; there were no villages, towns or cities, oceans or rivers, streams or forests or any kingly ranges of mountains such as the Mahamuchilinda Mountains, Great Iron Encircling Mountains, and Mount Sumeru. The whole area comprised a single Buddha land, a jewelled region level and smooth. There remained only the fourfold assembly, all other heavenly and human beings having been moved to another region. With lapis lazuli for earth, cords of gold marked the ground’s eight quarters; everywhere was strewn with mandarava flowers and adorned with jewel-

trees; jewelled nets, banners and curtains, hanging with jewel-bells, were spread above, and the air was perfumed by most precious incense.

Then all the Buddhas, each with a great Bodhisattva to act as his attendant, started to arrive in the Saha-world and each went to the foot of a jewel-tree. Each of these jewel trees was five hundred yojanas high and adorned with branches, leaves, flowers and fruit in due proportion. Under all the jewel-trees were lion seats five yojanas in height, also decorated with magnificent jewels. Each Buddha sat crossed-legged on his own lion-throne, and in this way the seats were filled throughout the thousand-millionfold world. But still there was no end to the emanations of Śākyamuni Buddha arriving from merely one direction. So Śākyamuni Buddha, wishing to make room for all the Buddhas who had emanated from himself, transformed two hundred ten thousand million nayutas of lands in each of the eight directions of space, making them all pure. In this way, bit by bit, the Buddhas from the ten directions all came, assembled and each were seated on their lion-thrones beneath a jewel-tree.

Then each Buddha dispatched their attendant to go and greet Śākyamuni Buddha, each sending a cupped double-handful of jewelled flowers, with the following instruction, ‘Noble son, you must go to Mount Grdhrakuta, the abode of Śākyamuni Buddha, and speak to him as I instruct you. Say, “Are you in good health and free from disease and illness? Is your strength unimpaired? And are your Bodhisattvas and sravakas all well and at peace?” Then scatter these jewelled flowers over the Buddha as an offering, and say, “The Buddha So-and-so joins in wishing that the Precious Stupa be opened.”’

When Śākyamuni Buddha saw all the Buddhas that were his emanations had assembled, and heard all these Buddhas say that they wished to participate in the opening of the Precious Stupa, he immediately rose up from his seat into midair. Likewise the fourfold assembly stood up, and pressing their palms together, gazed at the Buddha with a single mind.

Thereupon Śākyamuni Buddha with the fingers of his right hand opened the door of the Stupa of Seven Treasures, which made a loud sound, like that of a crossbar being withdrawn from a great city gate. At once all the members of the assembly caught sight of the Tathagata ‘Abundant Treasures’ seated on a lion throne inside the Stupa, his body whole and unimpaired, sitting as if in meditation. And they heard him exclaiming:

Prabhutaratna: ‘Excellent, excellent, Śākyamuni Buddha! It is well that you are teaching this *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*; it is to listen to it that I have come here.’

Ananda: Then the Buddha ‘Abundant Treasures’ offered half of his throne in the Precious Stupa to Śākyamuni Buddha, saying:

Prabhutaratna: ‘Śākyamuni Buddha, sit here!’

Ananda: Śākyamuni Buddha at once entered the Stupa and took half of the throne, seating himself in cross-legged position. When the members of the great assembly saw that the two Tathagatas were in the Stupa of seven treasures, they all thought to themselves:

‘These Buddhas are seated high up and far away! If only the Tathagatas would employ their transcendental powers to enable all of us to join them there in the air!’

Immediately Śākyamuni Buddha lifted all the members of the great assembly up into the air. Then the fourfold assembly, observing the Buddha who had passed into parinirvāṇa immeasurable thousands, myriads, kotis of kalpas in the past, praised this unprecedented marvel by scattering masses of heavenly jewelled flowers over the Buddha ‘Abundant Treasures’ and Śākyamuni Buddha. When this had been done, in a loud voice Śākyamuni Buddha addressed the whole fourfold assembly in a great voice, declaring:

The Buddha: ‘Who is capable of publishing abroad the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* in this Saha-world? Now indeed is the time, for not long hence the Tathagata will enter nirvana. The Buddha wishes to entrust this ‘Sūtra of the White Lotus of the Real Truth’ so that it may be preserved.’

‘O Sons of the Buddha!

Who can guard the Dharma?

Let him make a great vow

To ensure it long endures!

Whosoever cares for this Dharma-Sūtra

Worships me, my emanated Buddhas,

And this Buddha ‘Abundant Treasures’,

Who with his Precious Stupa,

Journeys everywhere for this Sūtra.

All you, my good sons!

Let each carefully ponder

That this is a difficult task,

Needing a great vow.

All the other Sūtras,

Numerous as sands of Ganges,

Though one expounded them all,

‘Twould still not be counted hard.

But if, after the Buddha’s extinction,

In the midst of an evil world,

One should hear and receive this Sūtra
And search into its meaning,
Or should copy and keep,
Or cause another to copy,
Or is able to teach this Sūtra,
This indeed is hard.
He who in the future
Can read and keep this Sūtra,
Is truly a Buddha-son,
Dwelling in the stage of pure goodness.
After the Buddha's extinction,
He who can expound its meaning,
Will be the eye of the world
For both gods and men.
He who, in the last age of fear,
Can teach it but for a moment,
By gods and men
Will be venerated.
I, on account of Buddhahood,
In innumerable lands
From the beginning until now,
Have expounded many Sūtras;
But, amongst them all,
This Sūtra is the chief.
If any one is able to keep it,
Then he keeps the Buddha's Body.
All you, my good sons!
Let him who, on my extinction,
Is able to receive and keep,
Read and recite this Sūtra,
Now in presence of the Buddha,
Himself announce his vow!

This Sūtra so hard to keep,
If any should keep it
For but a short time,
I shall still be pleased.
Such a one as this
Will be praised by all the Buddhas;
Being the eyes of the world,
Such a one is brave,
Such a one is zealous.
Speedily shall he attain
To Supreme Buddhahood.’

Chapter 13: Encouraging Devotion

Ananda: Thereupon the Bodhisattva-mahasattvas Bhaisajya-rajā and Mahapratibhāna together with their retinues of myriads of Bodhisattvas joined their voices together and made this vow:

Bhaisajya-rajā and Mahapratibhāna:

‘O World-Honoured One,
Our Guide and Teacher,
Comforter of Gods and men,
Hearing your prediction,
Perfect peace reigns in our hearts.
Pray be without anxiety!
After the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa,
In the last dread evil age,
We will proclaim this Sūtra.
Though many ignorant men
Will with evil mouth abuse us,
And beat us with swords and staves,
We will endure it all.
Monks in that evil age,
Heretical, warped, suspicious,
Crying ‘attained’ when they have not,
Will have minds full of arrogance.
Others - forest-dwellers
Will wear the patched robe in seclusion,
Thinking they walk the true path,
Scorn dwellers among men.
Others greedy for gain,
Will teach the Dharma to laymen
And be revered by the world as Arhats
Of the Six Transcendent Powers;
These men cherishing evil minds,
Ever thinking of earthly things,

Assuming the name of Aranyas,
Will love to calumniate us,
Saying such words as these:

“All these bhikṣu-fellows,
Because of love of gain,
Teach a heretical doctrine,
Themselves have composed this Sūtra
To delude the people of the world;
For the sake of acquiring fame,
They specialise in this Sūtra.”
Always in the assemblies,
In order that they may ruin us,
To kings and to their ministers,
To Brahmans and to citizens,
To the other groups of bhikṣus,
Of us they will speak slanderously,
Saying: “These are men of false views,
Who proclaim heretical doctrines.”
But, from reverence for Buddha,
We will endure those evils.
Though contemptuously addressed as
“All you Buddhas!”
Even such scorn and arrogance
We will patiently endure.
In the corrupt kalpa’s evil age
Abounding in fear and dread,
Devils will take possession of them
To curse, abuse and insult us.
But we, reverently believing in the Buddha,
Will wear the armour of long-suffering;
For the sake of teaching this Sūtra

Every hard thing we will endure.
We will not love body nor life,
But care only for the Supreme Way.
In the presence of the World-honoured One
And the Buddhas from every direction,
Thus we make our vows,
And the Buddha knows our hearts.’

Chapter 14: Steadfastness

Ananda: Then the Bodhisattva-mahasattva Manjushri, the Dharmaraja's crown-prince, spoke to the Buddha, saying:

Manjushri: 'World-honoured One! Rare indeed are Bodhisattvas such as these, who out of respectful duty to the Buddha, undertaking a task of such difficulty, make a great vow that in the evil age hereafter they will guard, uphold, read, recite and teach this Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra. World-honoured One, how should these Bodhisattva-mahasattvas go about expounding this Sūtra?'

The Buddha: If any Bodhisattva-mahasattva desires to expound this Sūtra for the sake of living beings in the evil age to come, he should practise four methods of steadfastness: first, he should be steadfast in the spheres of conduct and intimates proper for a Bodhisattva. Manjushri, what do I mean by the spheres of conduct and intimates of a Bodhisattva?

The Bodhisattva takes his stand on kshanti, is gentle and agreeable, neither hasty nor overbearing, and remains unperturbed being never alarmed at heart; he has no active interest in worldly affairs, but sees all things as they truly are, not acting upon false discrimination, always delighting in quiet surroundings, learning to still his mind and sitting in meditation. There the Bodhisattva should remain tranquil, unmoving like Mount Sumeru, constantly delighting in contemplating all phenomena as empty, just like space, according to their true marks and as beyond the reach of words: nameless, formless, unborn, unimpeded, incalculable, without volume, without limits, without barriers, without constant abiding or extinction, without innate nature or true being; characterless, not inverted, nor emerging, nor arising, nor moving, nor regressing, nor revolving; existing solely through causes and conditions, their appearance born of wrong views; from upside-downness come distinctions, that phenomena exist, or do not exist, are real, or are not real, are born, or are not born.

Then the Bodhisattva-mahasattva,
Occupies his proper Sphere of Intimacy;
Ever avoiding rulers and and their heirs,
Great ministers and their officials,
And those who play dangerous games.
Consorting not with men of arrogance,
Precept-breakers – Arhats in name alone – ,
Nor with scholars deeply attached
To the Hinayana Tripitaka,
Nor with bhiksunis
Fond of banter and jocularity.

But if such people, in goodness of their hearts,
Come to the Bodhisattva to hear the Buddha-Way,
Then the Bodhisattva with fearless heart,
Cherishing no expectation,
Should teach them the Dharma.
If there should be any disciple
Who, after my extinction,
Enters this Sphere of Conduct
And this Sphere of Intimacy,
When he teaches this Sūtra,
He will be freed from timid weakness.
When this Bodhisattva
Seeing things in their true meaning,
Rises from his meditation,
Whether to kings or nations,
Or princes, ministers and people,
To Brahmans or to others,
Opens up, expounds,
And teaches to them this Sūtra,
His mind shall be at ease
And free from timid weakness.
Manjusri!
This is the Bodhisattva's
First Method of Steadfastness,
By which he is able, in future ages,
To teach this Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra.

