

Triratna Dharma Training Course for Mitras

Year Three

Module 7: Faith, Symbols and the Imagination

Introduction to the module

In this module of the Dharma Training Course we will be entering a very different world from the everyday realm of our commonsense ideas and our surface sensory experience of the world. We will be exploring the world of *śraddhā*, imagination, archetypal symbols, and myth – related topics that open up a deeper vision of reality, and a different approach to our search for truth and meaning. In the words of Sangharakshita:

“We may say that there are two kinds of truth. There's first of all what we call scientific truth – the truth of concepts, the truth of reasoning - but in addition to this, and some would say even above this, there is what we may call poetic truth, or truth of the imagination, and this is the truth of images, truth of the intuition. And both are at least equally important. And the second, the latter kind of truth, the truth of the image, the truth of poetry, truth of the imagination, the intuition, this is manifested or revealed in what we call myths and legends, as well as in works of art, in symbolic ritual, and also quite importantly, in dreams.”

A Guide to the Buddhist Path, p.40.

Approach

To enter this world of symbols, images, poetry and myth, and to hear the quiet voice of our *śraddhā*, we sometimes need to give our wordy, critical mind a holiday. We will sometimes be requiring our intellect to work hard in this module, but we are entering a world where language is strained to its limits. You need to approach everything that will be said in this module as metaphor, as allusion to something which cannot be fully explained or worked out with the intellect. You will be approaching this material in the wrong spirit if you take it literally, if you try to turn it into a metaphysical system, or if – having done either of these things – you use the wordy intellect to look for logical inconsistencies, rather than relying on your own actual experience. In this world, experience is king, and what is important is what you feel when you do a *pūjā*, hear a story, or quietly contemplate the image of a Buddha or Bodhisattva - and not what you think you logically should experience.

Much of this module will consist of practical exercises that you need to actually do, and not just think about or talk about. If you do not do the practices, but just read and

think about the words of the material, you will be missing the point. (Of course the whole spiritual life is like that.) In order to do the practices you are asked to take on in this module, you will need to read the material for each week with plenty of time to spare before the session, ideally giving yourself at least a week to think about what you are asked to think about, and to do what you are asked to do.

Structure of the module

The course is structured as follows:

- **Week 1 – ‘The life and qualities of the Buddha’:** discussion referring back to two texts from Year 1, plus an optional pūjā depending on time.
- **Week 2 – ‘Mindfulness of the Buddha and his qualities’:** a session based on experiential exercises done over the preceding week, plus an optional pūjā depending on time.
- **Week 3 – ‘The language of images’:** experiential exercises based on an image of Śākyamuni, plus presentations about images that have meaning to the members of the group.
- **Week 4 – ‘Śraddhā’:** discussion of a purpose-written text.
- **Week 5 – ‘Exploring lucid faith’:** a session based on experiential exercises done over the preceding week, plus pūjā with purpose-created offerings.
- **Week 6 – ‘The place of faith in the Buddhist tradition’:** discussion of a purpose-written text, plus ‘śraddhā-bhāvanā’ meditation.
- **Week 7 – ‘Imagination and the spiritual life’:** discussion of a purpose-written text.
- **Week 8 – ‘Imagination in practice, plus final pūjā’:** a session based on experiential practices done over the preceding week, plus final pūjā.
- **Optional Week 9 – Mythic context:** discussion of a purpose-written text which is included in the study leaders’ notes.

Week One – The Life and Qualities of the Buddha

We have already started to look at some of the topics we will be dealing with over the coming weeks in the first (foundation) year of this course, in sessions 5 and 6 of Part 1. These texts look at some archetypal elements in the life of the Buddha, and at how using our imagination to keep the figure of the Buddha present in our mind can have remarkable benefits for our spiritual life. The Buddha is the central image, symbol and archetype in Buddhism, and his life is its central myth, so the Buddha is the place we need to start our exploration. *Start this module by re-reading these two texts* from year 1 of the course, and then reflect on the following questions before the first week of the module.

Questions for reflection, discussion, and research

1. Write a list of the qualities of the historical Buddha that you most admire or would like to have yourself. If possible think of events in the life of the Buddha (for example in the Pāli Canon) that illustrate these qualities. (You could bring along some readings from the Pāli Canon or elsewhere where these events are described, to share with the group.)
2. Can you think of any other archetypal or mythic elements in the Buddha's life, apart from those described in the texts? What qualities of an Enlightened being do these illustrate? (Again you could bring along some readings to share if you want.)
3. Which aspects of the life of the Buddha have a personal meaning for you?

Before the first week you should also read the instructions for Week 2, to give yourself plenty of time to do the exercises you are asked to take on.

Week Two – Mindfulness of the Buddha and His Qualities

Introduction

Last week we reminded ourselves of the story of Piṅgiya in the Pāli Canon, and of the positive effects on our mental and emotional states of keeping the Buddha in mind. We also called to mind some of the positive qualities of the Buddha that we most admire and aspire to. Make mindfulness of the Buddha and his qualities a part of your practice for the coming week by doing the following exercises, and be prepared to tell your group about your experience.

Practices for the week

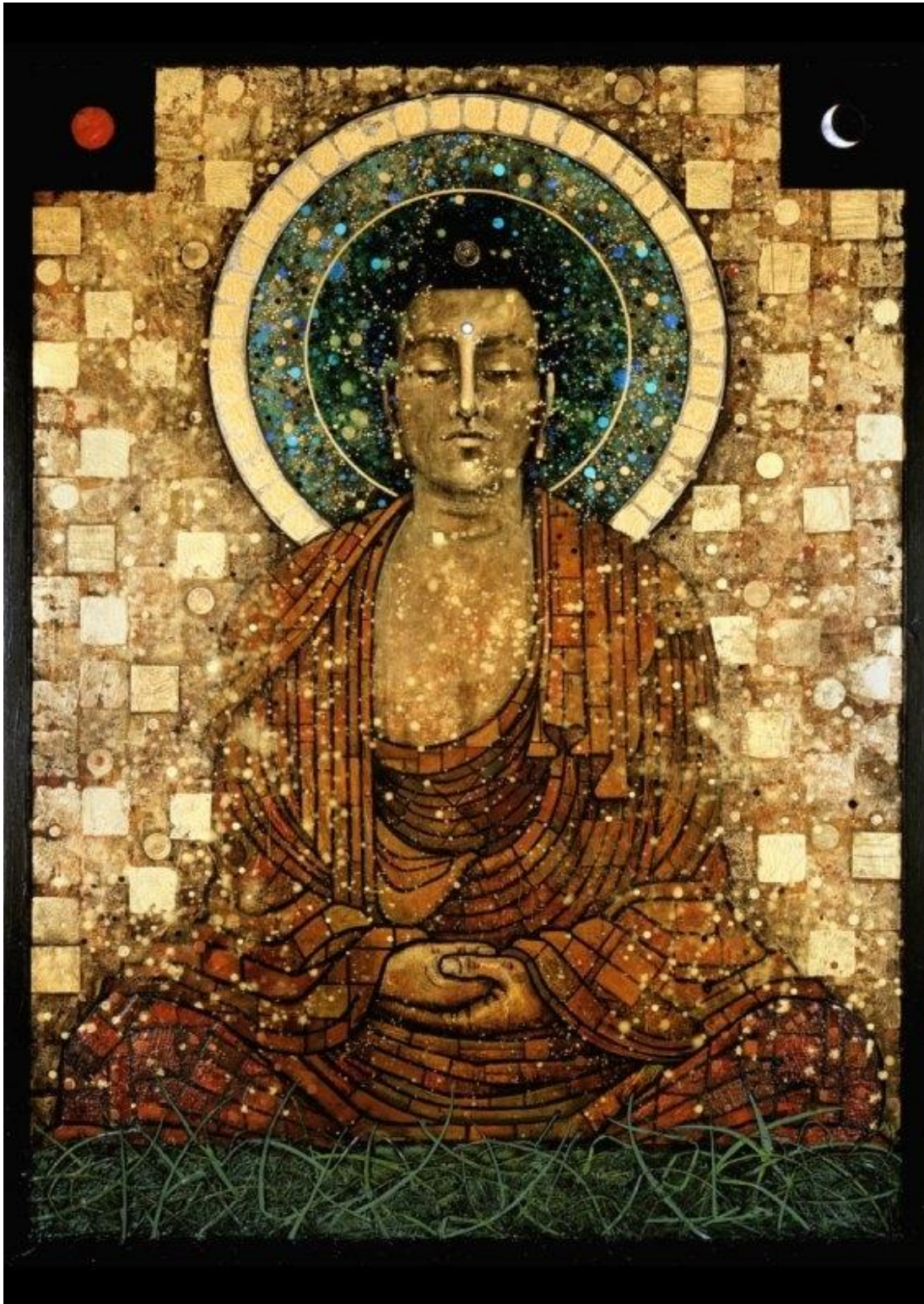
1. Use your imagination to keep the Buddha in mind as much as possible this week:
 - Begin each day by calling the Buddha to mind, and reminding yourself of the qualities you admire in him which you identified last week, maybe imagining incidents from the Buddha's life that illustrate these. Then chant the refuges and precepts, imagining that you are 'taking' the refuges from the Buddha, and undertaking to practice the precepts in loyalty to his teaching. There may also be some personal precepts that you wish to undertake.
 - Set some convenient times each day when you will take a few moments to call the Buddha to mind. (Obvious times are during breaks at work, before or after meals, and just before bed.) Use reminders to help you remember to do this – for example, keep a small image of the Buddha where you will see it, or leave post-it notes for yourself. Again, briefly connect with some of the qualities of the Buddha that you admire.
 - Whenever difficult or trying situations arise, call the Buddha to mind and imagine how he would have responded. Let his example affect you.
 - Tell your group about what you did and any effects you noticed. You may wish to share any personal precepts you took on.
2. Build a shrine to the historical Buddha. Take into account:
 - The qualities that you most admire in him, and how you can express these qualities with images, colour, form, objects, etc.
 - The teachings of the historical Buddha that mean most to you – you might want to place a text on the shrine, or copy out some verses.

