

## **Buddhophany: A Communication from Urgyen Sangharakshita to the Triratna Buddhist Order and Community**

I have been very pleased that Subhuti's article on 'Re-imagining the Buddha', expounding ideas I had discussed with him, has been received with so much interest and, on the whole, so favourably. These are indeed issues crucial for the future of the Dharma in the modern world.

The article is, however, quite long and covers a variety of different topics. With Subhuti's help, I have therefore set out below what I consider to be some of the most significant principles that emerge from the article, at least from one important point of view. I would like all Order members to reflect upon and discuss these principles and to put them into effect within their own spiritual lives and in their teaching and practice within the Triratna Buddhist Community.

Sd Urgyen Sangharakshita

### **Principles for Re-imagining the Buddha**

1. A successful Dharma life requires an imaginative connection with the Goal, some definite sense of reality beyond self-clinging. If there is no such connection and sense then spiritual life becomes no more than a refinement of self-identity, at best.
2. Any Order member who, as a means of making such a connection, is successfully engaging with his or her *sadhana* practice on the basis that has existed till now has my encouragement to continue. Whatever does evolve in the future as a way of imaginatively connecting with the goal should incorporate all the benefits and experience of what has been done in this respect till now.
3. The Triratna Buddhist Order and Community is not a continuation of the Tibetan tradition, or of any other particular Buddhist tradition. The particular iconographic, theoretical, and ritual frameworks of Tibetan or other traditions are not our reference point. This should be plain from the imagery, ceremonies, and rhetoric in common use in the Triratna Buddhist Community. It should be clear that whatever practices are done in the Order depend on principles derived from the Buddha himself, on the basis of my own presentation of the Buddha's teaching. The practical test of this point is whether or not some people feel any need to refer to Tibetan or other teachers and sources to do their practices properly, or to take them further and deeper, or whether or not they see that tradition as a source of authority for what they are doing. All this holds good both for those who do continue on the old basis and those who do not.

4. The Buddha Shakyamuni – his life, teaching, person, and image – is our central and key reference point. It is through him that we know of Enlightenment. All later developments in Buddhism emerge from his realisation and teaching. Going for Refuge to the Buddha in the first place means Going for Refuge to the Buddha Shakyamuni as teacher and embodiment of the Ideal. Order members teaching at our centres need to emphasise this from the outset of people's engagement with the Triratna Buddhist Community.
5. The Archetypal Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that emerged later in Buddhist history, are all to be understood as 'hypostases' or imaginative embodiments of the Buddha's Enlightened experience and qualities. They cannot therefore be truly understood without there first being a deep understanding of, and feeling for, the Buddha of history. People should be encouraged to focus their practice on the historical Buddha, not the archetypal figures, until they have developed this appreciation.
6. The various images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas emerged in a natural and unselfconscious process of historical unfolding as later Buddhists continued to imagine the 'world' of Enlightenment. They represented their imaginative experience of the Buddha and his Enlightenment in forms drawn from their own cultural imaginations. It is this process of imaginative unfolding, found especially in Mahayana, that should be our inspiration, not primarily the forms it created. This represents a Middle Way between the rejection of the Mahayana and its images and its wholesale adoption.
7. The development and engagement of imagination is one of the keys to spiritual life and should be a major aspect of the Triratna Buddhist Community everywhere. Our effort should especially be to allow imagination to unfold naturally, not to force it into any particular iconographic mould, especially one from a culture not our own. We should consciously allow images of the Buddha and his Enlightened experience to arise from our own cultural circumstances.
8. We may continue to draw inspiration and example from the iconography of the Buddhist East, but we need to beware, in doing so, that we do not inhibit imaginative development within our own cultures, and that we do not suggest an identification with any particular form of Buddhism. At present our greatest danger in this respect comes from the overuse of Tibetan imagery and styles.
9. We need to take further steps to develop an approach to *sadhana* practice, and to the initiatory aspect of ordination, that puts these principles into practice. The main point here is that, rather than giving people 'off-the-peg' images from Mahayana tradition at the outset, we work with individuals to find images that express those aspects of the ideal of Enlightenment that most strongly appeal to them or are most appropriate to them. However, we would first need to ensure that they had a strong sense of the historical Buddha and of Going for Refuge to him, so that any archetypal forms they contemplated were experienced as hypostases of him.

10. Work on developing this new approach, under the direction of the Public Preceptors, needs to start immediately.