Furthermore, Manjushri, after the Tathagata's parinirvāṇa, the Bodhisattva who wishes to expound this Sūtra should practise the second and third methods of steadfastness, that of heartfelt serenity, and of compassionate speech. If the Bodhisattva wishes to teach this Sūtra, he must set aside pride, jealousy, hatred, and arrogance, as well as a mind that is fawning, deceitful, false, and instead constantly practise honest and upright conduct. The Bodhisattva should demolish thoughts of overweening pride and teach the Dharma without obstacles by thinking on the Buddhas and great Bodhisattva-mahasattvas with respect and reverence, saying, 'These are my great teachers!'

Manjushri, when a son of the Buddha teaches the Dharma he is at all times gentle and full of forbearance, having compassion on all, never giving way to a negligent or slothful mind. When he is teaching, he takes no pleasure in fault-finding; nor does he disparage other Dharma-teachers, speaking of their tastes or shortcomings; nor does he single out disciples by name, neither exposing their mistakes nor praising them. Nor does he cause others to have doubts or regrets by saying, ‘You will never become a Buddha!’ Nor does he look with contempt on others, arguing or holding frivolous debates on doctrine.

Instead by cultivating a serene heart, ever gentle and patient, the Bodhisattva ensures that his listeners do not oppose him, answering those who ask difficult questions after the manner of the Mahāyāna.

The wise man in ways such as these,
Rightly cultivates his mind,
And is able to abide serene.
The merit of such a man,
Thousands, myriads, kotis of kalpas
Spent in reckoning and comparison
Would not suffice for the telling.

Then again, Manjushri, the Bodhisattva practices the fourth steadfastness in the age hereafter, when the Dharma is about to perish, toward those who are not Bodhisattvas, and who are either still in the household life or those who have left the household life, by cultivating a mind of great compassion, thinking: ‘These persons simply missed the Tathagata’s expedient means, his exposition of the Dharma in accordance with what is appropriate, not hearing it, nor being aware of it. But although these persons do not inquire into it, do not believe and do not understand this *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, when I have attained Supreme Perfect Enlightenment, wherever I may happen to be, I will employ my transcendental powers and power of wisdom to draw them to me and cause them to abide in this Dharma.’

Manjushri,
It is like the powerful Wheel-rolling King
Who, to his war-distinguished soldiers,
Makes presents of many rewards:
Elephants, horses, carriages,
Palaquins, personal ornaments,
As well as fields and houses,
Villages and cities,
Or bestows garments,

Various kinds of jewels,
Gold and other wealth,
Bestowing all with joy;
But only for one, heroic
And of rare exploits,
Does the king take from his head
The crown-jewel to give him.
Thus also is it with the Tathagata:
He is the Dharmaraja,
Possessing great powers of endurance
And the treasury of wisdom;
With great benevolence,
Seeing every human being
Suffering from pains and distresses,
Fighting against the Maras,
And seeking for deliverance,
He transforms the world with his teaching.
To these living beings,
In great tactfulness,
He has taught numerous Sūtras;
Finally knowing the living
Have attained developed powers,
At the very last he to them
Teaches this Lotus Sūtra.
As the king takes from his head
The jewel and bestows it,
So this Sūtra is preeminent
Among all the Sūtras.
After my parinirvāṇa,
Whoever seeks Buddhahood
And desires in serenity
To proclaim this Sūtra

Will behold the wonderful:
Seen will be the Tathagatas,
Seated on Lion-Thrones,
Their golden bodies radiant
Illuminating all beings
With boundless light,
And heard will be their Brahma-voices,
Teaching the Supreme Truth.
In their midst, such a one
Praising Buddha with folded hands,
Will hear the Dharma with joy.

Chapter 15: Emerging From The Earth

Ananda: When the World-honoured One had finished speaking, all the Bodhisattva-mahasattvas who had gathered from the lands of the Buddhas who were emanations of Śākyamuni Buddha, stood up in the midst of the great assembly, and bowing with their palms pressed together, addressed the World-honoured One saying, ‘World-honoured One, if you will allow us, then in the age after the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa, by diligently and earnestly protecting, reading, reciting, copying and making offerings to this Sūtra, we will teach it widely throughout this Saha-world!’ But the Buddha interrupted them, saying:

The Buddha: Enough! My good sons, there is no need for you to protect this Sūtra. Why? Because in this Saha-world there are already Bodhisattva-mahasattvas as numerous as the sands of sixty thousand Ganges. And furthermore, each one of these Bodhisattvas has a retinue equal to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges. After I have entered parinirvāṇa all these will protect, read, recite and widely teach this Sūtra.

Ananda: As soon as the Buddha had spoken these words, the earth of the thousand-millionfold lands of this Saha-world all trembled, quaked and split open, and from its clefts emerged at the same instant immeasurable thousands, myriads of kotis of Bodhisattva-mahasattvas. These Bodhisattvas had golden-hued bodies emanating a boundless golden radiance; each one of these Bodhisattvas led his own great assembly equal in number to the sands of sixty thousand Ganges. Such were their numbers: immeasurable, boundless, beyond comprehension through calculation, simile or parable.

On hearing the voice of Śākyamuni Buddha teaching, these Bodhisattvas sprung forth from the open space where they all had been dwelling beneath the Saha-world, and each proceeded to the wonderful Stupa of Seven Treasures suspended in the sky in which Tathagata ‘Abundant Treasures’ and Śākyamuni Buddha were seated. On reaching it, they turned to the two World-honoured Ones and made obeisance at their feet. They then also performed obeisance to the Buddhas seated on lion seats underneath the jewelled trees. Thereupon, the Bodhisattva-mahasattva Maitreya wishing to resolve his own doubts, pressing his palms together, turned to the Buddha and made this inquiry:

Maitreya:

‘World-honoured One! Of measureless Virtue

Only by you can our wonder be resolved.

We have never seen the like

Of this great Bodhisattva host,

Of countless myriads.

What is the course of their history?

Be pleased to tell, honoured of men,

Whence came they and why

They are thus assembled?
Mighty of frame, transcendent in power,
Of wisdom inscrutable,
Strong of will and memory,
Firm in endurance,
Whom all rejoice to see -
Whence came they?
If anyone tried to keep tally
Through kalpas as Ganges' sands
He still could not tell their number.
All these great, majestic,
Zealous Bodhisattva hosts -
Who has taught the Dharma to them,
Instructed and perfected them?
From every quarter of the riven earth
They spring forth from its midst.
World-honoured One! From of old
We have never witnessed such beings.
We know not a single one
Among this countless host,
Who suddenly spring from the earth.
Be pleased to tell us the cause!'

The Buddha: Excellent! how excellent, that you should question the Buddha about this great affair! All of you with a single mind and firm resolve should don the armour of diligence, for the Tathagata now intends to reveal and declare the wisdom of the Buddhas, the Buddhas' mastery of transcendental power, their swift lion-like and awe-inspiring strength of the powers.

Maitreya!
These Great Bodhisattvas,
Who from past numberless kalpas
Have observed the Buddha wisdom,
All of these are my disciples,

Whose minds I have set on the Great Way.
These Bodhisattvas are my sons
Who dwell in this Buddha-world.
Ever practising the ascetic (dhuta) deeds,
Joyfully devoted to quiet places,
Shunning the clamour of crowds,
Taking no delight in much talk,
With no pleasure in many words,
They reject the assembly's fret and confusion.
Nor do they linger among heavenly beings,
But constantly delight in profound wisdom,
Being free from all hindrances.
All these sons of mine,
Learning and keeping the discipline of my Way
For the sake of seeking Buddhahood,
Are always zealous day and night.
They dwell below the Saha-world,
In the region of space beneath it.
Their minds devoid of any fear,
Firm in their powers of will and memory,
Ever diligent in seeking wisdom,
They teach every kind of mystic law.
I, near the city of Gaya,
Sitting beneath the Bodhi-tree,
Accomplished Perfect Enlightenment;
And rolling the supreme Dharma-wheel,
I then taught and converted them
And caused them to seek the One Way.
Now they all abide in the never-relapsing state,
And every one will become a Buddha.
What I now speak is the truth;
Believe it with a single mind!

I from a long distant past

Have taught and trained all this host.

Ananda: Then the Bodhisattva-mahasattva Maitreya, as well as countless other Bodhisattvas, were seized with doubt and perplexity, wondering at this unprecedented event. They all puzzled to themselves, ‘How could the World-honoured One in such a short space of time have taught and converted such an immeasurable, countless number of great Bodhisattvas of this sort?’ Addressing the Buddha, Maitreya said:

Maitreya: ‘World-honoured One! The Tathagata not far from the city of Gaya sat in the place of practice and there attained Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. But barely forty years or more have passed since then. World-honoured One, how in that short time could you have accomplished so much work? World-honoured One, such a claim the world will find hard to credit! It is as if, for example, a young man of twenty-five, with fine complexion and hair still black, should point to an old man of a hundred years and say, “This is my son!” or that centenarian should point to the youth and say, “This is my father who sired and raised me!” This would be hard to believe, and so too is what the Buddha says, since his attainment of the Way is in fact not been long. But these great hosts of Bodhisattvas for numberless kalpas have already devoted themselves diligently and earnestly for the sake of the Buddha way. They have learned to enter into, emerge from and dwell in immeasurable samadhis, have attained great transcendental powers, have over a long period carried out noble practices; step by step they have practised all manner of practices, becoming skilled in questioning and answering, are treasures amongst men and of extreme rarity. Yet today the World-honoured One tells us that, in the time since he attained the Buddhahood, he has caused these persons for the first time to aspire to enlightenment, has instructed, led and directed them toward Supreme Perfect Enlightenment! World-honoured One, we beg you to explain this matter!’

Chapter 16: Revelation Of The Tathagata's (Eternal) Life

Ananda: Then the Buddha replied to the assembly:

The Buddha: ‘Good men, believe and understand the truthful word of the Tathagata.’

Ananda: He repeated these words three times. In response the great host of Bodhisattvas, with the Bodhisattva-mahasattva Maitreya as their leader, pressed their palms together and addressed the Buddha, saying:

Maitreya: ‘World-honoured One, we beg you to explain; we will receive the Buddha’s words with faith.’ They spoke in this manner three times, and then said once more, ‘We beg you to explain; we will receive the Buddha’s words with faith.’

Ananda: At that time the World-honoured One, seeing that all in the assembly repeated their request three times and more, spoke to them, saying:

The Buddha: Listen carefully and hear of the secret, mysterious, transcendental power of the Tathagata. I will declare this plainly. All the worlds of devas, men and asuras declare: “Śākyamuni Buddha, after leaving the palace of the Shakyas, seated himself in the place of practice not far from the city of Gaya and there attained Supreme Perfect Enlightenment.” But my good sons, it has been immeasurable, boundless myriads of kotis of nayutas of kalpas since I in fact attained Buddhahood.