- The way the Buddha's influence manifests here and now in your life; for example you might include a picture of a spiritual friend, a practitioner you look up to, or a place associated with the Buddhist tradition that has a positive effect on you.

You could build your shrine at home, in the country or other public place, or you could co-operate with a friend or friends to build a shrine at the Buddhist Centre. Note that the point here is to build a *new* shrine, as a way of exploring your feelings for the Buddha and his qualities, even if you feel happy with your existing shrine. If you do not yet have a personal shrine at home, this is an opportunity to create one.

Make a drawing or take a photo of your shrine, and bring it along next week. Be ready to tell the group about your shrine and what it means.

Week Three – The Language of Images



Introduction

Over the last two weeks we have been exploring the qualities of the Buddha, and the way we can bring an awareness of these qualities into our practice. To a large extent we have been using words in our attempt to get some idea of the nature of a Buddha, but words are not the only – or the best - way we can do this. Enlightenment is beyond the realm of words, and images can often give us a clearer glimpse of what it might be like than language could ever hope to do. But to open ourselves to this channel of communication we need to learn to speak the language of images, a language which for many of us was ignored in our formal education.

This week we will be getting some practice in using the language of images, starting by exploring an image of the Buddha as fully as we can. A good Buddha image is an attempt on the part of the artist to convey something of the nature of Enlightenment through the language of images. It is an attempt to communicate a state of being, not an attempt to portray a likeness of the Buddha's physical body.

Exercise 1

A digital version of an image of the Buddha is included as part of this session; this is a painting of Śākyamuni by Aloka, which is the centrepiece of the shrine at Padmaloka. Download this image and print it out in colour, in as high a definition as you can, and as large as you can – in A4 at the minimum. If this poses a problem for you, be sure to discuss this with your study leader and the other members of your group the week before this session. Someone in your group will be able to help you, and it may be that someone is able to print out a copy larger than A4.

We've included a version above. For the full quality image, please download:

http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/study/reference_materials/year3/Shakyamuni.zip

Then spend some time simply looking at this image - not thinking discursively *about* it, but allowing it to affect you on another level. Do this when you are free of all other input (i.e. not with the radio or TV on, while listening to music, or while talking.) If possible spend some time looking at it after you have meditated, when your mind is in a quiet receptive state. Devote a considerable amount of time to this over the coming week, allowing yourself to dwell on the image, and returning to it again and again. There is no set reading for this week, so this is a large part of your preparation – you are going to study a communication in the language of images rather than in the language of words, and you should be prepared to spend as long doing this as you would in studying a text. Of course you will want to reflect on the image and turn your conclusions into words, but try also to spend some time looking at the image without theorising about it or talking about it to yourself.

When you have steeped yourself in this image and reflected upon it, write down anything that occurs to you about it, and what it communicates to you. In particular make a note of what this image communicates to you about the nature of Enlightenment. *Bring your notes to the session, and be prepared to share them with the group.*

You will also be exploring this image in a more guided way with the help of your study leader during the session.

Please note that the image of Śākyamuni used in this session is copyrighted to Aloka, and is the property of Padmaloka Retreat Centre, who have granted permission for it to be used in this context. Outside of this context any copy made needs permission from Padmaloka.

You can purchase a copy of this and some other of Aloka's paintings from the Padmaloka website:

<http://www.padmaloaka.org.uk/resources/shop>

Exercise 2

Spend some time this week reflecting on any other images you have come across that communicate some aspect of spiritual truth to you, and choose one to talk about to the group. You may wish to focus on images of the Buddha in particular, but feel free to choose an image of another figure, or from another tradition, or an image (such as a painting) which has no formal spiritual connections. You may also wish to do some research, looking at books of Buddhist art, or art from other traditions, or exploring images on the internet.

Choose an image, and write down what it communicates to you, and how it does this. Bring a reproduction of the image to the session, and tell the group what it means to you.

Week Four – Śraddhā

Introduction

This week we are going to change gear. Until now our exploration of faith, symbols and the imagination has been largely through our own experience, rather than through thinking about them with the rational mind. But this week we will be studying a text about śraddhā, we will be thinking about śraddhā. There is a reason for this. In contemporary Western culture faith has been devalued to such an extent that many of us cannot open up to it without our conditioning getting in the way. So before we can fully use our faculty of faith, many of us first need to convince our rational intellects that this is a good idea, and not just a way of deluding ourselves. We need to use the tools of the rational mind to convince the rational mind that logic and reason are not the only ways we have of perceiving the truth, especially in the spiritual realm.

What gets in the way?

In contemporary Western culture faith has a bad name. There are a number of reasons for this, and if we can become aware of these we can begin to free ourselves from their effects, so that we no longer respond automatically to our conditioning. Below are some of the cultural factors that may cause us to see faith in a negative light – there may be others that you can think of.

Traditional Western religions

The Western theistic religions tend to mix up mythic truth with historical, factual truth. Myths can communicate important spiritual truths, and some Christian myths, such as the resurrection of Christ, do this – in this case the human potential for spiritual death and rebirth as a higher being. Other Christian myths, such as the creation of the world in seven days, seem to be just ways of explaining the unexplained. But in both cases Christianity has presented these myths as factual, historical truth, and religious faith has come to be associated with believing that these myths actually happened in the material world. Because such ‘faith’ involves blindly abandoning the rational thinking faculty, it has a justifiably bad name. For this reason many Buddhists prefer not to use the word ‘faith’, preferring the Sanskrit term *śraddhā* (Pāli *saddhā*), which does not have the same connotations of blind belief.

Hurry and excessive input

Śraddhā could be likened to a quiet voice that speaks from our depths, which we hear best when our mind is quiet. When we are distracted, anxious, over-stimulated, scattered, hurried, or in the grip of negative emotion, we are cut off from our depths, and cannot hear the voice of śraddhā. So we are most likely to experience śraddhā under conditions such as those we get on retreat, while the conditions of modern city

life encourage a speedy, scattered way of being in which any hint of śraddhā is usually drowned out by the superficial surface chatter of our minds. For this reason many people seldom have a strong experience of śraddhā, and it remains an undeveloped faculty in them.

Science and pseudo-science

The scientific method has proved itself an excellent way of finding out about the material world, and as a result many of us take its assumptions for granted, without really thinking about them.

One core assumption behind the scientific method is that the only valid way of knowing anything is through the evidence of our physical senses, whether directly or through some form of measuring instrument. Any conclusion reached without tangible evidence from the physical senses is seen as invalid. This makes for a rigorous approach to finding out about the material world, but unfortunately the same assumption is often applied to the spiritual field, where the object of interest – consciousness – lies in a different realm from the material, and very little about it can be perceived by the senses or measured. Ultimately we know spiritual truths by direct perception while in a heightened state of awareness, so ‘science’ often assumes that this way of knowing is not valid, or even that consciousness does not really exist, because it cannot be detected by the methods of science. Phenomena like śraddhā, Insight, or beauty, are then seen as mere fictions. This is a clear case of applying ideas that work well in one area to an area where they are not appropriate, but often we are not aware of this.

A second assumption behind the scientific method is that the experimenter must be emotionally neutral, and that if your emotional attitude affects the results of a trial it is not valid. But in the spiritual sphere this assumption breaks down completely, because we cannot know whether a spiritual practice works unless we are emotionally committed to it. In the case of meditation for example, the results depend on the mental state with which we engage in the practice, and an element of faith is essential for success. If we practice the Dharma with the sceptical, neutral attitude recommended by science we have not given it a fair chance.

Post-modern irony

We live in a world in which the very ideas of objective truth, beauty and value have been undermined, and in which it is unfashionable to take any ideals too seriously. The fashionable stance is one of ironic detachment, but this is essentially a cynical attitude which destroys our capacity for śraddhā, and prevents us from engaging creatively with life. If we want to get anywhere with the spiritual life we need to take cynicism, and wring its neck.

What is śraddhā?