Suppose there were myriad kotis of numberless Three-Thousand-Great-Thousandfold Worlds; let someone grind them to atoms, pass eastward through numberless countries, and then drop one of those atoms; suppose he thus proceeded eastward till he had finished those atoms – what do you think, good sons, is it possible to imagine and calculate all those worlds so as to know their number? Now suppose you take as atomised all those worlds, and counting every place that an atom has been deposited, and everywhere that it has not been deposited, as a kalpa, the time since I became the Buddha still surpasses these by hundreds, thousands, myriads, kotis, nayutas of numberless kalpas. Ever since then I have been constantly in this Saha-world, teaching the Dharma. And elsewhere I have led and benefited living beings in myriads of kotis of asamkhyas of lands.

The Tathagata perceives the true character of the triple world exactly as it is. For him there is no birth-and-death, nor going away nor coming forth; neither existing in this world nor cessation; neither reality nor illusion, neither thus nor otherwise. Unlike the way that those dwelling in the triple world perceive it to be, the Tathagata sees all such things clearly and without error.

Good sons! all that I teach is true and not false. The Sūtras expounded by the Tathagata are all for the purpose of saving and emancipating living beings whether they speak of myself, or of others. During this time, I have spoken of the Buddha Dipankara and other Buddhas, and have told of their entering nirvana. Such distinctions I have made as an expedient. In this way, whenever living beings come to me, with my Buddha eye I

observe their faith and all their faculties, whether keen or dull, and then according to their capacity and attainment, I explain, in stage after stage, my different names, length of lives, and describe the length of time during which my teachings will be effective, plainly stating I must enter Nirvana. At other times I resort to different expedients to teach the subtle and wonderful Dharma, thus causing living beings to awaken joyful hearts.

Why does the Tathagata do this? He employs a variety of similes, parables and reasonings to teach the Dharma, firstly because living beings have different natures, different desires, different actions and different ways of thinking and making distinctions, and secondly because he wants them to produce wholesome roots. The Tathagata observes the propensity of living beings toward lower things, being meagre in virtue and heavy with defilement. For such persons I describe how in my youth I left my household and attained Supreme Perfect Enlightenment. But in truth, as I have told you the time since I attained Buddhahood is extremely long. It is simply that I use this expedient means to teach and convert living beings so that they can enter the Buddha way. That is why I speak in this manner. This, the Buddha's work, I have never for a moment neglected. Thus, since I attained Buddhahood in the far distant past my life span is of numberless kalpas, forever existing and immortal.

Now, although in fact I do not actually enter extinction, I announce that I am going to adopt the course of extinction. This is an expedient means which the Tathagata uses to teach and convert living beings. Why do I do this? Because if the Buddha remains in the world for a long time, those persons with shallow virtue will fail to plant wholesome roots but, living in poverty and lowliness, will become attached to the five desires and be caught in the net of deluded thoughts and imaginings. If they see that the Tathagata is constantly in the world and never enters extinction, they will either grow arrogant or become lazy. And since they will not realise how difficult it is to encounter the Buddha, they will not approach him with respect and reverence.

Therefore as an expedient means the Tathagata says, 'Bhiksus, you should know that it is a rare thing to live at a time when one of the Buddhas appears in the world.' When living beings hear these words, they are certain to realise how difficult it is to encounter the Buddha. In their minds they will cherish a longing and a thirst to gaze upon the Buddha; thus they will work to plant roots of goodness. Therefore the Tathagata, though in truth he does not enter extinction, speaks of passing into extinction.

[The Parable of the Good Physician]

Good men! Suppose, for example, that there is a good physician who is wise and perspicacious, conversant with medical art, and skilful in healing all sorts of diseases. And he has many sons, say perhaps ten, twenty, or even a hundred. Then because of some matter he goes abroad to some distant country. Some time after he has gone, the children drink some kind of poison that makes them fall to the ground, where they roll about delirious with pain. And this is how the physician finds them when he returns home: some have lost their senses, while others on seeing their father approaching are overjoyed. Kneeling down, they entreat him, saying, 'How good it is that you have returned safely.'

We were stupid and by mistake drank some poison. We beg you to cure us and restore our health!’

The father, seeing his children in such distress, gathers good medicinal herbs that meet all the requirements of colour, fragrance and flavour, and then according to his prescriptions, grinds, sifts and mixes them together. Giving a dose of these to his children, he tells them, ‘Take this excellent medicine, and you will quickly be relieved of your sufferings and will be free of all illness.’

Then those children who have not lost their senses, seeing the good medicine take it immediately and are completely cured of their sickness. But those who are out of their minds, although begging their father to cure their sickness, refuse to take the medicine. Why? Because the poison has penetrated so deeply that they have lost their sanity. They say that the medicine is no good.

The father thinks to himself:, ‘Alas my poor children! Afflicted by this poison, their minds are completely befuddled. Although happy to see me and asking me to cure them, they refuse to take this excellent medicine. I must now devise some expedient to induce them to take it.’ So he says to them, ‘I am now worn out with old age, and the time of my death has come. I will leave this good medicine here. You should take it and be confident that it will cure you.’ Leaving them with these instructions, he then goes off to another land, where he sends a messenger home to announce, ‘Your father is dead.’

When the children hear that their father has died, they are overcome with grief and think to themselves, ‘If our father were alive he would have pity on us, and we should be saved. But now he has abandoned us and died in some other country far away. We are shelterless orphans with no one to rely on!’

Constantly harbouring such feelings of grief, they at last come to their senses and realise that the medicine is in fact excellent; on taking it, they are healed of all the effects of the poison. Then their father, hearing that his children are all recovered, immediately returns home.

Good men, what is your opinion? Can anyone say that this skilled physician is guilty of lying? Likewise it has been immeasurable, boundless hundreds, thousands, millions of nayutas of asamkha kalpas since I attained Buddhahood. But for the sake of living beings I resort to an expedient, saying that I pass into extinction. In view of the circumstances, how can anyone say that I have been guilty of lies or falsehood?

Like the physician who, with clever device

In order to cure his demented sons,

Though indeed alive, announces his death,

Yet none can charge him with falsehood,

I, too, being Father of this world,

Who heals all misery and affliction,
For the sake of perverted people,
Though indeed alive, say I am extinct;
Though near, failing to see me
They look on me as extinct.
Those creatures, full of sin
By reason of their evil karma,
Through kalpas numberless hear not
The name of the most Precious Three.
I, beholding all living creatures
Sunk in the sea of suffering,
Being dissolute, set in their five desires,
And fallen into karma-paths of ill,
To set them expectant and thirsting
At first do not show myself,
Lest, because they always see me,
They should arrogant minds beget.
When hearts are longing,
I appear to teach the Dharma,
To save all creatures,
I expediently speak of Nirvana.
When creatures upright and gentle in mind,
Everywhere worshipping my relics,
Cherish a desire for goodness
And thirst with aspiration,
Wholeheartedly looking for Buddha,
Then I on the Vulture-Peak appear,
To teach the Supreme Dharma
To all announcing,
That I exist forever undying:
Only as expedient revealing
Myself as dead - yet not dead.

I ever remain in this world,
In supernatural power,
Ever teaching the Dharma.
Wherever beings, reverent and joying in faith,
I am in their midst.
You, not knowing this,
Only say I am extinct.
Yet indeed by supernatural power,
Throughout kalpas numberless
On Holy Grdhrakuta am I.
While the living see, at the kalpa's end,
The conflagration in its burning,
Tranquil remains this realm of mine,
Ever full of gods and men,
Parks and many palaces
With every sort of gem adorned,
Blooming and fruitful jewel trees,
Where all creatures pleasure take;
The gods strike up their heavenly drums
And music make for evermore,
Showering down celestial flowers
On Buddha and His mighty host.
My Pure Land is not destroyed,
Though all view it as being burnt up,
And grief and horror and distress
Thus fill them to the full.
But those of virtuous deeds,
Gentle and of upright nature,
These will ever me behold
Here expounding to all the Supreme Dharma:
Unto this eager throng,
I teach the Buddha's eternal life.

Chapter 22: Entrustment

Ananda: When Śākyamuni Buddha had finished speaking he arose from the lion throne on which he had been seated with the Tathagata Abundant Treasures, and by means of his supernatural powers laid his right hand on the heads of all the Bodhisattva-mahasattvas, speaking these words:

The Buddha: For incalculable hundred thousands of myriads of kotis of aeons I have practised this rare Dharma of Supreme Perfect Enlightenment which now I transfer and entrust into your hands. Single-mindedly you must receive, fathom and propagate abroad this Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra, making it increase and prosper far and wide. The Tathagata is benevolent and has great compassion. He is in no way mean or avaricious; fearlessly he is willing to impart to living beings the wisdom of the Buddha, the Tathagata-wisdom that comes of itself. The Tathagata is the great Lord of Giving to all living beings. You should follow and learn from the Tathagata's example: give unstintingly!

In future ages where there are good men and women who have faith in the Tathagata, you should teach and expound the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra to them, for in this way you can help them gain the Buddha wisdom. If there are living beings who do not believe and accept it, use some of the other profound teachings of the Tathagata to teach, benefit and bring joy to them. If you do all this, then you shall repay the kindness of the Buddhas.

Ananda: When the multitude of Bodhisattva-mahasattvas heard the Buddha speak these words three times, they were delighted and a great joy filled their bodies. With even greater reverence than before, they saluted the Buddha, and then raising their voices in unison they replied three times, 'We will respectfully carry out all these things just as the World-honoured One has commanded. We beg the World-honoured One to have no concern on this account!'

Thereupon Śākyamuni Buddha addressed the immeasurable emanation Buddhas from the ten directions who were seated on lion thrones under the jewelled trees, as well as the Buddha Abundant Treasures, saying, 'Buddhas! Peace be with you – proceed at your pleasure. The Precious Stupa of the Tathagata 'Abundant Treasures' may again be as it was.'

When the World-Honored One had spoken these words, the whole great assembly with the Buddha Abundant Treasures, the immeasurable emanation Buddhas, the great multitude of boundless asamkhyas of Bodhisattva-mahasattvas, Shariputra and the other sravakas and the whole great fourfold assembly with its devas, human beings, asuras and others were all filled with great joy.

Appendix: Unit 4 – Transcending the Human Predicament

Listen to Sangharakshita's audio-lecture *Transcending the Human Predicament*, and/or read Chapter Three of the same title in Sangharakshita, *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=97>

Book: <http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=340>

Read an introduction to the concept of skilful means in *Visions of Mahāyāna Buddhism*, (pp.15-18) Windhorse, Cambridge, 2009.