According to Sangharakshita the word śraddhā derives from a root meaning ‘to place the heart upon.’ Śraddhā is our response to the values that we place our heart on, and to the symbols, teachings, and people that represent these values to us:

“...and this response, this heartfelt response when we come up against something higher, something beyond, some symbol of something higher, this response is what in Buddhism we call śraddhā, or faith...”

Lecture, ‘The Psychology of Spiritual Development’.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=41>

Our first glimmers of śraddhā may be a vague intimation of something mysterious, of something higher than ourselves as we currently are, along with an equally vague sense of awe and longing. In the words of Sangharakshita:

“...faith is inherent in any positive mental state; it doesn’t have to be faith in the Three Jewels as such. It can manifest as simply a vague but powerful inkling of something higher, a conviction that there is something more. Wordsworth describes this sort of feeling:

‘...a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.’ ”

Know your Mind, p.125.

Many of us have this sort of experience from time to time, but all too often it makes little difference to the way we live our lives. When śraddhā is more developed it becomes more specific, and begins to have a more powerful effect on our behaviour, until – if we are fortunate - it becomes the force that guides our actions and gives meaning to our lives. Sangharakshita again:

“...faith, we may say, is the response, the real living response of the whole being, and especially the emotional part of our being, to something, we may not be able to have a very clear idea of it conceptually, intellectually, but something which we intuitively perceive, which we feel, if you like, is greater, and higher, and nobler, and more sublime, and more worthwhile, of higher value than ourselves as we are now. Something to which we ought, as it were, to dedicate ourselves, if you like surrender ourselves. Something for the sake

of which we ought to live, even sacrifice ourselves to. So without faith in this sense, there's no spiritual life, there's no development.”

Lecture, 'The New Man Speaks'.

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=113>

So śraddhā is our response to the truths and ideals that we admire and love, that we wish to live by, and that we put at the centre of our lives when we are being true to what is highest in us. It is the faculty by which we perceive spiritual value and beauty, and are drawn towards them. It is:

“...the response of ...what is ultimate in us, to what is ultimate in the universe.”

Lecture, The Psychology of Spiritual Development.

“...the response of our total being”

“Now śraddhā... is not just belief, not believing something to be true. It's not even an emotional state. We may say that śraddhā... is the response of our total being.”

Lecture, The Psychology of Spiritual Development.

In this quote Sangharakshita makes it clear that śraddhā is not just an emotional response, nor is it just intellectual confidence that the Dharma is true and the practices work. Śraddhā is ‘the response of our total being’. So śraddhā involves all aspects of our being, including our thinking faculty, our emotions, and our will. These three aspects are explored in a traditional analysis of śraddhā that is discussed in Sangharakshita's book, *Know Your Mind*.

In this analysis śraddhā is defined as:

(1) Deep conviction, (2) lucidity, and (3) longing, for those things which (1) are real, (2) have value, and (3) are possible.

1. ‘*Deep conviction*’ about ‘*things which are real*’ implies knowing certain things to be true, so it involves the intellectual faculty. (Another translation says ‘deep understanding.’)
2. ‘*Lucidity*’ about ‘*things which have value*’ refers to our *emotional* response to ideals and values; when our heart response to spiritual values gives us a deep sense of what really matters to us, this produces a state of serenity and clarity, without conflict or indecision, which is described as a lucid mind.

3. *‘Longing’ for things that ‘are possible’* implies a strong desire to move towards spiritual qualities that we can see in others, or sense are possible in ourselves; this is the volitional aspect of faith, which makes us want to grow, evolve, and live by our ideals.

We will look at each of these aspects of faith, as a way of exploring the multi-dimensional nature of śraddhā.

Confident Faith (*abhisampratyaya śraddhā*) – knowing about Truths

“Profound conviction about, and understanding of, truths and principles.”

Confident faith – which Sangharakshita translates as ‘trusting faith’ in *Know Your Mind* – is the cognitive, knowing, ‘head’ aspect of śraddhā. It is the sort of faith that leads us to have a deep sense of rightness and importance when we come across certain Dharma teachings. We *know* that a teaching is right and important, and we may have a sense that we have somehow always known it. This usually includes a rational assessment that the words make sense at the intellectual level, but it can also go beyond this, and include an intuitive response that is deeper than logic. We may even have this response to teachings we don’t fully understand – many people have something of this response when they first hear the *Heart Sutra* in a pūjā.

At the most down-to earth level, confident faith simply involves knowing that the teachings make sense, that they seem to be true in our experience, and that the practices work. For example we may understand that the law of karma makes sense, that the way we act must shape our character and our future experience, and we may have seen this in operation in our own lives and those of others. We may understand clearly that the Three Lakṣaṇas say something true and important about the things and people we come into contact with in our life. We may know that the mindfulness of breathing and the mettā bhāvāna improve our mental states, because we have experienced this as a fact.

Clear thinking about truths such as these is an important aspect of śraddhā, which keeps our faith grounded in reason and reality. Without this we are likely to be wide open to all sorts of deluded ideas and false paths, simply because we like the sound of them, or from wishful thinking – a point we will return to later in this session.

Lucid Faith (*cetasah prasāda śraddhā*) – feeling for qualities or values

“Intense fondness for all the pure qualities of the Three Jewels. Its special activity consists in... loving that which is good.”

Lucid faith is the feeling, ‘heart’ aspect of śraddhā – it involves ‘intense fondness’. It is our emotional response of love and admiration for positive values, and for positive

qualities in people and other more spiritually developed beings. This aspect of śraddhā might logically be called ‘admiring faith’, but the Sanskrit prasāda means lucid, serene, pure, happy, and bright; so *cetasah prasāda śraddhā* literally means something like ‘the faith which gives a lucid, serene, bright mind’, and is usually translated as lucid faith.

Faith is said to have, “The essential nature of the purification of the mind... It dispels mental defilements, and makes the mind clear.” It is traditionally likened to the mythical water-purifying gem, which instantly makes muddy water clear and sparkling, because as soon as lucid faith arises in our mind it has the same effect, dispelling all dirt and murkiness. When we love and admire spiritual ideals and positive qualities, or when we feel love and devotion for those who embody these ideals and qualities, the dirt of defiled mental states cannot stay in our mind, and we see how we should live and act with crystal clarity. We are no longer plagued by doubt, or by the anxiety that comes from uncertainty, so that our mind becomes serene, happy and bright.

Lucid faith could be described as our response to spiritual beauty – the beauty of higher values, and beauty of character in people or higher beings. It is strongly related to the aesthetic sense by which we perceive beauty in art, music and nature – some would say that they are different aspects of the same faculty.

- Both faculties have elements that are beyond the scope of our logical, reasoning mind. We cannot fully explain in words why something is beautiful. We just *know* beauty, by direct perception. Likewise we cannot fully explain in words why mettā is beautiful, and hatred is ugly, independent of any social utility these two states may have. (A Darwinist or a Marxist might both argue that hatred is necessary and socially useful.) We just know, by direct perception, in the same way that we know that grass is green.
- Both faculties are stronger when we are in a positive state. We can go for a walk in beautiful countryside when we are distracted, scattered, or in the grip of negative emotions, and be completely blind to the beauty around us; whereas on another day, when we are in a good state, we might be delighted and uplifted by the same scene. Śraddhā is just the same – when we are in a good state we experience it far more strongly than when we are scattered or distracted. (Of course śraddhā arises on the basis of suffering, but while we are actually suffering because of negative mental states we seldom experience it strongly.)
- Both faculties can be developed by practice. If we are not used to looking at paintings, listening to music, or experiencing the beauty of nature, we may find these activities difficult at first. We may not know how to look, listen or concentrate in an appropriate way, and our tastes may tend towards the coarse,

the conventional, or the sentimental. With more practice we learn the art of seeing beauty, and our judgement becomes more refined and accurate. Śraddhā is just the same – with more practice we become more skilled in perceiving spiritual beauty, and our faculty of śraddhā becomes a more accurate instrument for detecting spiritual truth.

Sangharakshita has called lucid faith a ‘lifting of the heart’. In the same way that compassion is what happens when mettā encounters suffering, lucid faith begins when mettā encounters something higher than ourselves as we currently are. There is a lifting of the heart, which can have elements not only of love and admiration, but also of delight, devotion, wonder, and awe.

To experience this aspect of faith strongly can be like falling in love with the ideal, or being bedazzled by spiritual ‘glamour’. But as with the worldly experience of being in love, we cannot expect to feel this lifting of the heart all the time, and to be faithful to it we must often live by the memory of the experience. If we find it difficult to do this, it is likely that what we experience is not really śraddhā. As Sangharakshita has pointed out, the heart response of lucid faith is easily confused with mere pleasure. We may have a cheap counterfeit version of faith in something or someone simply because it makes us feel good, or panders to our wishful thinking. People will often say, “I like that idea,” as though their liking it made it true, and therefore worthy of faith. We might like a spiritual theory because it flatters us about our spiritual level, because it is exotic, or because it promises results with no effort, and no change in our lives. Or we might just like the warm glow of devotional feeling we get when we do a pūjā or chant a mantra. The acid test comes when we start to put our faith into action, and to guide our lives by it. In Sangharakshita’s words:

“The test of faith is whether one is able to act on it in the absence of any kind of gratification whatsoever, any kind of pleasurable feeling or emotion associated with the object of one’s faith.”

Know Your Mind, p.122.

In other words, the test of faith is whether it affects our actions by involving our will – the aspect of ‘longing faith’, which we will discuss next.

Longing Faith (*abhilasa śraddhā*) – willing a positive future into existence

“The profound desire and aspiration to attain and realise what is good, and the confidence in one’s ability to do so.”

Longing faith is the volitional, ‘gut’ aspect of śraddhā, the aspect which is to do with the will. It has two elements. The first is our desire and longing to move towards the qualities we admire, to close the gap between ourselves and our ideals, to have closer

communication with the beings we admire, and to become more like what we have the potential to be. The second aspect is confidence that we can actually do this.

Both of these elements are necessary. If we just admired and longed for the spiritual ideal from a distance, but saw it as something so sublime and profound as to be beyond us, this would not do us much good. (Many people make little progress in the spiritual life because they don't really believe they can.) On the other hand there is a sort of arrogant confidence that has no trouble thinking it can attain the ideal, because it brings the ideal down to its own level. This sort of arrogant attitude involves no recognition that the spiritual ideal is vast, mysterious, sublime and profound - way ahead of where we are now - so it brings no sense of longing for something quite beyond the present self. In contrast, true longing faith both acknowledges the distance between us and the ideal, opening the way for a devotional response, and also acknowledges our connection with the ideal, which means that it is not alien to us, and we can become more and more like it.

The practical outcome of longing faith is to actually do something – to commit to the path, to take some risks, to act, to practice. In the words of Edward Conze:

“It combines the steadfast resolution that one will do a thing with the self-confidence that one can do it...The opposites of this aspect of faith are timidity, cowardice, fear, wavering, and a shabby, mean and calculating mentality. Faith is closely connected with determination, which consists in acting with resolute confidence, after one has judged, decided, and definitely and unshakeably chosen an object, and is opposed to slinking along like an irresolute child who thinks, ‘Shall I do it, shall I not do it?’ ”

Buddhist Thought in India, p.48.

This aspect of faith is the way we bring positive futures into existence, by somehow sensing that they are ‘trying to happen’, and then burning our bridges, and committing ourselves to making this future a reality. We need this sort of faith to create anything significant – a work of art, a friendship, a new project, a Sangha – or an Enlightened being.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Before you came into contact with the Dharma, what did you connect with the word ‘faith’? Did you see it as something positive or negative? What conditioned your reaction?
2. Do you remember any experience of ‘confident faith’ when you first came across the teachings of the Dharma? Can you describe what this felt like? Have you forgotten it?

3. Think of a Buddhist teaching that you are confident is true. Be ready to tell the group why you have this sense of certainty.
4. What quality of the Enlightened Mind do you particularly admire and resonate with at the moment – serenity, mettā, compassion, generosity, integrity, energy, courage, creativity, freedom, wisdom, or whatever? Are there any figures in the Buddhist tradition which particularly embody this quality for you?
5. What do you long for – if all practical constraints were removed, how would you most like to live? Can you relate your longing to some aspect of the goal of the spiritual life?
6. Do you see the goal as something sublime and mysterious, or do you tend to bring Enlightenment down to where you are now? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches?
7. How does your śraddhā make your life different from that of a non-Buddhist?
8. Do you think the three aspects of faith discussed in the text are completely separate? How are they connected?
9. Which aspect of faith are you strongest in? Which do you find most difficult?

Next week's session involves some exercises that you need to think about well before the session. So please also read the next section before Week 4 of the module.

Week Five – Exploring Lucid Faith

This week will involve a sevenfold pūjā as the culmination of a week of practical exploration of the qualities of a figure in the Buddhist tradition. We have already discussed our feeling for the qualities of the historical Buddha in some detail, so you will probably want to choose a different figure to focus on this week. This exercise is most suited to the exploration of our response to archetypal figures. (Incidentally, Padmasambhava definitely counts as one of these.) If you do not relate to any of these figures, this exercise may help you to do so. If you really think this is a lost cause, then you might be best to return to the historical Buddha for inspiration, at the risk of some repetition.

Exercises

Think of a figure from the Buddhist tradition that has a strong appeal for you, and in the coming week:

1. Find out more or refresh your memory about the figure.
2. Look for images of your chosen figure. Spend some time looking at an image, and reflect on what it communicates to you. Note what is communicated by the facial expression, the body language, and the other attributes of the figure.
3. Explore the colour associated with the figure, and the effect it has on your feelings.
4. Keep an eye out in the world around you this week for anything that evokes the figure for you or might be connected with it in any way. Notice the colour associated with the figure in the environment, and look for the objects associated with it, like swords and Dharma books for Mañjuḥśa, jewels for Avalokiteśvara, and so on. Notice your response.
5. Be prepared to tell the group about your figure and your experience of exploring its significance over the past week. Do not assume that others already know about the figure, but explain its features and main qualities, at least briefly, as well as focusing on what has a special significance for you. Bring at least one image of the figure to illustrate your presentation. (According to the number of people in your group, the leader may need to suggest an upper time limit for these presentations, but you should aim to talk for a minimum of 5 minutes, and probably more.)
6. Make, write, paint, compose, or find something to give as an offering to your chosen figure in the pūjā.

Week Six – The Place of Faith in the Buddhist tradition

Introduction

This week we will be returning to the language of words and concepts once more to explore the role of faith in the Buddhist tradition. Western Buddhists often underestimate the importance of faith in the Buddhist path, and while it is true that Buddhism does not recommend the sort of blind belief demanded by Christianity and Islam, even a quick look at the reality of the tradition makes it clear that faith has always been seen as having an essential role. The lack of importance given to faith by some Western Buddhists seems to owe more to conditioning by our sceptical culture than it does to the Dharma. And if we allow ourselves to be misled into thinking that this represents the real attitude of practitioners down the ages, then we are likely to take a serious wrong turn, into a dead end on the spiritual path – so it is well worth spending some time on a quick review of the place of faith in some of the main strands of Buddhism from the past, and of its place in our practice in the present.

Faith in Pāli Buddhism

In Pāli Buddhism faith is one of the Five Spiritual Faculties that are essential for progress on the path. So it is seen as a crucial quality, absolutely necessary for the spiritual life, and on an equal footing with the other spiritual faculties such as meditation and wisdom. Sometimes modern Theravādin texts translate saddhā as ‘confidence’, but the Pāli Canon makes it clear that saddhā means much more than just confident faith, and can even be a path to liberation in its own right.

Those who would like to see the Buddha as recommending an attitude of scepticism rather than faith often cite the *Kalama Sutta* as evidence for their point of view. In this discourse the people of the Kalama clan come to see the Buddha because they are confused by the many competing spiritual teachers and teachings they have heard. The Buddha tells them not to base their judgment on tradition, popularity, prestige, charisma, or even logicity, but to assess each teaching on the basis of their own experience of what is beneficial, and on the opinion of the wise. The Buddha here is telling the Kalamas how to decide between different teachers and teachings; he is not telling them how to practice when they have chosen a teacher and path. In his advice to his own disciples the Buddha does not recommend an attitude of constant questioning of the teachings and practices, and instead recommends that they trust in his vision and experience. If we regard ourselves as disciples of the Buddha rather than as confused ‘seekers’, then the advice given to the Kalamas is not aimed at people like us, and we would do better to focus on the teachings that the Buddha gave to his committed followers.

Faith and the Spiral Path

In the teaching of the Spiral Path – one of the key features of Sangharakshita’s presentation of the Dharma – faith is the first essential step on the path, and the crucial gateway from the Wheel to the Spiral. In this formulation of the spiritual path the crucial factor that decides whether we make progress, or just circle around the Wheel of Life, is the way we respond to *duḥkha* – suffering or ‘unsatisfactoriness’. In our undeveloped state there is an inescapable element of *duḥkha* in our experience. Usually we try to distract ourselves from this by seeking sensory pleasures, entertainment, and so on. But if, instead of craving to be distracted from our state, we respond with faith that there is something higher and more fulfilling than our present state that we can access by practicing the Dharma, we can step off the Wheel, and onto the Spiral Path. Instead of hiding from *duḥkha*, we turn and face it. Instead of dulling our awareness to escape from reality, we sharpen it, and use this heightened mindfulness to cultivate better and more positive states, and knowledge of a higher reality.

Sangharakshita describes the place of faith on the spiral path in more general terms in the following passage:

“Now faith... is the ethically wholesome counterpart of *trṣṇā*, craving or thirst. In dependence upon *vedanā*, feeling, in this case of the unsatisfactoriness of the world, there arises not thirst, not craving, but faith – faith in something above, beyond, the world, higher than the world. In dependence upon *duḥkha*, one's experience of the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned existence, of one's ordinary life, there arises *śraddhā*, confidence or faith, in the sense of sensitivity to, if you like even belief in, awareness of, a whole higher dimension of truth and reality - that is to say, the spiritual. One has reacted not in a cyclical order, but... in a progressive order. And the spiral of the spiritual life has begun to unwind...