In the vein of a critical literary approach, ask yourself the kinds of questions I've given below:

1. In what does the story of the Sūtra in the first three chapters and the parable consist? How are its major themes, points and 'message' being conveyed? What is its overarching purpose, feel and character? How does it unfold? How does the form of the parable contribute to this?
2. How do the different incidents contribute, support and relate to the unfolding of the Sūtra and the story of the parable, its distinctive feel and quality?
3. Taking the parable as a whole, wherein lies the dramatic tension, oppositions, even conflict either between characters or within any particular characters? What values are being portrayed at variance? What resolutions, if any, are played out, or suggested? How is this portrayed?
4. What sort of world does the parable portray? What does it convey about the characters involved? How do the characters and the world they inhabit interrelate?
5. As the reader do you simply 'observe' the story and parable as something that happens to the key characters, or are you drawn in so that it becomes your story as well?

To get an insight into an intelligent, insightful exploration of a striking theme expressed in the Sūtra read Ratnaguna's *Abundance in the White Lotus Sūtra, Madhyamavani No.1*, Spring 1999.

<http://madhyamavani.fwbo.org/1/lotus.html>

If listening to inspiring talks is up your street, then a powerful twofold exploration comes from a Padmaloka men's event: *The Burning House – An Image from the White Lotus Sūtra*:

Group exercises

There are of course many primarily non-conceptual ways that a group could work together, and of which perhaps one or more of your group will have some experience, and can guide the rest. My suggestions here are based on ‘theatre games’, with which I have some personal experience. It is important to remember this is meant to be fun, i.e. to be enjoyed – while having a purpose, a direction.

The form of improvisation I’m recommending is fundamentally a form of collaborative, spontaneous story-telling, i.e. a game of ‘let’s pretend by acting out’; different participants taking on different roles. While this can be entirely non-scripted, participants could also decide on pre-agreed roles, and even an agreement on the general direction of the action. It’s good to bear in mind that improvisation tends to work best when we keep an openness of mind, a responsiveness, and flexibility to engage with another’s contribution, so that we collaborate in an emerging act of co-creation. This contrasts with ‘having a fixed idea’ and then setting out to express it. Instead, as the scene unfolds, each improviser in offering some new element (keep it as short, specific and ‘concrete’ as possible), invites the other improviser(s) to accept that new contribution as true and real, and not block it. In accepting that offer, the other’s response will firstly mean taking that contribution fully into account, and then secondly entail another offer, i.e. building on the prior one, i.e. “Yes, and now...” with every new piece of ‘information’ added helping the improvisers to refine the characterisation and progress the developing action... ‘Whither they know where’.

In allowing yourselves to engage and express the ‘impact’ of the Sūtra on you in a different way, you may discover all sorts of meaningful associations that have hitherto remained implicit. The point being not to take the details of the parable over literally, but to explore for yourself the variation of different tensions and implications inherent in the basic situation portrayed by the parable, and thereby come to a deeper understanding of the points being made by the Sūtra.

Improvise, perhaps in pairs, in front of the rest of the group a scene that expresses a contemporary version of the ‘burning house’ (*samsāra*) with its games that is relevant to your own situation – you could choose from a collection of ‘hats’, or other objects (from a ‘prop’ box) that support you getting into role. Each pair could improvise a particular ‘samsaric game’, contributing to an emerging mélange of games. You could also do this in the form of charades.

Each scene could last for, say, up to a maximum of 5 minutes. Then, with a third person joining in, improvise a way that person can ‘rescue’ the first pair.

For example, you might portray a number of different scenes depicting the eight worldly winds; or, a scene(s) exploring how to entice children out of a range of contemporary dangerous situations to which they may be oblivious (from an obvious issue like knife

carrying to the subtler area of internet addiction), or, climate change activists trying to effect changes in those addicted to Western consumerism – and a different radical alternative, or, educating intransigent South African officials regarding the dangers of HIV infection.

After a number of these improvisations discuss what has come from the exercise. You may discover this raises all sorts of interesting ‘ethical dilemmas’, the conflicting tensions inherent in trying to actually practise a commitment to Buddhist values, act skilfully, and raise awareness.

Appendix: Unit 5 – The Myth of the Return Journey

Listen to Sangharakshita's audio-lecture *The Myth of the Return Journey*, and/or read Chapter Four of the same title in Sangharakshita, *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=98>

Book: <http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=340>

To follow up the theme of skilful means – *upaya* – read Chapter 3: 'On Being All Things to All Men in Sangharakshita's *The Inconceivable Emancipation – Themes from the Vimalakirti-Nirdesa*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1995.

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

Also p.505-509 of Ugyen Sangharakshita, *The Essential Sangharakshita*, Wisdom, Boston, 2009.

(UK) <http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=729>

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

Asking yourself the kinds of questions I've given below:

1. In what does the story of the myth consist? How are its major themes, points and 'message' being conveyed? What is its overarching purpose, feel and character? How does it unfold? How does the form of the myth contribute to this?
2. How do the different incidents contribute, support and relate to the unfolding of the whole story of the myth, its distinctive feel and quality?
3. Taking the myth as a whole, wherein lies the dramatic tension, oppositions, even conflict either between characters or within any particular characters? What values are being portrayed at variance? What resolutions, if any, are played out, or suggested? How is this portrayed?
4. What sort of world does the parable portray? What does it convey about the characters involved? How do the characters and the world they inhabit interrelate?
5. As the reader do you find yourself 'observing' the story 'externally', or how are you drawn into it so that in some way it resonates with the story of your own journey?

6. Explore any significant differences that you discern with the story of the ‘Prodigal Son’ told in the Gospels.

Possible project topic

Pursue your understanding of how the notion of skilful means is expressed in the Lotus Sūtra both in the parables and the dramatic action of the story. What ambiguities and caveats should be borne in mind as a practitioner?

If you are really interested, try to get hold of Pye, M., *Skilful Means – A Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism*, Duckworth, 1978, which goes into the topic in some depth drawing out the essential relationship between relative and absolute truth, as well as skilful means and wisdom.

<http://tinyurl.com/yepxrds>

Group exercises

Taking the caveats of the previous unit as read (see above), improvise, perhaps in pairs, a series of scenes (these could even be sculpted tableaux) depicting different key themes portrayed in the myth. While a prop box of ‘hats’, or other objects may be helpful support, the use of masks could also be particularly effective.

You could explore more contemporary scenes of alienation (e.g. drug addiction – gambling, alcohol, sex) as well as ways of intervention to supporting a ‘recovery’ or realisation/fulfilment of personal potential. It might be an interesting exercise to explore a number of modern ‘myths’ of rags-to-riches that seem to ape the message conveyed by the Sūtra; how do the implicit values express themselves differently? Likewise we have a number of ‘helper’ role-models that suggest different ways of getting involved with those deemed to be ‘in trouble’. Improvisational scene plays can unearth the hidden assumptions implicit with these.

After a number of these improvisations discuss what has come from the exercise.

Appendix: Unit 6 – The Jewel in the Lotus

Listen to Sangharakshita's audio-lecture *The Jewel in the Lotus*, and/or read Chapter Seven of the same title in Sangharakshita, *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=101>

Book: <http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=340>

Read 'The Priceless Jewel' (pp.7-16), in Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993.

<http://www.sangharakshita.org/books/The%20Priceless%20Jewel.pdf>

Read the attached excerpt from *The Door of Liberation* that gives one account of Avalokiteśvara's origins.

The Birth of Avalokiteśvara

In a prophecy made in the White Lotus Sūtra, Śākyamuni Buddha himself predicted the spread of the Teaching in Tibet. Once while the great Teacher was staying in the Bamboo Grove with his disciples, a rainbow-coloured ray of light emanated from his forehead toward the north, and he smiled. His disciples were surprised and begged him to explain. He said, "Fortunate youths, the snowy country of Tibet, long the abode of demons and devils, has never been subdued by any of the Buddhas of the past, present or future, but it will be subdued in the future by the Bodhisattva Ārya Avalokiteśvara. He will lead its inhabitants to the path of enlightenment and the Holy Dharma will blaze there like a rising sun. Long ago Ārya Avalokiteśvara made this vow before the thousand Buddhas:

'May I be able to establish in emancipation all the living beings in the barbaric Land of Snow, where all beings are so hard to discipline and none of the Buddhas of the three times have stepped. May these beings be disciplined by me. May I be like father and mother to those who are now helpless. May I be their guide, leading them to freedom. May I burn the lamp to chase away the gloom of barbarism. In that country, may I extend, for as long as possible, the teachings of the Tathāgatas of the three times. In hearing the name of the Three Jewels, may the many beings of the Land of Snow go for refuge and obtain rebirth as men or gods. May they have the opportunity to enjoy the Holy Dharma. May I be able to mature and emancipate them, each according to his own way. May that gloomy barbaric country become bright, like an island of precious jewels.'

After this speech, another ray of light in the form of a white lotus emanated from the Buddha's heart. It illuminated all the world and radiated to Amitābha in Sukhāvātī, the Pure Land, the western paradise - an ineffable land of light sustained by the power of the Buddhas, in which there is no material creation.

That ray of light then emanated from the heart of Amitābha and dissolved into the Lotus Lake; thereupon Amitābha prophesied that an incarnation of the Buddha would subdue the beings in the barbaric Land of Snow.

At that time there lived in Sukhāvātī the Dharmarāja Sang-bo-chok. One day he sent a group of his attendants to Lotus Lake to gather offerings of flowers for the Buddha. In the middle of the lake they saw a lotus from whose great stem extended a canopy of leaves; showing through the petals of the lotus was a cushion from which radiated rays of light. The attendants immediately ran to tell the king, who, amazed, filled his royal barge with offerings and went with his attendants to see this miraculous lotus. In front of the lotus he and his attendants made offerings and prayers.

The centre of the lotus opened in four parts, revealing, miraculously born from the lotus, the incarnation who would subdue the barbaric Land of Snow. He was seated in cross-legged position. His face was smiling and beautiful; his hair fell in five locks and was ornamented with precious jewels. He had four arms. Two of his hands were folded at his heart; his lower right hand held a white crystal rosary, and his lower left hand held the stem of a white lotus that blossomed at his ear. His body was the colour of sunlight reflected on ranges of snowy mountains and was ornamented by the special signs and marks. He was adorned by jewelled ornaments and wore garments of beautiful silks. Across his left shoulder was draped the skin of a black antelope. And from his body, rays of light emanated to the ten directions.

The king and his attendants welcomed him with many kinds of music, and invited him to the palace. The king then went to Amitābha and asked, ‘Who is this incarnation magically born from the centre of a lotus, who has the five flowing locks, who is ornamented with precious jewels, who is the colour of snowy mountains, whose beautiful appearance captivates the mind, and who has extraordinary signs and marks? Is he a prince of my lineage or is he one who will help living beings?’