And then secondly, dependent upon Faith arises Joy... Our hearts have... been lifted up to something higher, have touched something higher, have experienced, even if only for a moment, something higher.”

Lecture, Stages of the Spiritual Path

<http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=28>

Although faith is presented as the first stage of the Spiral Path, this does not mean that it is a preliminary, elementary practice, to be left behind when we get to the more advanced stages. Rather faith is the essential foundation which is needed for all higher states of mind, and which must be there all the time as an aspect of these higher states. In Sangharakshita’s words:

“Faith is inherent in any positive mental state.”

Know Your Mind, p.125

And:

“Faith is the indispensable emotional element of any experience of insight into the nature of reality.”

Ibid, p.123

Faith and Stream Entry

In Pāli Buddhism one of the important landmarks on the spiritual path is seen as ‘Stream Entry’, the point at which we become irreversibly bound for Enlightenment. Stream entry is achieved when we break the first three of the ten fetters that currently bind us. These three fetters are:

1. Self-view, in the sense of our perception of ourselves as a fixed, separate, unchanging entity.
2. Doubt and indecision, in the sense of an unwillingness to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to the spiritual path.
3. Attachment to rites and rituals, which Sangharakshita explains as the sort of superficiality that is happy to just go through the motions of the spiritual life, without really tackling our fundamental problem.

Insight into non-selfhood breaks the first of these fetters, self-view, while faith breaks the second, doubt. But Sangharakshita has made it clear that if we break any of these fetters it is equivalent to breaking all of them – they are three aspects of the same thing. So if we break the fetter of doubt we also break the fetter of self-view. This implies that if we develop our faith to a certain point it becomes Insight, and that cultivating our śraddhā can be a path in its own right, that can lead us to the highest goal.

The Path of Faith in the Pāli Canon

This idea that cultivating faith can be a path in its own rite is confirmed in the passage about Piṅgiya in the *Sutta Nipāta*, which we re-read at the beginning of this module. In this passage the Buddha tells Piṅgiya that his faith will take him all the way to Enlightenment:

“Piṅgiya, other people have been freed by the power of saddhā. Vakkali, Bhadravudha and Alavi-Gotama have all done this. You too should let this power release you; you too will go to the other shore, beyond the reach of death.”

To which Piṅgiya replies:

“Yes, I shall go there. I shall go beyond change, I shall go beyond formations; I shall go beyond comparison. There are no more doubts. You may consider this as mind released.”

Sutta Nipāta, 5.16

Faith in later Buddhism

As with many other features of the ‘basic Buddhism’ of the Pāli Canon, the idea that fully developed faith is equivalent to Insight, and that cultivating faith is a path that can lead us to the highest goal is taken up, developed, and expanded by the Mahāyāna, until it becomes the basis for long and involved scriptures, and the foundation for whole schools of practice.

‘Mainstream’ Mahāyāna

In Chapter 2 of the *White Lotus Sutra*, one of the earliest Mahāyāna scriptures, the Buddha shocks his more literalistic followers by telling them that all his teachings are only skilful means, adapted to beings’ present level of understanding, and designed to help them according to their present state of development. He then goes on to say that none of his teachings can be taken as absolute truth, which is beyond the comprehension of anyone but an Enlightened Being, and that the closest we non-Enlightened beings can get to understanding the Insight of a Buddha is through the faculty of faith:

“The meaning of every nature and form, I and other buddhas in the universe alone can understand these things. This Truth is inexpressible, it is beyond the realm of words; among all living beings none can apprehend it, except the bodhisattvas, who are firm in the power of faith.”

In other words, short of Enlightenment it is only those who are ‘firm in the power of faith’ who can experience a glimpse of the incomprehensible vision of a Buddha, through the heart connection that śraddhā gives them to the higher realm from which the Dharma emanates.

The idea that faith is the whole basis of the path and the most valuable of spiritual qualities is also expressed in many other Mahāyāna scriptures, such as this passage from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

Faith can joyfully enter the Buddha's teaching;
Faith can increase knowledge and virtue;
Faith can ensure arrival at enlightenment...
Faith is the unspoiled seed of virtue,
Faith can grow the seed of enlightenment.
Faith can increase supreme knowledge,
Faith can reveal all Buddhas...
Faith is most powerful, very difficult to have;
It's like in all worlds having
the wondrous wish-fulfilling pearl.

Pure Land Buddhism

Of all forms of Buddhism it is in the Pure Land schools of China and Japan that faith is given most importance. The more mainstream of these schools use the widespread Buddhist practice of meditating on a Buddha, and keeping a Buddha in mind as much as possible, as a way of developing the qualities of a Buddha in oneself. So the form of practice they recommend has much in common with the way Piṅgiya practiced, and with the way you have been getting more experience of practicing during this module.

However some later forms of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism exalt reliance on the archetypal Buddha Amitābha to such an extent that they even frown on meditation, or any other type of formal practice except repeating the name of Amitābha, on the grounds that to do anything by 'self-power' is to doubt the 'other-power' of Amitābha. This is perhaps not quite as silly as it sounds – Sangharakshita has pointed out that the complete trust in the saving power of the Absolute as embodied in Amitābha that this type of practice aims at is equivalent to egolessness and Insight. But he also stresses that by discouraging all practices based on so-called self-power, for the vast majority of people this extreme type of Pure Land Buddhism runs a great risk of encouraging complacency, laziness, lack of effort, and ethical laxity; so that in this case perhaps the reliance on faith alone goes too far and becomes too one-sided.

Vajrayāna Buddhism

The Tantric Buddhism of the Vajrayāna makes great use of visualisation and mantras as ways to connect with archetypal Buddha forms, and to keep them in mind as vividly as possible. In this sense Vajrayāna practice is just an extension of Piṅgiya's practice of mindfulness of the Buddha, although at a more archetypal, ritual, and even magical level, which is aided by mantras and elaborate visualisations. As with Piṅgiya's practice it is based on faith and devotion to the Buddha, who in this case is represented by the yidam, the personal deity, who symbolises some aspects of the qualities of the Enlightened Mind.

Śraddhā and Insight

One of the themes to emerge from this brief summary of the place of faith in the Buddhist tradition is the relationship between śraddhā and Insight. Śraddhā is not only an essential aspect of any experience of Insight, it is our connection to the higher realm from which the Dharma emanates, so that our śraddhā is a precursor of Insight, or the form that Insight takes at our present stage of development. It follows from this that we could make the main aim of our practice to cultivate faith, rather than trying to approach Insight directly.

For many people this will be an unfamiliar way of looking at the Dharma. Many Buddhists in the West see the ultimate goal of the spiritual life almost exclusively in terms of Insight, and seldom think of it in terms of śraddhā. We tend to think of faith as something quite different from Insight, and far less 'advanced'. But in fact śraddhā and Insight are not so very different, as the following points may make clear:

- Insight is not just about 'knowing', and it is not achieved by the rational mind alone. Insight is trans-rational – it is a vision that springs from a highly developed intuition, and it involves the emotions and the will as well as the cognitive faculty. As we have seen, śraddhā also has these three elements – it involves the head, the heart, and the will.
- Śraddhā is not just a feeling – it involves a strong element of knowing. The aspect of śraddhā we have called confident faith involves knowing the truth of the Dharma, while lucid faith is a sort of heart-knowledge that certain values and qualities are beautiful, and therefore 'true', and in accord with reality in a different but no less important way.

Perhaps the main difference between śraddhā and Insight is one of degree – full Insight is śraddhā taken to a new level, and it springs from a unification of our faculties, so that we no longer experience a split between what we think, feel and will – the three aspects of śraddhā have become fused into one indivisible faculty, and our reason is united with the deeper levels of our being.

We have seen that many strands of the Buddhist tradition see the main aim of practice as cultivating śraddhā rather than Insight. This approach has some obvious advantages for Western practitioners, with our frequent tendency to individualism and one-sided rationalism. For example:

- Śraddhā very obviously involves the emotions and the will, as well as the intellect. Seeing practice in this way therefore reduces the danger that we will see the goal in purely cognitive terms, or imagine we have reached it when in fact we have just understood the teachings at an intellectual level – a real danger for us western practitioners.
- Śraddhā is a relational quality – it focuses on something outside ourselves. This reduces the danger that we will see the spiritual life in an individualistic way, and appropriate any attainment, thinking of it as *my* attainment. If we do think in this way there is a real danger that the spiritual life, far from allowing us to transcend our limited selfhood, traps us more deeply in individualism and arrogance.
- Because śraddhā is obviously a multidimensional quality, thinking of our practice in terms of śraddhā makes it more obvious that the spiritual life involves working on a broad front, which might include friendship, working with others, serving the Sangha, and so on – and not just meditation or reflection in solitude, valuable as this is in its place.

Cultivating śraddhā

Luckily there is no real conflict between a spiritual life that takes Insight as its goal and one that aims at cultivating śraddhā – the difference is mainly one of attitude and emphasis. The practices that develop the one are largely the same as those that develop the other – which is not surprising, given that the two are so closely related.

Clearly there are some practices – pūjā is the obvious example – that cultivate śraddhā in a direct way. But there are other practices which we probably do not think of in terms of śraddhā which have the same effect. For example we may think that we go on retreat, live a simple life for a while, and spend our time in meditation in order to develop a clear, focused, positive mind, which will eventually be able to experience Insight into the nature of reality. But a clear, focused, positive mind is also precisely what will allow us to experience śraddhā, and these are precisely the circumstances in which we will begin to experience śraddhā more strongly. As was pointed out earlier, śraddhā is like a small voice from our depths (or from the heights, depending on your preferred metaphor). This voice is drowned out by too much distraction and surface chatter, it cannot be heard when we are scattered or in the grip of negative emotions, and it is clearest when we are in a positive, calm, focused state. Retreat conditions

and the practice of meditation are excellent ways of developing śraddhā. We may meditate to move towards Insight, but find that what actually happens is that we experience a strengthening of our śraddhā. This śraddhā will in fact be the way that we get a deeper sense of the nature of reality – it will be the equivalent of Insight, at our level.

To take another example, we probably think mainly of Dharma study as a way to cultivate wisdom. But clearly studying the Dharma is an important way of cultivating confident faith – if we do not know the Dharma we can hardly have confidence in it. And the role of study in cultivating śraddhā goes beyond this - it can also help us to develop both lucid faith and longing faith. When we study a Dharma text that has its origin in the mind of someone more advanced than ourselves, we in a sense enter a higher realm. We dwell for a while in the mind of someone who lives on a higher plane than ourselves, and experience the beauty and mystery of this higher realm. So when we study a Dharma text like, for example, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, we do not just acquire knowledge about the Dharma, we also get a feel for the beauty of higher states, we deepen our admiration for higher qualities, and we strengthen our emotional connection with the higher realms of experience from which the Dharma emanates. Such study therefore nurtures lucid faith, and is likely to deepen our longing faith.

Of course as we have said there are specific practices that are obviously directed to the development of śraddhā, such as pūjā, as well as the visualisation practices undertaken by Order members. If we see the main goal of our spiritual life as the development of faith, we will give an important place to such practices. On the other hand if we see our practice in terms of a narrow understanding of Insight we are likely to miss the point of practices such as pūjā and sādhana, and our spiritual life is likely to remain on a superficial, one-sidedly rational level.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Which of the five spiritual faculties do you think is most important? Why?
2. What do you see as the main goal of your practice – Insight, or some other quality?
3. How would your practice be different if you saw it as mainly aimed at cultivating śraddhā?
4. What do you think is the relationship between śraddhā and Insight?
5. Which practices and conditions most increase your śraddhā? How could you make these a bigger part of your spiritual life?

As well as discussing these questions arising from the text, this week you will also be led through a meditation practice aimed at cultivating śraddhā, which is based on the threefold classification of the aspects of śraddhā that we discussed in the session before last. The instructions for this are given below, but you may want to wait until you are led through the practice before you experiment with it. If you don't remember the three aspects of śraddhā clearly, you need to refresh your memory before doing the practice.

A śraddhā bhāvanā

Stage 1

Begin the practice with a short period of the *mettā bhāvanā* or mindfulness of breathing, whichever you feel makes you most receptive to the voice of śraddhā.

Stage 2

Call to mind the Buddha or another figure from the Buddhist tradition that you have a feeling for – this may well be the figure you chose to explore for last week. See the figure as clearly as you can, and/or feel their presence.

Become aware of what you most admire and love about this being. See it in their eyes. See it in their face. See it in their body language. Hear it in their voice. Feel it in their presence.

Rest your attention on your love and admiration for this quality, in the same way that you rest your attention on mettā in the mettā bhāvanā, allowing it to grow and pervade your being. Allow yourself to rejoice and delight in this quality.

Stage 3

Without letting go of the figure you imagined in the last stage, think of a Dharma teaching that you have confident faith in. Reflect on this teaching, and on why you know it to be true. Sit with your sense of confidence in this teaching. Allow it to grow into a confidence that the Dharma works, and that you can unfailingly evolve beyond your present self by practicing it.

Stage 4

Call the figure you imagined in Stage 2 back to mind. Sharpen up your image of them, and your sense of their presence, and once more become aware of what it is about them that you most love and admire. Become aware of your longing to move towards this figure, to experience more of this quality, and to express it yourself. Try

to imagine what it would be like to have this quality yourself, and how wonderful this would be. Sit with your longing, your aspiration.

Reconnect with your confident faith that the Dharma works, that you can evolve by practicing it. Bring this confidence together with your longing and aspiration. Imagine how wonderful the future will be when you embody this quality yourself. At the end of the meditation, ask yourself what you can do now to bring this future about.

Week Seven – Imagination and the Spiritual Life

Imagination is necessary for the spiritual life

Imagination, like faith, is a faculty that is often undervalued by Buddhists in the West. However Sangharakshita has stressed that imagination is crucial part of the spiritual life, because it is closely related to śraddhā, it allows us to escape from the prison of our immediate experience, it gives us access to higher states of meditation, and it is an indispensable component of Insight into the nature of reality.

We all have a strong imagination

People who find it difficult to relate to symbol and myth often say they do not have a good imagination. But we all have an excellent imagination. We are highly skilled at imagining the objects of our craving, in sexual fantasies, or when creating alluring images of the things we desire, such as food or other sensory pleasures, or possessions we would like to own, ranging from the latest gadgets and designer clothes to beautiful and expensive houses, according to our taste and situation. We are also skilled at creating images of what we dislike, hate, or fear. We imagine scenes that make us resentful, envious or jealous. And many of us play endless film clips in our heads of all the terrible things that might happen in the future, and experience a great deal of unnecessary anxiety as a result.

Our problem is not that we lack imagination, it is that we use our imagination in ways that are linked to our worldly cravings and anxieties, rather than to anything more refined and elevated. The way we use our imagination is related to what matters to us, and all too often what really matters to us is quite mundane. This means that our imagination remains trapped in the lower realms, rather than becoming a vehicle that can transport us to higher dimensions of being. The task of raising our imagination to a higher level is therefore an integral part of the task of raising our level of being. Gradually learning to focus our imagination on more refined, subtle and beautiful objects is an essential part of the spiritual life. In the rest of this session we will look at a number of ways we can use the imagination to help our spiritual progress, culminating in a discussion of what Sangharakshita has called the ‘Imaginal Faculty’, the faculty which allows us to enter the higher visionary levels of experience, and to perceive truths that are beyond the realm of space and time.

Imagination and the boundaries of our being

Without imagination, our limited experience of the world is all that there is for us. We have no way of experiencing anything except what the chance occurrences of our life have sent our way. There is a well-known parable about a frog who lives in a well, and another who lives in the ocean. The ocean frog visits the well frog, and describes the ocean to him, saying that it is vast in all directions, that its colour varies from

bright blue to almost black, that it is sometimes whipped into terrifying storms, and that all sorts of strange creatures live in it. The well frog – who stands for the person who does not use their imagination, and thinks that what they have experienced themselves is all that there is – does not believe a word of it.

Imagination is a faculty by which we can have experiences that the chance accidents of our life have not given us, and which can therefore expand the boundaries of our being. We may not be the ocean frog – yet – but we can use our imagination to get a glimpse of states of being that are far beyond our present experience, and so avoid being quite as stupid as the well frog in the story.

The uses of fiction

One way in which imagination can extend our boundaries is by allowing us to engage with characters in novels and plays, vicariously extending the breadth of our experience of the world. By using the imagination in this way we can experience what it is like to be someone from a different culture, of a different gender, living in a different age, facing quite different experiences to the ones we face in our daily life.

Imagination and empathy

“We can also apply the same principle to developing empathy for the real people we come across in our daily life, particularly our spiritual friends. If we do not use our imagination to get some sense of what they are experiencing, we will have no real sense of them as living human beings with their own desires and fears, and their own inner world which is just as vivid as our own. They will seem like cardboard cut-outs to us, and we will not relate to them with the respect we owe to beings who are just as deep, and real, and important as we are. Using our imagination to develop empathy for others by imaginatively seeing the world through their eyes is an essential aspect of the development of mettā, and this in turn is essential if we are going to break out of the prison of our limited, egocentric view of the world. In the words of the poet Shelley:

‘The great secret of morals is love, or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his own species must become his own.’ ”

Quoted in *The Ten Pillars of Buddhism*, p.50

This principle of using the imagination to experience what others experience can be extended even further - to experiencing what others who are more developed than we

are might experience, and to experiencing positive states that are not usually part of our mental repertoire – a topic we will explore in the next section.

Imagination and the Four Right Efforts

The Four Right Efforts are a fundamental Dharmic formulation that points to the fact that we need to actively manage our mental states, actively creating and nurturing skilful states, while weakening and preventing the arising of unskilful states. This should be our constant activity as spiritual practitioners, both in meditation and outside it, and the imagination is one of the most powerful tools we can use in this basic work of the spiritual life.