Amitābha replied, ‘This incarnation is a Bodhisattva, the great compassionate Ārya Avalokiteśvara, He is not of your kingly lineage.’ Then Amitābha, putting his hand on the head of Ārya Avalokiteśvara, spoke these words, ‘Noble son, those beings who abide in the barbaric Land of Snow have not been subdued by the Buddhas of the three times. Because of the power of your previous supplications, you, excellent one, will subdue them. Wondrously well done! By merely seeing your ārya body and hearing the sound of the six syllables, may the beings in the Land of Snow be delivered from the three lower states of beings and obtain rebirth as men or gods. When all the demons and devils living in the Land of Snow see your body and hear the six syllables, may their harmful minds be calmed and may they develop helpfulness, compassion and the bodhi-mind. When all the carnivorous animals in that country, whose very voices are frightful, see your body and hear the six syllables, may their harmful thoughts be calmed and may they live together peacefully. When beings in the Land of Snow who are hungry, thirsty, and miserable see your Ārya body and hear the six syllables, may they receive a rain of ambrosia. Drinking this, may they be satisfied according to their wish. When those who live in the land of Snow who are unfortunate, blind, and sick, who have not protection and no refuge, see

your Ārya body and hear the six syllables, may they be completely freed from all sickness and disabilities. When all those beings see your Ārya body and hear the six syllables, may their lives be prolonged and free from illness. May you be the protector for those without protection, the refuge for those without refuge. As the beings in the Land of Snow depend on the six syllables, may all the teachings of the Buddha spread throughout the land and may all delight in the Holy Dharma OM MANI PADME HUM. In these six syllables are found the intent of all the Buddhas, and the root of the eighty-four thousand aggregates of the Dharma.’

Before his teacher Amitābha, Ārya Avalokiteśvara also vowed, *‘May I have the opportunity to establish all living beings in happiness, beginning with those in the Land of Snow. Until I relieve all living beings, may I never, even for a moment, feel like giving up the purpose of others for my own peace and happiness. If I should ever think of my own happiness, may my head be cracked into ten pieces like the Ardzaka plant, and may my body be split into a thousand pieces, like the petals of a lotus.’*

Having made this promise, he travelled throughout the six realms of saṃsāra, teaching all living beings the eighty-four thousand teachings of the Dharma by means of the six syllable mantra OM MANI PADME HUM. In each realm he freed beings from their particular miseries, and taught the Dharma to those who wished to hear it.

Finally he went to Tibet, the Land of Snow. Gazing over the Tibetan nation from the peak of Red Mountain, he had a vision of countless beings burning alive in an ocean of fire. Witnessing the misery of these beings, he wept heart-felt tears. The goddesses Tara and Bhrkuti miraculously appeared from these teardrops and encouraged the Bodhisattva, promising to help with him with the great task of teaching the Tibetans.

Avalokiteśvara went among the Tibetans and taught them the mantra OM MANI PADME HUM, pronouncing the words of the Dharma with infinite compassion. Then he entered the meditation of bodhi-mind, making a long and intense effort to dispel the misery of beings and bring them to happiness. Exhausted by his efforts, he entered the meditation of restoration. For a second time, he gazed out over the land and saw that he had not helped even one one-hundredth of the beings of the Land of Snow to enter the bliss of liberation. He was seized by bitter sorrow, and for an instant the thought arose, ‘What is the use? I can do nothing for them. It is better for me to be happy and peaceful myself.’

At that moment, his head cracked into ten pieces and his body split into a thousand parts. In agony, he cried out to Amitābha Buddha, who appeared before him in the sky. Placing his hand on Avalokiteśvara’s shattered head he said, *‘All circumstances come from cooperative causes conditioned at the moment of intent. Every fortune which arises to anyone results from his own former wish. Your powerful expression of supplication was praised by all the Buddhas. In a moment of time the truth will certainly appear.’*

Then Amitābha blessed him and transfigured the ten pieces of his head into ten faces, one for each of the Ten Pāramitās. He also blessed the broken body, transfiguring the torn flesh into a thousand hands, each with its own wisdom eye, so that the Bodhisattva had a

thousand eyes and his vision became as that of the thousand Buddhas of the golden aeon. On the crown of ten-faced head, Amitābha placed himself, and he radiated boundless, inconceivable light. Since that time, Ārya Avalokiteśvara has often manifested himself in Tibet. His various forms have included laymen and lamas.

From Geshe Wangyal, *The Door of Liberation*, 1973, p.30ff.

As with the two previous units you could be asking yourself:

1. In what do the stories of Avolkitesavara's myth, and the parable of the Priceless Jewel consist? How are their major themes, points, 'messages' being conveyed? What are their overarching purpose, feel and character? How do they unfold? How do the form of the 'telling' contribute to this?
2. How do the different incidents contribute, support and relate to the unfolding of the stories, their distinctive feel and quality?
3. Wherein lies the dramatic tension, oppositions, even conflict either between characters or within any particular characters? What values are being portrayed at variance? What resolutions, if any, are played out, or suggested? How is this portrayed?
4. What sort of worlds are being portrayed? What does it convey about the characters involved? How do the characters and the world they inhabit interrelate?
5. In what ways does an exploration or openness to the richness implicit to the symbolism of the jewel and the lotus affect your appreciation and interpretation of these stories?
6. How does all of the above contrast meaningfully with any of the other parables and myths so far encountered in the Lotus Sūtra?

If Sangharakshita's exploration of the Avalokiteśvara's mantra has captured you, then an excellent talk to stir your imagination is Padmavajra's 'The Sound of Reality' available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM709>

Possible project topics

Compassion and its relationship to 'Skilful Means' as the quintessential spiritual value for the Mahāyāna – how does this express the Buddhist conception of Transcendental Wisdom?

For a poetic insight, listen to Sangharakshita reading his poems: 'The Lotus of Compassion' and 'The Bodhisattva's Reply' at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=P01>

Another very good talk is Parami's *Out of Compassion for the World* available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC56>

and Subhuti's 'Awake to the Cries of the World' at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=OM473>

Explore the symbolism of the jewel and, or, the lotus; there are a number of possible ways of doing so: either in a more creative exploration through writing, poetry or some other artistic medium, or alternatively pursuing this via the history of the imagery as it has found expression in different cultural forms, and making your own connections.

To give yourself a way in, try listening to Sraddhagita's talk *The Jewel in the Lotus* available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC1>

A classic description of the Buddha's vision of the lotus pool can be found at track 10 in Sangharakshita's talk *The Ideal of Enlightenment* at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=120>

Appendix: Unit 7 – Symbols of Life and Growth

It's worth seeing if you can find Dr. Conze's translation of this section of the Sūtra in Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, Ch.5: 'The Lotus of the Good Law – On Plants', p.105-113, as well as a shorter, poetically evocative translation (p.139-40) in Conze, Horner, Snellgrove, Waley, (Eds.), *Buddhist Texts Through the Ages*, Harper, London, 1964.

http://openlibrary.org/b/OL9070658M/Thirty_Years_of_Buddhist_Studies

<http://tinyurl.com/yjosm2c>

Listen to Sangharakshita's public talk *The Rain of the Dharma* given in 1994 in the USA, particularly tracks 10-13 available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=181>

and Amoghavajra's exploration of 'The Parable of the Rain Cloud' available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=LOC18>

Another seminal Sangharakshita talk is *Enlightenment as Experience and as Non-Experience*. Tracks 10-11 are particularly pertinent to the theme of this unit available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=119>

Make a collage, painting or write some poetry that expresses something of the feel that comes from this chapter for you, as well as celebrating your experience of the transcendent as symbolised through the natural world.

Watch some of the programmes from David Attenborough's BBC nature documentary series *The Private Life of Plants*, as well as perhaps 'Fresh Water', and 'Seasonal Forests' from the *Planet Earth* series.

The Private Life of Plants (YouTube): <http://tinyurl.com/ygcvy78>

Planet Earth (YouTube): <http://tinyurl.com/yg946qe>

Visit an arboretum or garden like London's Kew Gardens, immersing yourself in the fecund vibrancy of life to be found in such places, perhaps writing your own poem celebrating your experience. Explore the contrasting nature of the experiences of a beautiful garden with that of the 'wilds of Nature'.

Spend some time collecting pictures of great works of art that express the values you discern in this chapter.

Appendix: Unit 8 – The Revelation of Abundant Treasures

If you find this one of the least accessible episodes in the Sūtra, having some understanding and feeling for the architectural symbolism of the stūpa will greatly enhance your reading of what happens in Chapter 11 of the Sūtra. Consequently, I strongly recommend listening to *Five Element Symbolism and the Stūpa*:

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=100>

and/or reading Chapter Six in Sangharakshita's *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=340>

See also 'The Symbolism of the Five Elements in the Stūpa' (pp.168-171) in Sangharakshita, *A Guide to the Buddhist Path*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1996.

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

Another of Sangharakshita's lectures covering similar ground is Chapter 2: 'The Tantric Stūpa' in *Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism* (pp.31-51), Windhorse, 2002.

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

The original audio talk (and transcript) is available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=104>

Questions

1. What are your responses to the symbolism of the Mahabhūtas? How would you square Five Element symbolism with scientific facts? How would you explain this to a Western sceptic, particularly the notion of akasha (space)?
2. Experiment with the meditation on the Visualization of the Six Element Stūpa as described in Kamalashila, 1999, *Meditation – The Buddhist Way of Tranquillity and Insight* (pp. 228-9), Windhorse, Birmingham.

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

Online version: <http://kamalashila.co.uk/page7/page7.html>

What is your experience?

Revisit ‘The Buddha and Bodhisattva: Eternity and Time’, Unit 8 of the *Bodhisattva Ideal* series in the second year of the Dharma Training Course:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb9aclc>

The original audio talk (and transcript) is available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=72>

or in Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=454>

There are important themes that Sangharakshita discusses there that are central to understanding the deeper import of this episode in the Sūtra. A part of this lecture is reproduced in the material made available for Unit 9 in this Appendix.

Potential project

Researching the history and development of stūpas in the Buddhist world, both through their widely differing architectural forms, as well as the evolving symbolism attributed to them is fascinating. Below is a reading list to get you started:

- Chapter 10: ‘Buddhist Saints and the Stupa’ in Ray, R.A., *Buddhist Saints in India – A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations*, OUP, Oxford, 1994.

<http://tinyurl.com/y9sec39>

- Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Psycho-cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa*.

<http://tinyurl.com/y8kko2y>

- *The Stupa, Sacred Symbol of Enlightenment* (Crystal Mirror 12, Dharma Publishing).

<http://tinyurl.com/yfog5wf>

- Snodgrass, A., *The Symbolism of the Stupa*, Banarsidass, Delhi, 1992.

Motilal Banarsidass: <http://tinyurl.com/yhhfxxq>

Google Books: <http://tinyurl.com/y1fp4dt>

- Brauen, Martin, *The Mandala, Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism*, Serindia Pubs, 1997.