In practicing the Right Efforts we cannot simply summon a positive mental state into existence by an act of will – both positive and negative states arise in dependence on conditions. Changing our outer conditions can put us into a more positive state, so that there are many actions we can take to improve our states of mind when necessary. But we also need to be able to change our mental states without changing our outer conditions – for example when we are meditating - and we can use the imagination to do this, bringing skilful mental states into existence, and in the process ridding our minds of what is unskilful.

For example, if we are not feeling calm and serene, we can begin to experience serenity by using the imagination. Perhaps we can imagine the state of serenity directly. We are likely to find it easier to imagine an image that gives rise to a sense of serenity, such as a sunset over a calm ocean, or a pool of still, lucid water. If we can focus our mind, experiencing such a scene clearly in our imagination, we can create inner conditions that give rise to an experience of serenity, just as surely as an outer experience of a similar kind might do – but with the advantage that we are not dependent on chance experiences in the outer world for this positive stimulus, but can carry it around with us wherever we go, and use it whenever we need it.

We are likely to find it even easier – and probably more powerful – to give birth to a sense of serenity by imagining, not an impersonal scene of this sort, but a serene person, or an archetypal figure who communicates serenity to us. Serenity, *mettā*, strength, energy, courage, and other positive states are attributes of beings rather than of inanimate matter, so we naturally find them easier to imagine embodied in the form of a being.

When we imagine a serene being, or a strong being, or a compassionate being, our state of mind is automatically influenced by the figure we conjure up in our mind. As we imagine the expression on their face, the look in their eyes, and the way they hold their body, our powers of empathy allow us to experience at least an echo of what it would be like to have that expression, to look through those eyes, and to hold our body in that way. We begin to experience what it would be like to be such a being. By

using our imagination we begin to experience for ourselves the qualities that this figure represents for us. This of course is one aspect of the almost universal Buddhist practice of mindfulness of the Buddha, which we have been exploring in this module. If we regularly call to mind the Buddha or some other archetypal symbol of Enlightenment as an aspect of our practice, we strengthen our connection with the qualities of Enlightenment, and our mind moves gradually towards a higher plane. This is one important way that we can use our imagination creatively to help our practice.

Acting ‘as if’

Imagination is an essential part of the way we bring anything new and creative into existence – whether a formal work of art, a better friendship or relationship, a more healthy atmosphere in our workplace, a new project, a new quality in ourselves, a spiritual community where people relate on the basis of generosity, or a better world around us. As the Nineteenth Century American writer Henry Thoreau has pointed out, all castles on the ground start life as castles in the air. Imagination is the way we perceive what could be in the future, and then bring it into existence. We do this by using our imagination to perceive that something creative is a possibility, and then acting ‘as if’ the possibility was a reality. We can see this clearly with children’s play. The way children develop a quality in themselves is to imagine it, probably with the help of TV, films, fiction and various other role models, and then to act *as if* they possessed this quality. For example a child might connect imaginatively with a particularly brave character in a film; then by acting as if they were this character in their play they begin to make this quality a reality in themselves.

Acting ‘as if’ in a similar way is an important principle of the spiritual life, which underlies for example our practice of the precepts – by acting ‘as if’ we were an Enlightened being, we become more like an Enlightened being. And by using our imagination we can apply this principle much more widely. If we can imagine ourselves having any of the qualities of a more spiritually developed person, we can begin to act more ‘as if’ we possessed these qualities – and this will gradually become the reality. We can apply the same principle not only to fulfilling our own potential, but also to helping others to fulfil theirs – if we can relate imaginatively to someone as a potential Bodhisattva, and then treat them as if this were the reality, very often they will respond, and live up to what is best in themselves. (Conversely, if we cynically expect another to behave in a negative or unskilful way, and act accordingly, this is likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.) By helping others to live up to their potential in this way we can create a highly positive atmosphere, in which we in turn are inspired to express more of what is highest in us, creating a virtuous spiral of mutual inspiration. When we imagine what could be, and then act ‘as if’, we create a new world.

The Imagination as a way to perceive Truth

Imagination is also the faculty that gives us access to the symbolic and mythic dimension of life, without which the world remains flat, shallow, and ultimately boring. We live in a miraculous and mysterious universe, which is pregnant with meaning; but if we do not develop the faculty of imagination we become bogged down in the superficial routine of our lives. The grey surface of things becomes all that we see, while the magic, mystery and mythic dimension of our existence remain hidden from us.

Our education and culture often do not help. Many of us have been indoctrinated to see the surface of things as the whole of reality, while the realms of symbol and myth that the imagination opens up are dismissed as make-believe. We need to reverse this assumption if we want to live a life of real meaning. We need to learn to see the world in the way that the great spiritual geniuses have seen it, as a living, multilayered reality, where the surface appearance of things hides deeper dimensions of symbolic and mythic truth.

To those with such a vision, the symbolic and mythic aspects of the world *are* the reality – or to put it another way, reality is itself symbolic and mythic. The imagination, which allows us to perceive this deeper dimension of things, is the faculty which allows us to experience the truth. This is Sangharakshita's view of imagination at its highest, which he calls the Imaginal Faculty. His ideas in this area build on those of the Nineteenth Century English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who saw the Imagination (with a capital I) as the faculty with which we can connect to a higher realm of truth and beauty, distinguishing it from what he called 'fancy' – which we might describe as mere make-believe.

Coleridge's idea of the Imagination

Coleridge felt that in his creative process he was sometimes inspired by something quite outside his normal personality, as though he was in communication with a higher realm, and that when this occurred he could intuitively perceive a poem as a whole entity, as though it existed in its own right outside of time. His task as a poet was then was to translate this timeless inspiration into a linear sequence of words, which the reader would experience as unfolding in time. A (far from perfect) analogy for this process, taken from the world of contemporary information technology, might be something like a zip file, or any other form of compressed and encrypted file format which needs to be expanded before it can be understood. Coleridge's Imagination could be compared to a faculty that allowed him to download a highly compressed form of his poems from a source of wisdom beyond his usual self, which he then decompressed into a form that other people could understand.

Many other gifted artists, musicians and even scientists have spoken in a similar way about the process of creation. As just one of many examples, Mozart felt that he perceived his musical works initially as an integral whole, which he then translated into a sequence of notes. In a completely different field, Albert Einstein has said that he intuitively grasped the theory of relativity as a whole, and that it was only afterwards that he sat down to work out the detailed mathematics to support it. These are just a few of the large number of similar examples that could be quoted, where gifted people working in many different fields have spoken of the creative process in a similar way.

The Imaginal faculty

At this point it would be well to remind ourselves of some advice given in the first week of this module:

“You need to approach everything that will be said in this module as metaphor, as allusion to something which cannot be fully explained or worked out with the intellect. You will be approaching this material in the wrong spirit if you take it literally, if you try to turn it into a metaphysical system, or if – having done either of these things – you use the wordy intellect to look for logical inconsistencies, rather than relying on your own actual experience.”

With this still in mind, and hopefully safeguarded against literalism, we can say that what Sangharakshita calls the Imaginal faculty, which is closely related to Coleridge’s Imagination, is a faculty by which we can perceive objects that exist on a higher level of reality, which are a reflection of something both true and beautiful that exists outside of time and space. This has also been called the ‘spiritual faculty’, because it is the faculty by which we know spiritual truths. This faculty comes into existence as we heal the split between our head and our heart, so that we combine the thinking faculty, by which we know what is true, with the feeling faculty, by which we respond to what is beautiful. To quote Sangharakshita:

“The conflict between head and heart, reason and emotion, conscious and unconscious mind, can be resolved only by the emergence of a higher faculty, wherein the light of reason and the warmth of emotion are not only fused but raised to the highest possible level of intensity.”

The Essence of Zen, p.73

<http://www.windhorsepublications.com/CartV2/Details.asp?ProductID=381>

Ultimately, in the spiritual sphere, the truth we know with our head and the beauty we feel with our heart are closely related – they are aspects of the same thing. (Note that here we are talking about spiritual truths, not matters of mundane fact. There is

nothing particularly beautiful about the figures for the gross national product of France in 1998, for example, although these figures may be ‘true’ in a mundane sense. The truths behind the words of the Dharma, or an image of a Bodhisattva, or even an elegant physical theory like the law of relativity, are true in a different way altogether, a way which is beautiful because it reflects the nature of reality.)

We could perhaps describe the Imaginal faculty as intuition on the highest level - not in the sense of mere hunch or vague feelings, but as a perception of the truth of something in its entirety, independent of its various details. The Imaginal faculty is closely related to śraddhā. It is also closely related to Insight – as the faculty by which we see the deep truth behind the world, we could say that it is the Imaginal faculty what allows Insight to arise.