Serindia: <http://www.serindia.com/item.cfm/34>

Google Books: <http://tinyurl.com/yht2lcq>

- Chapter 5: ‘Philosophical Interpretations’ in Sangharakshita, *The Three Jewels*, Windhorse.

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=332>

- V. ‘The Stupa Cult and the Extant Pali Vinaya’; ‘VI. ‘Monks and the Relic Cult in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta: An Old Misunderstanding in Regard to Monastic Buddhism’; VII. ‘Burial Ad Sanctos and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism’. All in Schopen, G., *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, Univ. Hawaii. 1996, p.86ff.

<http://tinyurl.com/yeddjuz>

- Pema Dorjee, *Stupa and Its Technology – A Tibeto-Buddhist Perspective*, 1996.

<http://tinyurl.com/yzbnoal>

- Anna Libera Dallapiccola (ed.), *The Stupa, Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, Verlag, 1980.

Buy the article online: <http://tinyurl.com/y9n8okn>

Open Library: <http://openlibrary.org/b/OL16323965M/Stupa>

- Pant, Sushila, *The Origin and Development of Stupa Architecture in India*, Bharata Manisha, Varanasi, 1976.

<http://tinyurl.com/ybjw3se>

Appendix: Unit 9 – The Eternal Buddha

The excerpts of two lectures, given below, give an introduction to help finding your own way to engage with the themes of Time and Eternity.

From, ‘The Buddha and Bodhisattva – Eternity and Time’ by Sangharakshita

...It’s true to say that the Bodhisattva follows a path, what we call the Path of the Bodhisattva, and it’s true that the Bodhisattva does aim at a goal, the goal of Enlightenment for the sake of all living beings. But though this is true, though these impressions are correct, there is at the same time a sort of danger; and the danger consists in the fact that these expressions, as when we speak of the Bodhisattva as following a path, arriving at a goal – these expressions are in fact metaphorical. We don’t always realize that, we don’t always realize how much of our thought, how much of our speech, how much of our communication is metaphorical. It’s not to be taken literally; it is suggestive. It’s meant to stimulate, even inspire. It’s not meant to communicate in a clear-cut, scientific, sort of quasi-mathematical fashion. So there is the danger that we may forget this and there’s the danger that we may start taking these metaphors - these metaphors with the help of which we try to make clear what is going on in the spiritual life - the danger is that we may start taking these somewhat too literally and trying to press them to logical conclusions.

Now let us look into this just a little more closely. Suppose that we’re walking along the road – something that often happens to us. So in due course, having covered a certain distance, having covered a certain ground, in due course we arrive at our destination, which is, say, a house. This is a simple enough situation, a simple enough sort of experience, but what are the facts involved? What are the facts of the situation? The facts of the situation are that we have changed our position, but we have changed it on the same plane, as it were, on the same level, as it were.

Now it is only too easy, too fatally easy, to think of the Bodhisattva’s Path and the Bodhisattva goal in the same sort of way, rather literally. It’s only too easy to think of the Bodhisattva’s path, leading up, as it were, to Buddhahood as though to the door of a house. We think of the Bodhisattva as going along step by step, stage by stage, and one day he comes up against this great and wonderful door or gateway of Nirvana, all glistening and pearly and golden and there it is, just like coming to the door of a house, and he just enters, he just goes in. And this is the way in which we think of these things, these experiences and we can’t in a way help it.

But it isn’t really like that at all. When you come to the end of the Bodhisattva path, when you come in fact to the end of the spiritual path, you don’t find a gate, you don’t find a doorway – you don’t find any sort of house, any sort of spiritual, any sort of celestial mansion waiting for you. So what do you find? When you get to the end of the path, you don’t find anything at all. You don’t find anything at all – there’s just nothing there. The path just ends. The path just comes to an end. The path just stops, and there you are at the end of the path with nothing there. The path, as I’ve said, just ends. So you find yourself,

as it were, (again a metaphor so don't start taking it literally), you find yourself at the edge of a precipice. The path has gone on nicely, step by step, stage by stage, mile after mile, and you had counted all those milestones, and you were expecting to arrive in comfort at the door, the entrance of a great house, a mansion, but no – you find that the path ends right at the edge of a precipice. And there you are standing right on the edge of the precipice, and the precipice goes down not just a few feet, or even a few miles, it just goes down to infinity. Now what is one to do?

The Zen people, who are also involved here, the Zen people put it another way. The Zen people say that the spiritual life is like climbing up a flagpole. So eventually with great effort – and the flagpole is supposed to be rather slippery, if not deliberately greased – by fate or circumstances – eventually, with a lot of effort and struggle you get to the top of the flagpole. It goes up a very, very long way we are told - this particular flagpole. So when you get to the top what happens? Well when you get to the top you can't go any further up – obviously, and it is also impossible to come down. Why is it impossible to come down? Because beneath, below there's the Zen master standing with a big stick! So you dare not come down, and you can't go up. And, worst of all, at the top of the flagpole there is no cosy little platform on which you can settle down, like St. Simeon Stylites or anything like that. There is nothing there, there is just empty space. So you're afraid to jump of course. So you can't go up, you can't go down, you can't stay there, and you can't jump off. So what is one to do? This is what the Zen people put to one. Well, it's quite impossible to say. One just can't say. No statement is possible. So I'm afraid I shall have to leave you all on the top of the flagpole!

We are not concerned this evening with that particular predicament, not concerned with it, that is to say, directly, but only as illustrating the sort of the point that I'm trying to make, namely that 'path' and 'goal' are discontinuous. Contrary to what we usually think, contrary to our usual metaphorical mode of description, Enlightenment is not reached by following a path. Enlightenment is not reached by following a path in the sense that, at the end of the path, there's Enlightenment staring you in the face. No such thing happens, no such thing occurs, no such thing takes place. At the same time this does not mean that the path should not be followed. Paradoxically enough, one follows the path knowing it doesn't lead anywhere, doesn't arrive anywhere. However, we're not concerned this evening with that either. What we are trying to say, what we are trying to point out, trying to make clear is the fact that the path and the goal occupy, as it were, different dimensions. One, we may say is the dimension of time and the other is the dimension of eternity, and one will not arrive at the one by the indefinite prolongation of the other; by the indefinite prolongation of time going on and on and on in time indefinitely you never reach eternity, you never get to eternity. You never reach that other dimension. It's rather like or it would be like trying to arrive at a two-dimensional figure by the prolongation of a one-dimensional line: however far you may go in that direction, prolonging the line, protracting the line even to infinity, you never will arrive at a two-dimensional figure. So the two – eternity on the one hand, time on the other, and goal on the one hand, the path on the other – these are discontinuous, discrete as we may say.

Now the Bodhisattva represents the dimension of time, because – obviously – the Bodhisattva path is followed in time. It's something that happens, this following of the path in time – it has a past, and a present and a future; it doesn't go beyond time. But the Buddha represents the dimension of eternity. The Buddha represents the goal, and the goal is gained out of time. One reaches the end of the path in time, but one shouldn't think that one attains the goal in time: one can attain the goal out of time or one can put it another way and say that the goal is eternally attained.

We usually – and up to a point quite justifiably – think of the Buddha as an historical figure, and this is quite correct as far as it goes. And we think of the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment as an historical event. We say, for instance, it took place two thousand five hundred years ago – we might even name the year, might even name the day. So we look upon the Buddha's attainment of Enlightenment as something occurring in time, within this dimension of time. And so long as we make it clear that we're speaking popularly, conventionally, then this isn't altogether wrong.

But then only too often we go on to think of Buddhahood itself as existing in time. And this is quite wrong, this is altogether wrong because though the Buddha as historical person may exist within time, Buddhahood itself exists outside time: Buddhahood itself exists in what we call the dimension of eternity. We can in fact think of the Buddha himself as existing simultaneously on two different levels: on the level of time, as a human, historical figure, and on the level of eternity, as Reality. And we can think of him as existing also, in addition to these two, in an intermediate, as it were archetypal realm.

...The *Dharmakāya* represents Buddhahood as it is in itself, or the Buddha as he is in himself. And the *Dharmakāya* therefore represents the real, the true, the genuine, the ultimate, Buddha. Not the human Buddha, not the historical Buddha, not even the archetypal Buddha. And therefore we find the Buddha saying in the *Diamond Sūtra*, in a verse which is very famous in the Buddhist world and often recited:

Those who by my form did see me, (form meaning the human historical form) And those who followed me by voice Wrong the efforts they engaged in, Me those people will not see. From the Dharma should one see the Buddhas, From the Dharma bodies comes their guidance. Yet Dharma's true nature cannot be discerned, And no one can be conscious of it as an object.

So this is what the Buddha says in the *Diamond Sūtra*. The Buddha is saying that the Buddha is not really his physical body, nor even his archetypal form, the Buddha is the *Dharmakāya*. The Buddha is, as it were, Reality.

Now the message of another great Mahāyāna text, the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, is similar. In fact in a way it's even more explicit. I don't know how many of you have seen or have read this particular Sūtra, but it is worth pointing out that this Sūtra, the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* which means 'The White Lotus Flower of the Good Doctrine', this particular Sūtra employs the non-conceptual mode of communication. We have seen, on more than one occasion that there are two modes of communication – one conceptual, through

abstract ideas, concepts, and the other non-conceptual, the other speaking the language of parable and myth and so on and this the language which the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* speaks predominantly. And I have in mind a particular episode, when suddenly, according to the text, millions of Bodhisattvas appear from the earth. You can imagine how staggered everybody was! There they were, sitting round the Buddha under a tree somewhere in northern India, and maybe a few hundred of these ascetics and monks and maybe householders, a few princes and so on, a few merchants, and suddenly, we are told, out of the fissures of the earth, there came millions of Bodhisattvas – quite an extraordinary sort of thing to happen, even during the lifetime of the Buddha!

And the Buddha, when he saw all these millions of Bodhisattvas issuing from the fissures of the earth, he said, addressing the other ordinary human disciples, “Oh yes, these are all my disciples. I’ve taught and trained them all.”

So the ordinary human disciples expressed, according to the *Sūtra*, their astonishment when they heard the Buddha claiming to have taught and trained these millions of Bodhisattvas who had appeared in this miraculous manner, and they said, “But look here, you were Enlightened only forty years ago. And we recognize, we admit that you’ve been working pretty hard! Teaching all sorts of beings and you haven’t really wasted any time, but these millions of Bodhisattvas, that’s a bit too much to ask us to believe. How could you possibly have trained so many of them? Some of these Bodhisattvas are not just ordinary novice Bodhisattvas, they’ve been following the Bodhisattva path for ages, for kalpas, hundreds of lives, thousands of years, so how can they possibly be your disciples?” They said, “It’s just like a young man of twenty-five pointing out a collection of centenarians, all men of a hundred, and saying, ‘They’re all my sons.’ It’s just impossible.”