Higher planes of being

If, as we have said, this Imaginal faculty perceives ‘objects’ that exist on a higher level of reality, then where are these higher levels, and what are these objects? In talking about this area, we again need to remind ourselves that words and concepts are stretched beyond their limit, and to be wary of literalism. We must resist the temptation to turn any of this into a metaphysical system, and remember that everything that is said is metaphor, and more like poetry than geography. With that warning in our ears, one way to look at this question is in terms of the traditional Buddhist idea that reality has many levels, corresponding to different planes of being. In our normal state we inhabit what is called the *kāmaloka*, the realm of desire. Above this there exist various ever more refined and beautiful dimensions of being, called the *rūpalokas*, or ‘realms of subtle form’, and the *arūpalokas*, or ‘formless realms’.

Sangharakshita describes these *rūpalokas* and *arūpalokas* as the planes of ‘archetypal form’ and ‘extremely subtle archetypal form.’ The ‘objects’ that we might encounter in these realms are the archetypes, which may communicate themselves to us in terms of images, symbols, or myths. (‘Object’ is a very unsatisfactory word here – the forms we meet on these levels are not dead and inert, but full of life and being.) We do not experience the forms of these realms with our normal physical senses, but with subtle inner or visionary senses. We can access these higher dimensions in meditation, in visionary experience, in highly focused and imaginative states, and sometimes in dreams.

Archetypes

The word ‘archetype’, which Sangharakshita uses to describe the forms we might encounter in these higher planes of being, was initially used by the psychologist C. G. Jung to describe fundamental forces which seem to exist deep in the psyche of all humanity, and which express themselves in a various forms in the myths, religions, visions, dreams, and art of human beings, no matter what their cultural background.

One example of such an archetype might be the feminine figure of the compassionate guide and saviouress, which manifests as the Bodhisattva Tara in the Buddhist tradition, and as the Virgin Mary, Ishtar, and in a host of other forms in other traditions. Other important archetypes that Jung and his followers drew attention to include the Wise Old Man (or Woman), the Magician, the King, the Warrior, the Golden Youth, and the Hero. Such archetypes have a powerful appeal for us even when we are completely unaware that they are archetypes, so that they crop up again and again in popular culture, for example in films, and in the images we project onto celebrities and well-known people. For example many people projected the archetype of the compassionate saviouress onto Princess Diana (the Queen of Hearts!) and onto Eva Peron, the wife of the Argentine dictator, who was worshipped during her life, and then embalmed and virtually deified after her death – even though these people expressed the archetype very imperfectly.

Archetypes like that of the gentle saviouress may communicate themselves to us through visual images, but they are not just inanimate patterns of shapes and colour. Archetypes exist in the deep levels of the collective psyche, which Jung called the collective unconscious, so they are patterns of being rather than patterns of shape and colour – they are more like powerful personalities than inanimate images. Each archetype carries a strong emotional tone, as well as a pattern of thought and volition. We can experience these archetypes as powerful external forces, and we can also open up to their influence, drawing strength from them, experiencing them in our own being, and acting out their myths in our lives. If our conditioning would allow us, it might be simpler and more descriptive to stop using the pseudo-scientific language of archetypes, and instead to relate to these forces in the psyche in the way that people have done throughout human history – as gods and goddesses which we can revere, draw strength from, serve, and allow to work through us in the world of everyday reality.

Sangharakshita's view of the archetypes

By making it respectable to talk about these forces in the psyche in an age that had tried to banish this aspect of reality, Jung's concept of the archetype has served a valuable function in Western thought. However Jung was shackled by the need to stay within the bounds of the materialist worldview of the medical profession from which his discipline of psychiatry emerged. Sangharakshita has used Jung's idea of the archetype and taken it further, pointing out what Jung sometimes seemed to hint at, but could never say – that the archetypes are not just aspects of the hard-wiring of the human brain, but are aspects of reality, so that when we encounter them we are encountering an aspect of the truth. As Subhuti says in his book, *Sangharakshita – A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition* (pp.279-280):

“In Sangharakshita's thinking, the archetypes ultimately exist on the transcendental level, only fully realized at Enlightenment. They express

themselves at lower and lower levels within the planes of archetypal form, manifesting as the subtle sensuous experience of visions and some dreams. These visionary dimensions of archetypal experience are the worlds of the gods. The archetypes finally emerge within our world of sensuous experience as the myths and symbols of human culture...

Though we are usually largely unconscious of these other dimensions, nonetheless they are acting upon us, helping to shape our experience, just as last night's dreams leave a lingering impression that persists throughout the day... While we are unconscious of these other dimensions acting upon us, we can only function in a divided way: reason split from emotion, conscious mind separated from unconscious."

In Sangharakshita's view the imagination is not just one faculty among many, but it is central to who we are, and crucial for the spiritual life. It is the way we connect to higher levels of being, and therefore the way we perceive the truth. It is also what allows us to become whole integrated beings; to quote Subhuti again:

"Our spiritual life, from this point of view, consists in awakening the imaginal faculty... Once we have begun to awaken the faculty, we will begin to unify all our energies within it – and we will be able to live out our true meaning and purpose. By uniting at higher and higher levels with the images by which the archetypes express themselves, we will be led ultimately to perceive the truth. At this point imagination becomes identical with prajna, or Wisdom."

Sangharakshita: A New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition, p.281

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. How do you use your imagination in everyday life? (Be honest!)
2. What inspires you?
3. Think of a book or play that has expanded the boundaries of your experience. Tell the group about it.
4. How do you use your imagination in your mettā bhāvanā practice? Pass on anything you do that others in the group might find useful.
5. To what extent do you use your imagination in your practice of the mindfulness of breathing, to help you cultivate positive states? Again, pass on any techniques that might help others.

6. Have you ever had the experience of acting ‘as if’, and then seeing positive results? If so, tell the group about it.
7. Do you ever have what seem like inspired ideas, especially in meditation? Can you relate your experience to Coleridge’s idea of the Imagination?
8. Do you think that what Sangharakshita calls the ‘imaginal faculty’ is really an aspect of the imagination, or not? What can be said for the idea that it is, and what can be said against it?
9. Tell the group about an archetype that has an effect on you.

Week Eight – Imagination in Practice and a Final Pūjā

There is no text to read for this final week. Instead practice the exercises below over the coming week, and be prepared to describe your experience of doing so. After discussing these exercises the module will conclude with a sevenfold pūjā, during which you may wish to make an offering that symbolizes something you feel you have gained from this course.

Exercises

1. Try to be mindful this week of how you use your imagination in negative ways. When you spot yourself doing this, imagine a Buddhist image instead, and perhaps chant their mantra. What effect does this have? Tell the group about your experience.
2. Experiment with using your imagination to develop positive mental states in your meditation this week, either by conjuring up scenes that induce them, by calling to mind beings who embody them, or – if you can – by imagining them directly. You could draw on some of the ways other people spoke about doing this in Week 7. Tell the group how you got on.
3. Make pūjā a part of your practice this week. Do at least three sevenfold pūjās, on your own or with others. Use your imagination to visualize the images in the pūjā as clearly as possible, and to evoke the spiritual moods of the seven stages. Tell the group about your experience of doing this.
4. Experiment with acting ‘as if’ this week. Do one of the following:
 - Try to imagine that everyone you meet is a Bodhisattva (perhaps doing a very good job of hiding it!), and treat them accordingly.
 - Imagine that you are a Bodhisattva having a bad life, who has temporarily forgotten the fact, and act accordingly.

Whichever you choose, act out this imaginative exercise in your daily life to the extent that your mindfulness and continuity of purpose allows. Describe any effects this had to the group.

5. Find ways to stimulate your imagination this week. Go to an art gallery, listen to some good music while doing nothing else, read a book with a strong archetypal dimension – for example a Mahāyāna Sutra - or do something creative. Tell the group what you did and the effect it had.

6. Think of a personal precept or practice you would like to take forward from this part of the course. Create or find something that represents this for you, and bring it to the session, placing it on the shrine as an offering in the pūjā that will conclude this module. Take it away after the pūjā and put it on your personal shrine as a reminder.

Possible Extra Week – Mythic Context

This module also includes an optional extra session on ‘Mythic Context’, which your study leader may wish to add either before or after the suggested Week 8.

Suggested references

Ritual and Devotion by Sangharakshita:

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

Audio: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/series/details?ser=X05>

Creative Symbols of Tantric Buddhism by Sangharakshita:

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

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

The Religion of Art by Sangharakshita:

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

Know Your Mind (especially pp.119-125 on śraddhā) by Sangharakshita:

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

The Mythic Context by Subhuti

What is Myth? by Aloka

The Life and Death of the Imagination by Aloka

The Refuge Tree as Mythic Context by Aloka

All available from Padmaloka Books: <http://www.padmalo.org.uk/resources/shop>

Sangharakshita – a New Voice in the Buddhist Tradition (especially pp.212-214 on the ‘three grounds of faith’) by Subhuti.

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

The Way of the White Clouds by Lama Anagarika Govinda.

Free online: <http://www.archive.org/details/TheWayOfTheWhiteClouds>

Wisdom Beyond Words (esp. pp.184–194 on the ‘Greater Mandala’) by
Sangharakshita:

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