So at this point, according to the *Sūtra*, the Buddha makes his great revelation, the one towards which the whole *Sūtra* has been working up, as it were, a revelation which is the keynote of the *Sūtra*. And the Buddha says, “Don’t think that I was Enlightened forty years ago. That is just your way of looking at it. I am eternally Enlightened.” And when the Buddha makes that statement obviously it isn’t the *Nirmānakāya* speaking, it’s not the *Sambhogakāya* speaking – it’s the *Dharmakāya* speaking. In other words it’s the real Buddha speaking, the eternal Buddha speaking or Buddhahood itself speaking, not any particular person, not any particular individual, however great.

So when one speaks of the eternal Buddha, or when the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka Sūtra* speaks in terms of the eternal Buddha, one is not to understand the word ‘eternal’ in the sense of indefinitely prolonged in time, but rather in the sense of being outside time altogether. And this means therefore that for the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka*, as for the *Diamond Sūtra*, the Buddha symbolizes the dimension of eternity, or symbolizes Reality as existing outside time.

And similarly therefore the Bodhisattva represents the dimension of time, or represents Reality – represents even Buddhahood – as manifesting in – though this again is metaphorical – time. And it isn’t very difficult to understand how this should be so, how

the Bodhisattva should represent or symbolize the dimension of time, because, as we have seen, the Bodhisattva follows the path, engages in certain activities, originates, that is to say, a certain sequence of thoughts and words and deeds, and this sequence is progressive. In other words the Bodhisattva manifests the relative Bodhicitta to an ever increasing degree, and all this – this whole process – takes place in time.

... We have therefore two principles: we've a principle of Buddhahood out of time, in the dimension of eternity, and we've a principle of Bodhisattvahood in the dimension of time. One, the principle of Buddhahood, eternity is transcendent, the other, the principle of Bodhisattvahood, in time, the principle of growth, evolution, development, is immanent. The one, the first represents perfection eternally complete, eternally achieved. The other represents perfection everlastingly in process of achievement, in the world order, through the evolutionary process. And the two are discontinuous. The one does not lead into the other. They are discontinuous, discrete.

Now the question that arises is, 'Can we leave them like this?' Is this the last word that can be said on the subject, that here you've got Buddha, there you've got Bodhisattva, there you've got eternity, there you've got time, discontinuous, discrete. Is this the last word that can be said on the subject? Well certainly not according to the Mahāyāna, and especially not according to the Tantra. There's no question though of merging one into the other. The solution isn't as easy as that. It isn't saying, "Well time is illusory, merge it in eternity," or, "Eternity is illusory, merge it in time." No. They both are, irreducibly there – Buddhahood, Bodhisattvahood, eternity, time – they can't be merged, the one in the other. So it isn't a question of doing that.

Rather, according to the Mahāyāna and again especially according to the Tantra, it's a question of realizing both of them simultaneously. In other words realizing Buddha and Bodhisattva simultaneously, eternity and time simultaneously. Seeing everything as eternally achieved and at the same time eternally in process of achievement. Seeing that these two do not contradict each other. One may say one has to see that everything moves but nothing moves. Sometimes one may have that feeling, that sensation, one is moving, one is walking perhaps, even running, but nothing moves. The two are there both, in a sense, contradictory – movement but no movement – but they're both there – one can deny neither of them.

In the same way, one may say the Buddha sits eternally beneath the Bodhi tree. The Buddha has always sat beneath the Bodhi tree and always will sit. At the same time the Bodhisattva is eternally practising the *pāramitās*, the Perfections, life after life to infinity, and that these two, Buddha and Bodhisattva, represent different aspects of one – one might even say the same, Reality. Reality as existing out of time in, as it were, eternity, and Reality as progressively revealed in time.

Now it's very difficult for the mind to go beyond this point. ... To begin with, we have to realize that however long time goes on, time never reaches eternity; time just goes on and on. Time, we may say, does not go beyond time. There's no question of any getting nearer and nearer to eternity as time goes on, any nearer to the Absolute, any nearer to

Buddhahood, which is in the dimension of eternity. So that in say a million years we'll be no nearer to eternity than we are now, no nearer to Buddhahood – no nearer to Enlightenment, just by going on and on in time. We'll be no nearer at all.

So this sounds pretty hopeless. That however long you go on in time you never get there, you never reach eternity, never reach Buddhahood. It's a different dimension. But it isn't really as hopeless as it looks, because you can turn it the other way round and you can say that at this very moment we're as near to Enlightenment, to eternity, as we shall ever be. We might even say that even a Bodhisattva, on the very threshold of Enlightenment, just a minute before he gets it, is no nearer really than we are at this moment.

And this is really something to meditate upon, something to ponder. That every moment is the last moment. After all every moment is the last moment, whether it's this moment, or the next, or whether it's a moment occurring after a million years. Every moment is the last moment, and beyond the last moment there's only Buddhahood. Whether it's this moment or the moment that comes in a million years when perhaps we're on the threshold of Enlightenment. There's only this moment, and after this moment there's only Buddhahood. So every moment in fact, though we don't know it – if we did know it what a terrible reaction there would be! – that every moment we find ourselves at the top, in fact, of the flagpole, and all that we have to do is... well, what?!

So you can see that we've gone quite a long way. At the same time we haven't gone anywhere. We've completed our journey, our journey along the Bodhisattva path. At the same time we've realized that the goal of the journey is eternally achieved and eternally in process of being achieved. The Buddha and the Bodhisattva, eternity and time, are one – or are not two.

References

'The Buddha and Bodhisattva: Eternity and Time', Unit 8 of the *Bodhisattva Ideal* series in the second year of the Triratna Dharma Training course:

<http://tinyurl.com/yb9aclc>

The original audio talk (and transcript) is available at:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=72>

or in Sangharakshita, *The Bodhisattva Ideal – Wisdom and Compassion in Buddhism*, Windhorse, 1999:

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=454>

From, 'The Buddha, God, and Reality' by Sangharakshita

...We may say that Enlightenment, the Buddha's Enlightenment, or anybody else's Enlightenment represents the point of intersection, as it were, of time and eternity. Strictly speaking, of course, it is only a line that can intersect another line. So eternity isn't a line. We can represent time as a line, but not eternity as a line. So in a way you can't really speak of eternity intersecting time as though it was another line, another time, as it were. It is ridiculous to speak of it in that way. So perhaps we should think rather in terms of time, that is to say a line, which at a given point, just stops. At this, so called, point of intersection it isn't intersected by another line. The first line, time, just stops. Instead of propagating itself indefinitely, it stops, it disappears, as it were, into a new dimension.

It is rather like the flowing of a river into the ocean. The ocean represents the new dimension, the river is time, the ocean is eternity if you like. This simile is, of course, rather hackneyed, but it is still rather useful if one doesn't take it too literally and perhaps it is possible to improve on it to some extent. Suppose we do that. Suppose we just assume, or we imagine, that the ocean into which our river is flowing is just over the horizon. So what does one see? One sees the river flowing and flowing to the horizon, but you don't see the ocean into which the river is flowing. So it seems as though the river is flowing into nothingness, flowing into a void, it just stops at the horizon, because that is the point where it enters the new dimension that we cannot see. So time is like that, time just stops as it were at eternity, time just comes to an end, time is succeeded by eternity, and this is what we mean by Enlightenment. Enlightenment is just like that. Siddhartha disappears, just like the river disappearing at the horizon and the Buddha takes his place. This is of course from the standpoint of eternity. From the standpoint of time Siddhartha becomes the Buddha, he develops into the Buddha, grows into the Buddha, evolves into the Buddha. But from the standpoint of eternity Siddhartha just ceases to exist and there is the Buddha, who has of course been there all the time.

Now this difference of approach, approach in terms of time, approach in terms of eternity, is at the bottom of the whole controversy between the gradual school of Zen and the abrupt school of Zen. You probably remember that in the early days of Zen, or rather Chan in China, there were these two branches of the Chan or Zen school, those who believed that Enlightenment was attained suddenly, in a sudden sort of flash or illumination, and those who believed that it was attained gradually, step by step, by patient effort and practice. And you remember also that in the *Platform Sūtra* Hui Neng tries to clear up this whole controversy by saying that it isn't that there is a gradual path, and that it isn't that there is a sudden path or abrupt path, it is merely that some people gain Enlightenment more quickly than others, presumably because they make a greater effort. And this is true.

But one can also go rather more deeply than this. The abrupt realization, or the abrupt attainment of Enlightenment, we may say, has got nothing to do with speed within time. When one speaks of the abrupt path, or the abrupt school, or the abrupt realization of Enlightenment, one doesn't mean that one has speeded up the same process within time.

It doesn't mean that if you take the usual process of attaining Enlightenment, as it goes on within time, and you just speed it up, you just get it through more quickly. It doesn't mean that whereas normally you might spend fifteen, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years on the gradual path, you speed it all up and you compress that into, say, one year, or even a month, or even a week, or even a minute. It isn't that. The abrupt path, we may say, is outside time altogether. And sudden Enlightenment is simply the point at which this new dimension, this dimension of eternity outside time is entered. So one cannot, as it were, reach this point, one cannot reach this point, as it were, of eternity by speeding up the process of realization within time. You can never get closer to eternity by speeding up your process of approach to eternity within time. Within time you just have to stop. But at the same time, paradoxically, you can't stop without first having speeded up.

This puts one in mind of the story of Aṅgulimāla, which I have often referred to. It's a rather instructive story because it illustrates this question of these two dimensions. ... The point that this story illustrates is this; that Aṅgulimāla could not catch up with the Buddha because the Buddha was, as it were, moving - or standing still, it is the same thing here, in a different dimension. Aṅgulimāla representing time, couldn't catch up with the Buddha representing eternity. However long time goes on, it never comes to a point within time where it catches up with eternity. It doesn't find eternity within the temporal process. So Aṅgulimāla couldn't even have caught up with the Buddha even if the Buddha, had stood still; even if the Buddha had stood still, Aṅgulimāla could be running now, still, after two thousand five hundred years, but he wouldn't have caught up with the Buddha. The distance between them would be the same now as it was then, he wouldn't be any nearer.

... Let us return to our main topic. We have seen, in other words, that Enlightenment, or the attainment of Enlightenment, represents entry into a new dimension of being, it is not a prolongation of the old one, however refined. So after his Enlightenment, after his Enlightenment under the Bodhi tree the Buddha is a different, even a new person. Not just the old Siddhartha slightly improved, or even considerably improved, but a new person. We tend, unfortunately, to think of the Buddha's Enlightenment in terms of our own experience of life. What usually happens is that in the course of our lives, in the course of so many years, so many decades we undergo various experiences, we add to our knowledge, we learn different things, we do different things, go to different places, meet different people, but underneath we remain, as it were, fundamentally, the same person, recognisably the same person. The change is only peripheral. ... Whatever changes take place don't go very deep. Perhaps we are the same person now that we were twenty, thirty years ago when we were a child. Very often this is the case, very definitely, very remarkably, in as much as we do not succeed in outgrowing those very early, those childhood, even those infantile conditionings and attitudes.

... The Buddha's experience of Enlightenment didn't represent just a little, peripheral change in him, a change just on the surface. It was something much deeper, something in a way much more dramatic than that. More like the change that takes place as between two lives, when you die to one life and you are reborn in another, and there is a great gap

in between. The Enlightenment experience is more like that, it is more like we may say, death. In fact in some Buddhist traditions Enlightenment is called the ‘Great Death’.

Because when you are Enlightened everything of the past dies, everything is annihilated, in a way, and you are completely reborn. So in the case of the Buddha, we may say, Siddhartha dies, not that Siddhartha is changed, or that Siddhartha is tinkered about a bit with and sort of patched up and improved – revised edition issued, no. Siddhartha dies, Siddhartha is finished, Siddhartha dies, as it were, at the foot of the Bodhi tree and the Buddha is born, the Buddha comes into existence, or appears, only after the death of Siddhartha. We say the Buddha is ‘born’ but it is not really even like that. At that moment, when Siddhartha dies the Buddha is seen as having been alive all the time, as we say, but when we say all the time we really mean above and beyond time, out of time altogether.

Now to come back to another very important reflection of Buddhist thought, and even of metaphysical thought in the West, time and space are not things in themselves. We usually think of time and space as things in themselves. We think of space as a sort of box within which things move about, we think of time as a sort of tunnel along which things move, but they are not really like that.

Time and space are really forms of our perception. When we see things, phenomena, we perceive them under the form of time, we perceive them under the form of space, as it were through the spectacles of space, through the spectacles of time. When we experience them through these dimensions, then we speak of these things as phenomena. And these phenomena make up the world of relative existence, of conditioned existence, or what Buddhists call *Samsāra*.

But when we enter this other dimension, when we enter the dimension of eternity, then we go beyond time and beyond space, and therefore we go beyond phenomena, which are only realities as seen under the forms of space and time. So we go beyond the world, we go beyond *Samsāra*, and in the Buddhist idiom we enter Nirvana, or in the Hindu idiom we go from darkness to light, from the unreal to the real, from death to immortality.

Often Enlightenment is described as awakening to the truth of things. Described in terms of knowledge and vision of reality, seeing things as they really are, not as they appear. Seeing things in their truth, seeing things free from any veils, free from any obscurations. Seeing them without being influenced or affected by our own assumptions, our own psychological conditionings. Just seeing them with perfect objectivity, as they are. Not only seeing them, but if you like, becoming one with them, becoming one with Reality, or one with the Reality of things. So the Buddha, the one who has awoken to this truth, the one who, as it were, exists out of time, in this dimension of eternity, maybe regarded, therefore, as reality itself in human form. The form is human but the substance, if you like, is reality itself.

And this is what is meant by saying that the Buddha is an Enlightened human being; the form is human, there is a human form, but there isn’t the ordinary conditioned human

mind. In the place, as it were, if we can use such an expression, in the place, as it were, of the conditioned human mind with all its prejudices and preconceptions and limitations, in the place of that there is reality itself, or the experience or the awareness of reality. Therefore we say that the Buddha, the Enlightened one is reality in human form, or symbolises, or represents that in human form.

...So what is meant when we say, in the words of the Dhammapada, that the Buddha cannot be tracked, he doesn't leave any trace, he is the pathless one. Just like the bird going through the sky, the bird doesn't leave any track in the sky, and if you try to track a bird by following its path in the sky, and looking for signs that it has left in the sky, then you would have your work cut out, as they say. So it is just the same with the Buddha, you can't track him, you can't trace him, because he belongs to a different dimension, the transcendental dimension, the dimension of eternity the same idea is expressed in the Sutta Nipāta, where the Buddha says, *'There is no measuring of man, won to the goal, whereby they'd say "His measure is so." - that's not for him. When all conditions are removed, all ways of telling are removed.'* When all psychological conditionings are removed in a person then you have no way of accounting for that person, and this is what the Buddha is like.

And the same sort of idea is expressed more abstractly in four out of the list of Fourteen Inexpressibles, as they are called. We won't go into all of these now but these four positions are; whether the Buddha existed, or would exist after death, or not, or both, or neither. And the Buddha was very often asked this. For some reason or another some of the ancient Indians had a real thing about this, and they often used to come to the Buddha and say, 'Please tell us, when you die, will you go on living or not, or both, or neither?' So the Buddha always used to repudiate all these four, and he would say, *'It is inappropriate, it is inapplicable to say of a Buddha that after death he will continue to exist. It is also inappropriate to say that after death he will cease to exist. It is inappropriate to say he will continue to exist and cease to exist. And it is inappropriate to say that he will neither continue to exist nor cease to exist. All these are quite inapplicable and quite inappropriate. Because,'* he goes on to say, *"Even during his lifetime, even when he sits there in a physical body the Tathāgata, the Buddha, is beyond all your classifications, beyond all your categories.'*

You can't say anything about him. The Buddha is the person about whom you can't say anything, because he doesn't have anything, he isn't anything in a sense. And this is why in the *Sutta Nipāta* again, there is an epithet of the Enlightened beings, *'akincana'*, which is usually translated as 'man of nought', one who has nothing because he is nothing, and therefore you can't say anything about him. Which is very tantalising for the human mind.

...We are not going into that now, however, but what we are concerned with and what is significant is that this all crystallized eventually, into a very important distinction, made with regard to the Buddha. And that is the distinction between what came to be called his *Rūpakāya*, his physical, phenomenal appearance, and his *Dharmakāya*, his true form, his essential form. *Rūpakāya* literally means form body, and *Dharmakāya* means body of

truth or body of reality. Rūpakāya is the Buddha as existing in time, Dharmakāya is the Buddha as existing out of time in the dimension of eternity, and it is the latter, the Dharmakāya that is the real body.

And this is clear, for instance, from the Buddha's admonition to Vakkali. There was a monk called Vakkali who was very, very devoted to the Buddha, so much so that he used to go about, he used to follow the Buddha around just looking at him. He was so fascinated by the appearance and the personality of the Buddha he just used to spend all his time just sitting and looking at the Buddha, or following him round and just looking at him. He didn't want any teaching, he didn't have any questions to ask, he just wanted to look at the Buddha. So one day the Buddha called him and he said, 'Vakkali, this physical body is not me. If you want to see me, see the Dharma, see the Dharmakāya, see my true form.' And we are told that Vakkali afterwards meditated upon this.

And the same point of view is found in two very famous verses of the *Diamond Sūtra*. One of the most important of all Buddhist texts, where the Buddha says to Subhuti, he says, '*Those who by my form did see me by my physical appearance, And those who followed me by voice, wrong the effort they engaged in, me those people will not see. From the Dharma should one see the Buddhas, from the Dharma bodies comes their guidance, yet Dharmas true nature cannot be discerned and no-one can be conscious of it as an object.*'

Most of us, like Vakkali, try to see the Buddha in, as it were, the wrong way. Not that we should ignore the Rūpakāya, the physical body, the form body, but we should take it as a symbol of the Dharmakāya, the true form and the true body, the Buddha as he is above and beyond time, in eternity as it were, in his ultimate essence.

But we must confess, we must admit, that the word 'Buddha' itself is very often a bit ambiguous. Sometimes when we say 'The Buddha', we mean the historical figure. For instance we say that the Buddha spoke Magadhi, well here obviously the Buddha means the historical figure, Gautama the Buddha. But sometimes we use the word Buddha to mean the transcendental reality, as when we say for instance, 'Look for the Buddha within yourself.' When we say look for the Buddha within yourself we don't mean just Gautama the Buddha, we don't just mean Siddhartha, we mean the eternal, the time transcending Buddha nature within ourselves.

...To briefly summarize the conclusions reached so far: Enlightenment, we may say, can be looked at from two points of view. It can be looked at from the point of view of time, from the point of eternity. It can be regarded as the culmination of the evolutionary process, a process that is carried on, a culmination that is reached through and by means of personal effort. But Enlightenment can also be regarded as being a sort of break through into a new dimension beyond time and beyond the evolutionary process. In the same way we can look at the Buddha in two ways, as Rūpakāya and the Dharmakāya; as included in history and also as transcending history.

And in the second case, when we regard the Buddha or Buddhahood as synonymous with Reality, as occupying the dimension of eternity, as transcending time, then the Buddha figure becomes a symbol of reality itself.

From, *The Buddha, God, and Reality*:

<http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=23>

Ask yourself the kinds of questions I've given below:

1. In what does the story of the Sūtra in these later chapters consist? How are its major themes, points and 'message' being conveyed? What is its overarching purpose, feel and character? How does it unfold? How does the form of the parable contribute to this?
2. How do these different incidents contribute, support and relate to the unfolding of the story of the Sūtra at this stage, its distinctive feel and quality?
3. Wherein lies the dramatic tension, oppositions, even conflict either between characters or within any particular characters? What values are being portrayed at variance? What resolutions, if any, are played out, or suggested? How is this portrayed?
4. What sort of world does the Sūtra portray? What does it convey about the characters involved? How do the characters and the world they inhabit interrelate?
5. Is the reader meant to simply 'observe' the story as something that happened to the key characters, or how are you drawn into the story so that it becomes your story as well?

Appendix: Unit 10 – The Parable of the Good Physician

This unit can be used simply as a way of concluding study of the Sūtra, with the ‘Parable of the Good Physician’ arguably repeating the message already conveyed earlier, albeit with a different twist. However as Sangharakshita makes clear in his lecture the Parable also embodies the archetype of the Healer, and thereby provides the occasion to pursue learning how to engage with archetypes even more consciously than hitherto. There are of course all sorts of ways in which this can be done.

One good start is to follow up the two sources below:

Listen to Sangharakshita’s audio-lecture *The Archetype of the Divine Healer*, and/or read Chapter Eight of the same title in Sangharakshita, *The Drama of Cosmic Enlightenment: Parables, Myths and Symbols of the White Lotus Sūtra*, Windhorse Publications, Glasgow, 1993.

Read ‘The Journey to Il Convento’ and ‘St. Jerome Revisited’ in Sangharakshita, *The Priceless Jewel*, Windhorse, Glasgow, 1993, pp.47-91, or listen to them at:

The Journey to Il Convento: <http://freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=163>

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

Here Sangharakshita sketches out his own understanding of the archetypal realm and gives us some insight into how he has personally worked with a particular archetype expressed in the figure of St. Jerome.

C. J. Jung’s *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (1963) is also a favourite starting point for many people.

<http://tinyurl.com/ykn2uma>

A good project topic could be to follow up any particular images within the Sūtra that have appealed to you strongly and unearth the archetypal dimensions of meaning being expressed to you through the images. This can only be ‘work-in-progress’ insofar as the archetypal is always an ongoing ‘unfolding’ of meaning, that is progressively discovered as we progress through life.